

## **Famines in Bombay Presidency before Independence**

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### **Abstract**

*Famine is a shortage of food so extreme and protracted so as to result in widespread persisting hunger, notable emaciation in many of the affected population and a considerable elevation of community rate attributable at least in part to deaths from starvation. The archetypical famine extends over a wide area and affects a large population. The members of a community beset by famine gradually become greatly emaciated in homes or along the streets and roads, utterly inactive, skeletonized, often with swollen bellies, waiting for death. Famine that occurred before the British occupation of India was not known enough to make out a correct list of years or the causes of these visitations. Some of those of which we find mentioned were due to war rather than to drought in all probability. Some have been altogether forgotten since the object of Indian historians was generally rather to record the fortunes of a dynasty rather than condition of people. Normally we heard that before the British came to India there was no lack of food and that every man lived happily in this country. But the fact was famines occurred in ancient time that was in greater severity than those modern times. It was only during the British Rule that the way to prevent famine spreading over large areas had been learned and the best methods to relieve distress were discovered.*

Keywords: Famines – Causes - Bombay presidency - relief work

## **Introduction**

Famine is defined as “food shortage accompanied by a significant number of deaths”. India has a long history of famine that led to the starvation of millions of people. During the British rule in India twelve major famines occurred, which lead to the deaths of millions of people. Many of these famines were caused by the failure of the summer monsoon, which led to widespread droughts and crop failures. Bombay Presidency was one of the three Presidencies of British India; the other two being Madras Presidency and Bengal Presidency. It was in the center-west of the Indian subcontinent on the Arabian Sea. The Presidency was established in the late 17th century and named as Bombay, the capital city and the island on which it was built.

## **Objectives of the study**

The main objectives of this research paper are following.

- To know the meaning of famine.
- To list out famines of Bombay Presidency.
- To analyse the causes of famines.
- To Point out the Measures taken for relief from famines.

## **Importance of the study**

Famine in British India was severe enough to have a substantial impact on the long-term population growth of the country in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Indian famines occurred not only at a particular place. It had occurred at various places and on various period. In this article the researcher highlights the history of famines in Bombay presidency, its causes and relief works.

## **Research Methodology**

This study is based on historical method.

## **Definition and Meaning of Famine**

The famine commission (1867) defines the word “famine” as “suffering from hunger on the part of large classes of population” Thus famines means suffering of large population and cattle due to shortage or non-availability of food, fodder, water etc, for survival.

Famine is a shortage of total food so extreme and protracted as to result in widespread persisting hunger, notable emaciation in many of the affected population and a considerable elevation of community death rate attributable at least in part to deaths from starvation.

## **Formation of Bombay Presidency**

In 1534, the Portuguese captured the islands and established a trading center (or “factory”) at Bombay. The Portuguese called the place Bom Bahia, meaning ‘the good boy’ which the English pronounced Bombay. The first British settlement in the Bombay Presidency was in 1618, when the East India Company established a factory at Surat. The British were protected by a charter from the Mughal Emperor Jahangir. Bombay at that time was under the control of Portugal. In may 1662, king Charles II of England married Catherine of Braganza, whose family offered a large dowry, (a gift made by the father of the bride to the grooms) as a part of this gift was the Portuguese territory of Bombay, However, Charles II did not want the trouble of ruling these islands and in 1668 persuaded the East India Company to rent them for just 10 pounds of gold per year.

By 1675, the population was around 60,000. In 1687 the company made Bombay as their Indian Headquarters. The city continued to grow. In 1864, there were 816,562 people living there and by 1991, the population of the whole of Bombay (which had spread beyond the islands) was 9,900,900. The original seven islands of Bombay consisted of 22 hills. Most of them were raised to fill in the shallows to connect the islands.<sup>i</sup>

### **Causes of famines**

Famine in India occurred due to various reasons such as the failure of monsoons, lack of sufficient production of food grains either due to shortage or excess of rainfall or due to natural calamities and incompetence on the part of the government to take necessary preventive measures. Famines has many causes nearly a century ago Walford listed 12 classifying them into natural causes beyond human control and artificial causes within human control. This distinction remains valid in a general way, although it is certainly true that man has learned to modify some of the natural causes as well as to minimize their impact natural causes include drought, excessive rains and flood, unseasonably cold weather, typhoons and other high winds, tidal waves, depredation by vermin and such insects as locusts, and plant diseases. They tend chiefly to reduce production of food and to destroy stocks, occasionally though mostly for short periods, floods or frosts restrict the flow of foodstuffs from surplus to deficit areas. The artificial causes commonly political include warfare that involves siege or blockade, or destruction of food, stocks or growing grain, and wartime strains on growing grain, and wartime strains on economics that diminish man power, machines, or fertilizers, thus reducing cultivated acreage, yields, and production revolutions particularly when they involve a struggle between peasantry and officialdom may reduce food acreage and yields and thus contribute to famine.

