

## Analysing the 1899-1900 Famine Conditions and Relief Measures in Hyderabad Karnataka Region

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### Abstract:

*The famine of 1899-1900 was one of the most severe droughts that impacted the Hyderabad Karnataka region, leading to widespread distress, starvation, and economic collapse. This study examines the causes, intensity, and consequences of the famine, focusing on the socio-economic conditions of the affected population. It also critically evaluates the relief measures undertaken by the then Hyderabad administration, including food distribution, employment schemes, and infrastructure development. Using historical records, government reports, and contemporary accounts, this research provides an in-depth analysis of the effectiveness of relief policies and their impact on mitigating famine-induced suffering. The study further explores how these relief measures shaped future famine response strategies in the region.*

**Keywords:** Famine of 1899-1900, Hyderabad Karnataka, Drought and Starvation, Colonial Relief Measures, Socio-Economic Impac.

### Introduction

The late 19th and early 20th centuries were marked by severe famines in Hyderabad, particularly in the Nizam-ruled Karnataka region. The famine of 1899-1900 was one of the most devastating, affecting millions of people and causing significant loss of life, livestock, and agricultural productivity. Through this article, an attempt has been made to look through a new lens based on primary and secondary sources. A critical

approach has been taken to analyze the causes, consequences, and responses to the famine, undertaken during famines in the Hyderabad Karnataka region.

### Brief History of Famine in Hyderabad Karnataka region

Famine may be said to arise when a large group of people fails to produce enough food for their own needs and lacks the means of obtaining it from other

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sources. This is often due to successive failures of monsoons, on which most of India's agriculture depends even today, natural disasters such as floods or earthquakes, or human agencies such as war. It's rare for a famine to be directly traceable to only one cause. From 1396-1407, the Durga Devi famine devastated the Deccan and so reduced the population that land went out of cultivation for years..

<sup>1</sup> 1344 famine was rampant in northern India. The Emperor Muhammad Tughlak was unable to obtain necessities for his own household and ordered the evacuation of Delhi's population to Daulatabad (Deogiri) in Deccan. The famine of 1899-1900 was not an isolated event but part of a recurring pattern of famines in the Hyderabad region. Three famines in the 17th century (1629, 1659, and 1685) and three in the 18th century (1713, 1747, and 1787). These famines were often triggered by droughts and exacerbated by poor administrative responses.

In 1769-70, ten million people (one third of population) are estimated to have perished in a famine in Bengal. Doji Bara or skull famine in Deccan in 1790-92, is reputed to have been the severest famines ever know in India. It extended over Bombay, Hyderabad and north Indian districts of madras, where relief works were opened, and the first of their kind in the country. Between 1660to 1750 there

were 14 major famine about which very little is known. Greater South India famine in 1876-78, this affected Madras, Mysore, Hyderabad, and Bombay for 2 years. The 19th century saw twelve periods of scarcity or famine, including the severe famines of 1876-77 and 1899-1900. The recurring nature of these famines points to systemic issues such as inadequate irrigation, over-reliance on rain fed agriculture, and ineffective governance.

### ***Causes of the Famine***

The primary cause of the famine was the failure of the monsoon rains in 1899. India's agriculture, then as now, was heavily dependent on the monsoon for irrigation and water supply. The monsoon failure led to a severe drought, which resulted in the drying up of rivers, wells, and reservoirs. Crops failed across vast swathes of land, leading to a drastic reduction in food production. The scarcity of water also led to a "fodder famine," as there was insufficient grass and vegetation to feed cattle. This, in turn, caused a massive die-off of livestock, which further exacerbated the crisis by depriving farmers of their primary means of ploughing fields and transporting goods. The famine of 1899-1900 was primarily caused by a combination of natural and administrative factors:

***Rainfall Deficiency:*** The average rainfall in the whole of the dominions in 1899 was only 15.49 inches, or less than half the usual quantity. In the western and

<sup>1</sup> The British India, Mehta house, Bombay, p338-341

southern divisions the latter rains entirely tailed. In all parts, the late rain was much below the average rainfall during the latter part of the season averaged 3.7 cents, compared to 1.79 in the preceding year. This significant drop in rainfall led to crop failures, particularly in the districts of Aurangabad, Bir, Parbhani, Naldurg, and parts of Nander and three talukas of the Bidar district and one taluka of the Gulbargah district.