According to famine commission report 1880, the divesting famines to which the provinces of India have from time to time been liable, are in all causes to be traced directly to the occurrence of seasons of unusual drought, the failure of the customary rain-fall leading to the failure of the food crops on which the subsistence of the population depends. It is desirable, therefore, before proceeding to the discussion of the matters which will constitute the substance of our report, to indicate what is known as to the rain-fall of the different parts of the country and its variations from year to year and what prospect there is of rendering such knowledge practically available for the purpose of meeting or avoiding for the purpose of meeting or avoiding the consequences of extreme drought to which so many parts of India are subjected.<sup>ii</sup>

### **Famines in Earliest times**

A dreadful famine occurred in between 1396 and 1407 A.D in Maharashtra. A very severe and prolonged famine called the Durgadevi famine.<sup>iii</sup> Duff in his history of the Mahrattas states that “In 1396 the dreadful famine distinguished from others as the DurgaDavee commenced in Maharashtra. It lasted, according to Hindu legend for 12 years. At the end of that time the periodical rains returned; but whole districts were entirely depopulated and very scanty revenue was obtained from the territory between the Godavari and Kistna for upwards of 30 years afterwards. The hill forts and strong places previously conquered by the Mahammadans had fallen into the hands of poligars and robbers and the returning cultivators were driven from their villages”. Owing to this famine, large number of population was migrated from Deccan Plateau to Malwa and Gujarath. In 1460 A.D Next famine occurred in Deccan and it was called Damaji Pant famine. This occurred owing to drought. The famine of 1520 was caused by politically unsettled conditions. It’s mainly due to military disturbances in the Deccan.<sup>iv</sup>

In 1629-31 famine affected the entire area of Deccan, Gujarath, Kandesh, Berar and Daulatabad. This was the most severe famine, and raged throughout all of Deccan. For two successive years the rains failed, and the mortality and depopulation caused thereby were very great. The Emperor Shah Jahan was then at Burhanpur; and the “Mirat-i-Ahmedi” describes the measures he took for the relief of the distressed. He ordered poor-houses to be opened at Burhandpur, Surat, and Ahmedabad for the relief of the famished and food and money were to be distributed. All taxes were remitted for two years. The destruction of cattle was so great, that it is said that no male buffaloes were to be found in Ahmedaad after the famine, and they had to be imported.<sup>v</sup>

In 1718A.D-This prevailed in Ahmedabad and Surat, great mortality caused from famine and sickness. Bajri was sold at two seers per rupee.1747 A.D- A very severe famine reported from kutch, Ahmedeabad, RewaKanta and Surat, as well as from Aurangabad and other parts of the Deccan, according to the “Mirat-i-Ahmedi” not a drop of rain fell, nor blade of grass grew. There was so much emigration into Malwa.

In 1757, 1766, 1774, 1782, A.D four minor famines or seasons of severe scarcity are reported to have occurred in Kutch, but no details are remembered concerning them.

### **Famine of 1791-92**

It was the worst famine ever known, and it extended in greater or lesser degree to the whole of the Bombay Presidency except Sindh, and to Marwar. It seems to have been the culminating period of a series of bad years, aggravated by disturbances and war. The summer rains failed entirely in the Southern Mahratta Country, were very scanty in the Deccan and in Gauzerat, in Katiawar and

Marwar, and were deficient in the districts along the coast from Broach and Surat to Ratnagiri. But in October rain fell abundantly, and the famine was ended by a good harvest in the spring of 1792. In the Southern Mahratta Country, as well as in the adjoining parts of Hyderabad (Kaladgi and Dharwar) it is still remembered as the “Dogi Bara,” or skull famine, because of the vast number of the skulls of those who had perished from famine; and in all parts the mortality is believed to have been very high.<sup>vi</sup>

### **Famine of 1802-1803**

This famine appears to have been more widely extended, and to have caused more-severer distress, than any-other that has been known in this country before 1876. Native opinion, however, reckons it to have been less severe in the Bombay Presidency than that of 1791-92. Its intensity was most felt in Khandesh, Ahmednagar, Sholapur, Kaladgi, and Dharwar, also in the southern part of Hyderabad, especially Raichor, and it pressed severly on Belgaum, Satara, Poona, Surat, and Kutch; elsewhere it was comparatively light. The famine was not, however, so much due to the irregularity of the season as to the ravages of war. The rainfall was indeed scanty in most parts, especially in the Concan districts and the southern Mahratta country and Hyderabad, and the crops under ordinary circumstances would have been below par; but it is expressly stated in the reports for the more northern part of the Deccan, such as khandesh, Poona, Satara, Kaladgi, and Dharwar, as well as in Aurangabad, that the season was a fair one, and the harvest would have been good, or pretty good, but for the disturbed state of the country, which prevented much land being sown, and for the destruction caused to the standing crops by the ravages of the army of JaswantRaoHolkar and the Pindaris who followed in his trail. One main alleviation of the distress in these parts was the abundance of water in the tanks and rivers, and the plentiful supply

of grass. In Khandesh, Ahmednagar, and Aurangabad, the traces of these ravages are said to have been re-populated. In the parts which themselves were free from war, the Concan districts, Bombay, Surat, Broach, and Guzerat the distress was chiefly caused by the influx of starving.<sup>vii</sup>

### **Famine of 1812-13**

The principle of non-interference with trade declared by Madras was followed by the Government of Bombay in 1812-13 when another drought occurred, entailing famine in Guzerat and the adjoining countries. On this occasion the Governor refused to sanction the prohibition of export or to import grain on Government account declaring his belief that unassisted trade, if left to itself could do more to relieve distress and to effect an equable distribution of supply than Government could do with all its resources. The famine extended to Rajputana, where it is reported to have been very severe, and to the trans-Jumna districts of the North-Western Provinces. In subsequent scarcity of 1824-5 which though not very acute, extended over nearly the whole of Bombay at first inclined to the policy of Bombay and the north part of the Madras Presidency, the same question arose again. Mr. Mountstuart Elphinstone, who was then Governor of Bombay, at first inclined to the policy of offering a bounty on imported grain, or guaranteeing a fixed minimum price to importers, but after some discussion he became convinced that it was wiser to adhere to the general principle of non-interference.<sup>viii</sup>

### **The Great Famine of 1876-78**

The most dreadful calamity of its kind experienced in India since the beginning of the century is the Great famine of 1876-78. The shortage was felt with great severity over the whole of Mysore (except the hilly tracts that lie along the western Ghats) the southern half of the Hyderabad State, and all the Deccan

districts of the Bombay Presidency. In the whole of Bijapur and quantum portion of Dharwar and Belgaum and acute famine conditions prevailed. The famine was of severe identity resulted in widespread damage of kharif crops; the actual out turn was 5.2 per cent in Kaladgi (Bijapur).<sup>ix</sup>

Although the Bombay Presidency has had no serious famine since 1812, it has often been visited by local shortage, and the generally uncertain rain-fall of the Deccan upland has accustomed its officers to the prospect of famine and the question of relief. The Bombay Government had before them the records of the Behar famine of 1873-74, and were ready, when the monsoon failed significantly in 1876, with a organized plan of action. They resolved to relieve the distress almost entirely by large public works, and they at once selected several such undertakings of permanent utility to be set in hand. Following the policy approved by Colonel Baird Smith in 1861, they placed those works under the control of professional engineers, not accepted the mode of payment by piece-work, fixed the daily wage at a rate just sufficient to support the laborers, and abide on supervision and discipline to get as much useful work done possible, and they overtly declared that relief should not be made interesting but should be so arranged as to secure to all the quantity of food just enough for a bare support, with a slight margin over. All others had to submit to the test of coming to relief centers to gain it. The cost of gratuitous relief was 10 lakhs of rupees, and the number relieved daily for 13 months was 33,300. Altogether the cost of the famine administration up to the end of 1877 was Rs.1,14,00,000. From that time there has been an unexpected expansion of distress, the bad season of 1877, followed by a plague of rats, preventing the people from recovering as quickly as had been hoped from the depressed condition into which they had fallen; and the expenditure on relief in 1878 and 1879 was about 14 lakhs of rupees.<sup>x</sup>