**Drought Conditions:** The failure of both the Kharif (monsoon) and Rabi (winter) crops exacerbated the crisis. The lack of rain during critical agricultural periods left farmers without sufficient food or income. Four years after the nineteenth century began, intense; distress is, stated; to have been experienced in the Lingsugur, Raichur, Nagar-Earnul (Mahbubnagar), Aurangabad, Hyderabad, Bidar and Parbhani districts. The Talukdar of Lingsugur, in his report, states that owing to a season of drought, the crop wholly failed, and an inferior description of grain, on which the poorer classes mostly subsist<sup>2</sup>.

**Dependence on Rain fed Agriculture:** The region's reliance on monsoon rains for irrigation made it highly susceptible to droughts. The absence of widespread irrigation infrastructure worsened the impact of rainfall deficiency. In the Lingsugur, Raichur and parts of the

Gulbargah districts the crops are fairly good, and at present they are included them in the affected area, although it may be necessary to do so hereafter if the rain holds off.<sup>3</sup>

The early Crop Failure especially rice crop almost universally failed and the late rice crop could not be sown except in limited areas with access to wells and channels. This led to a near-total collapse of food production. In the other districts the Kharif crop has been very poor, the early rice has almost failed, the late (rabi) rice crop will not be sown at all, except a comparatively small area under wells and channels, and the rabi, or spring, crop will in almost all parts be a failure, unless it is saved by rain within the next few weeks.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Economic Factors**

Despite the crop failures, revenue collection continued in many districts, with only partial remissions granted. Considering the extensive failure of the crops, the percentage of the remissions is less than I expected it to be, except in the Naldurg and Bidar district where the Talukdars gave full effect to the Government orders. Most of the Tehsildar of Other districts thought more of collecting the revenue than of giving remissions, for which they cannot altogether be blamed, as frequent reminders were issued for the remittance of revenue. Broadly speaking, the royts who had bad credit with the money-

<sup>2</sup> Dunlop A, J. (1901) Report on the Famine relief operations in The Nizam's Dominions During 1309 Fasli (1899-1900) Hyderabad Deccan Vol-I & II p-1

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p 9

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p 9

lenders, or who had surplus cattle to sell, were made to pay up, while the poor who had no property and no credit were granted time. The grain prices soared, with rice selling at three to seven seers per rupee, making it unaffordable for the poor. The lack of effective price controls and market regulation worsened the food crisis.

### **Impact of the Famine**

The famine had devastating consequences on the population, livestock, and economy of the affected regions. Thousands perished due to starvation and famine-related diseases. We can come across instances of parents parting with their children for a handful of grain, highlighting the desperation of the population. The Talukdar of Raichur, while confirming the above account, states that ragi sold at about three seers per rupee, and that in the course of this famine Dara Jah. A Jagirdar of that district distributed some fifty thousand rupees' worth of jawari among the distressed poor. Every applicant received three-quarters of a pound of jawari per day. Notwithstanding this benevolent act, many thousands are said to have perished.<sup>5</sup>

Many people emigrated to more favourable districts, leading to the depopulation of entire villages. Further destabilizing the affected regions, under the circumstances it was practically impossible to check emigration. However

all the emigrants who could be identified were taken back to Parendah, where there was a poorhouse in which at one time the attendance reached as high as 1,454, while in the camps on the Parendah road there was an average attendance of about 9,000.

The loss of cattle was severe, with many animals dying due to lack of fodder and water. We can also notes that forests were filled with cattle, but the grass was quickly exhausted, leading to further mortality.

The famine led to significant revenue losses for the government, with the Gulbargah district alone losing about a lakh of rupees. The economic recovery of the region took many years. Thousands perished, a great many emigrated into more favoured districts, whole villages were depopulated, and the general prostration was very great. The loss of revenue in that district alone amounted to about a lakh of rupees, and many years elapsed before the district recovered from the effect of this shock.

Approximately 46.4% of those relieved received gratuitous relief, either as dependents in relief camps or as inmates of poorhouses. This highlights the extent of destitution among the population. They recommend sufficient wage support in relief work and gratuitous relief should be given in their village or in poorhouse to those who are unable to work. General suppression of revenue in proportion of crop failure, they also suggested that land owning class should be assisted by loans.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p 1

We can also note that a slight rise in dacoities and thefts, reflecting the breakdown of social order in the face of widespread hunger and desperation. It reflects on what would have been the situation of that time, by seeing this kind of development the Nizam's government had to act quickly and take necessary steps to halt this.