## **Famine of 1891-92**

An area of 9,484 sq.miles and a population of 1146,787 of the three districts of Bombay Karnataka (except Kanara) were affected by the severe famine of 1891-92. Ramdas wrote on 7th November, 1891, "Poor people of Bijapur district depending solely upon husbandry for their living, have been struck with agony at the threatening prospect of famine for want of rain, that some of them, to save themselves, have migrated to other districts that the market prices of provisions have been rising daily, that the cattle are dying in numbers for scarcity of fodder which is felt so much that a cow was sold by the mamalatdar of Muddebihal at an auction sale for a sum of one anna and a quarter, and it is a matter of surprise that Government should have done something as yet to relieve the distressed". Despite of such a severe situation, it clearly shows that government to gain revenue, cattles were sold in auction, the paper pays the government to remit wholly the land assessment for that year.<sup>xi</sup>

## **Famine of 1896-97**

The nineties of the nineteenth century were the most difficult years in the economic history of our land. The famine of 1896-97 was in fact officially recognized as the greatest famine ever visited India. The monsoon was irregular and want of rain was acutely felt everywhere prices rose very high, people and cattle alike died countlessly.<sup>xii</sup>

## **Later famines**

Under the colonial rule there was no respite to the people of Bombay Karnataka, recurrence of famine was very common, closely on the heels of 1896-97 disaster followed. Again famine began in 1898 and ended in 1902, as usual Bijapur suffered the most.

In the year 1904-05 and 1905-06 Bombay Karnataka was once again under the grip of famine followed by the famine cholera broke out in Bijapur and Belgaum, 1752 in Bijapur and 1728 in Belgaum perished due to it. At Bijapur due to plague birth rate decreased from 39.77 to 35.68 per mile. The year 1910-11 were again calamities years, severe plague broke out all over Bombay Karnataka, Belgaum and Dharwad were worst hit, about 7,5584 and 10,150 people died due to plague in Belgaum and Dharwad respectively. The plague continued to play havoc and in 1911-12 33,178 or 8.23 percent of the total population succumbed to it in Dharwad alone. In 1916-17 plague appeared all over Bombay Karnataka once again, there were in all 35,369 cases of attack and 23,851 deaths were reported.

In 1937-38 there was again a total failure of rain in Bijapur district. About 3,629 ad square miles area and 4,75,842 people were affected. Gradually the scarcity spread over 4,525 square miles and 6,51,356 people were affected. Interestingly, the mismanagement and half-heartedness exposed that only 2,903 attended the relief works.<sup>xiii</sup>

## **Plague**

Plague started first at Bombay. Bombay plague epidemic was a bubonic plague epidemic that struck the city of Bombay, which actually traveled to Bombay from Hong kong. From Bombay it spread to Poona in October 1896, and then spread to Bombay Karnataka, Belgaun, Dharwad, Hubli, Gadag and other parts were under severe grip of plague and the infection spread with rapidity. In Dharwar district, the total mortality from the plague upto end of 1903-04 amounted 149,851 or 13 percent of the total population. In Belgaum district also and upto the end of 1910-11 over 1,83,000 or 11 percent of the total population perished.<sup>xiv</sup>

## **Contribution of British Government during famines**

The British established their empire and commerce became the source of their strength, the famine was to be the gravest danger to this commerce. Therefore, the British sought a long term strategy to overcome this “plague” for the commercial activities which was eating both the raw materials and the laborers. Rocked by the continuous famines, the British Government appointed a Famine Commission in 1880. The Commission made valuable suggestions to deal with such situations. It suggested that during the times of famine the taxes should be suspended or remitted; food and medicines should be distributed; work should be provided to the able-bodied men; the aged and the infirm people may be provided with doles. On the basis of these recommendations of the Famine Commission; the Government adopted Famine Code of 1883. Under this code a Famine Relief and Insurance Fund was created. After the introduction of decentralization under the Government of India Act, 1919, it was specifically enjoined on the Provincial Governments to contribute a definite sum for the expenditure on famine. This practice is still followed; and it has become one of the cardinal duties of the modern government. However, this was not the solution of the problem. The British were serious about bringing a permanent solution. It was in this context that the British started scientific experiments for the improvements of the agricultural economy.

### **Contribution of Nationalist Leaders during famines**

On 28 December 1885, the Indian National Congress was founded at Bombay. In 1896 at Calcutta Congress session, the Nationalist took up the issue and discussed the cause of famine. They felt that the provisions of existing famine code were inadequate and appealed the government to redeem its pledges. According to C.SankaranNair in his address of Amroti Congress, He said that the terrible famine that has devastated our country first claims our attention. He

pointed out that the root of these famines was the great poverty of India. He asserted, it shows itself in the poor condition of the laboring population and of the great majority of ryots. He further said that the government is morally responsible for the extreme poverty of masses.<sup>xv</sup>

At the Luknow Session of Congress in 1899 R.C Dutt in his presidential addresses said “India was suffering from a famine which had spread over a large extent of country than had ever before visited by famine in any single year. The famine of 1897 was not only calamity of that year. It was accompanied by a war outside our frontiers which cost us some millions and many brave lives, and it was accompanied by a plague” Dutt also pointed the alleged and real causes of famine and felt that the government failed to tackle the famines and suggested several measures to prevent the recurrence of famines<sup>xvi</sup>

N.G.Chandavarkar, who hailed from Bombay Karnataka, in his presidential address to the Lahor Congress in 1900 discussed in detail all the aspects relating to famine. He pointed out that it was due to the fault of British administration. In 1901, the Calcutta Congress, D.E. Wacha pointed out the defects of Bombay Government and stressed more on faults found by the famine commission in Bombay Presidency. In 1902, Surendranath Banerjee at Ahmedabad Congress in his presidential speech gave the statistical data of people perished due to famine and famine related epidemics. Hence, the nationalist leaders continuously discussed the effects of famine and passed resolution urging the government to take necessary steps.<sup>xvii</sup>

### **Summing up**

Bombay had suffered from famines since time immemorial and still it is prevailing. The Causes of famine in 1791-92 were due to the failure of summer

rains. During that famine the Great number of the emigrants was perished in Malwa. The causes of famine in 1802-1803 were the irregularity in season and civil wars. The next famine of 1812-13, the main causes was the droughts due to non-interference of trade. The Great famine of 1876-78, due to season failure, and the result of which affected the crops and in turn increased prices of grains. The effect of Great famine compelled the British Government to do something substantial to measure the recurrence of famines. Hence, the British Government formed three commissions to evaluate the causes and effect of the famines. They adopted various methods to save people and providing relief work includes reducing tax, employment, Building Railroads, fixed price of grain etc, though, three Famine Commissions constituted by the British Government were never providing welfare plans for the masses. In 1896-97 the famine extended to 9 districts and affected within those districts an approximate area of 46,000 square miles out of a total area of 52,782 square miles. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, famine occurred frequently due to seasonal failure of rain, civil wars and economic Policies. Due to famines high mortality rate prevailed in Bombay presidency. The cause of mortality was also due to plague, cholera, small-pox, fever etc. Those dreadful famines and high mortality insisted the nationalist to take awareness for spreading nationalism. News Papers and journals played a vital role in spreading awareness among people. Poona Sarvajanik Sabha organized relief work for spreading famine relief code to the provisions. Under the guidance of nationalist leaders, the local leaders also spread awareness the spirit of nationalism among masses of Bombay.

Endnotes:

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<https://www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen/trading/bombay/history.html>

<sup>ii</sup> Famine Commission Report, 1880, p54.

<sup>iii</sup> <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki>

<sup>iv</sup> SreenivasaRaghavaIyengar, **Memorandaum on the progress of the Madras Presidency during the last forty years**, 1893.p-25

<sup>v</sup> Bhatia, B.M. Famines in India, Asia Publishing House, New Delhi, 1963, p-21

<sup>vi</sup> Famine Commission Report,1880,part-1, p-16

<sup>vii</sup> Famine Commission Report, 1880, Part-1, p-17

<sup>viii</sup> Bhatia, B.M. Famines in India, Asia Publishing House, New Delhi, 1963, p-90

<sup>ix</sup> <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki>

<sup>x</sup> Famine Commission Report, 1880, Part-1, p-18

<sup>xi</sup> Bhatia, B.M. Famines in India, Asia Publishing House, New Delhi, 1963, p-184

<sup>xii</sup> Report on past famine in the Bombay Presidency

<sup>xiii</sup> <https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in>

<sup>xiv</sup> Gazetteer of Bombay Presidency, Vol.xxi-B, Belgaum district, Govt. Central Press, Bombay, 1914, p.4-5.

<sup>xv</sup> C.Sankaran Nair Speech at 1897 INC Report of INC for 1897, The Encyclopedia of INC, Vol.III, P.212-213.

<sup>xvi</sup> R.C.Dutt's Presidential address, INC Report for 1899,, the Encyclopedia of INC, Vol.III, pp.458

<sup>xvii</sup> <https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in>