Quick Response to the happenings in the state was foreseen by the administrators and made the government to import grain from other districts and Calcutta, selling it at subsidized rates. However, the lack of discrimination between those in need and those who were not led to inefficiencies. The salaries of those who drew small pay were increased. Cavalry and foot soldiers received Rs. 5 and Rs. 2 respectively per man in addition to their usual pay.

The Nizam's government also distributed cooked food for several months which includes bread and khichri (rice and dal), to the distressed population who were in need of that. The expenses were incurred by Government on relief works amounted to rupees. 4,30,289. This itself shows how Nizam's government acted quickly and responsibly to people's bad times.

Forests were opened for public use, allowing cattle to graze freely. Leaves of the devadari tree and of the 'bodi' creeper were also largely eaten cooked with or without small quantities of jawari flour. The root of various species of aquatic

plants was dug up in every tank bed and eaten young peepul leaves, seeds of certain grasses, the pith of the jawari stalks were all eaten by the poorest classes. However, the rapid depletion of grass resources led to further mortality among livestock

An immense quantity of grass was supplied from the Yellandu and adjacent forest to cattle owners, karkhanas, various regiments of His Highness' troops and the Hyderabad Contingent. This gave work and means of subsistence to hundreds of poor people for many months. The Assistant Conservator of Gulbargah states that cattle entered the reserves in such numbers that nearly all the grass was trampled on and what would have sufficed for a limited number for the whole season was destroyed in a few days, and that the richer ryots and local officials removed what grass there was to the detriment of the poorer ryots. The supply of grass in the Aurangabad division and in most of the Indur, Medak and Elgandal forests was quickly exhausted.<sup>6</sup>

Relief works primarily involved the construction of roads and irrigation projects under the petty contract system. These projects provided employment to millions, with 44.8 million workers and 24.8 million dependents supported. The famine of 1899-1900 it was intense in several parts of North India and Hyderabad. Direct rainfall in whole India, fodder famine led to terrible mortality of

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid p 26

cattle, failure of crops due to lack of water. By June 10 crores spent on relief and estimated cost was 15 crores. Supreme responsibility was saving human life.

Relief Measures done by Nizam's Government

Charitable contribution from Great Britain and colonies aggregated Rs 84 lakhs. The First great famine commission which sat under the Presidency of Sir, Richard Strachey elaborated famine codes.<sup>7</sup> The appointment of Famine commissioner was created on the 4<sup>th</sup> October 1899 and his powers Auer defined in rules which received the Sanction or His Excellency the Minister on 20th December 1899. These powers included the Following Irrigation Branch, P.W.D.

1. To order the commencement' of any Irrigation work, the estimate for which has been already sanctioned.
2. To sanction the commencement of any irrigation work, the plan and estimate for which has been approved by the Chief Engineer, but not yet sanctioned by Government.
3. To sanction the commencement of the earthwork of any irrigation project for which plans and estimate have not been prepared, provided the Chief Engineer concurs with him in considering the project a suitable one from a professional point of view.

4. In cases of contracts under the revenue system for the repair of tanks, to grant in cash such portion of the estimated amount as lie may consider desirable, with a view to the work being expeditiously carried out, so as to employ the largest number of people.
5. to order commencement of any work, the plans and estimate for which have been Sanctioned by Government
6. To sanction collection of metal or moorum on existing roads, for which there are no sanctioned estimates.
7. To sanction the earthwork, in anticipation of estimates, on
  - a. Hingoli metre gauge branch railway,
  - b. Khamgaon-Jalna light railway.
  - c. Road from Bir to Jalna, which may ultimately be utilised for a light railway.<sup>8</sup>

#### **Conclusion:**

The famine of 1899-1900 in Hyderabad was a devastating event that exposed the vulnerabilities of the region's agricultural. The government's relief measures were extensive. The recurring nature of famines in Hyderabad underscores the need for systemic reforms to address the root causes of food insecurity and build resilience against future crises. This analysis serves as a reminder of the importance of proactive governance, sustainable

<sup>7</sup> Ibid p 40

<sup>8</sup> Ibid p 33

agricultural practices, and mitigating the impact of famines.

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