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FAMINE COMMISSIONS DURING BRITISH PERIOD

A major characteristic of British rule in India and the net result of the British economic policies was the prevalence of extreme poverty among its people.

The poverty of the people found its expressions in series of famines which ravaged all parts of India in the second half of the 19th century the first of these famines occurred in Western UP in 1860-61 and cost over 2 lakhs of lives.

Campbell Commission 1866

In 1865-66, a famine engulfed Orissa, Bengal, Bihar, and Madras and took a toll of nearly 20 lakhs of lives with Orissa alone losing 10 lakh lives, since the famine was most severe in Orissa; it is called the Orissa famine. The Government officers though forewarned took no steps to meet the calamity.

The Government adhered to the principles of free trade and the law of demand and supply, the Government did provide employment to the able bodied men leaving the work of charitable relief to voluntary agency. But the famine proved a turning point in the history of Indian famines for it was followed by the appointment of a committee under the chairmanship of Sir George Campbell.

The old doctrine that the public was responsible for the relief of the helpless was abandoned. The Government was expected to borrow money in order to finance for building of Railways and canals. Further the district officers were made responsible for saving all preventable deaths.

Stretchy Commission 1880

The great famine of 1876-78 was perhaps the most grievous calamity experienced since the beginning of the 19th century. It affected Madras, Bombay, Uttar Pradesh and the Punjab. About five million people perished in a single year. The Government made half-hearted efforts to help the famine-stricken.

The government famine machinery was inadequate and ineffective and the unwise policy was amply clear. In 1880, the Government of Lytton appointed a commission under Richard stretchy to formulate general principles and suggest particular measures of preventive or protective character. The Commission recommended the adoption of certain basic principles.

Firstly, employment on works must be ordered before the physical efficiency of applicants had been unpaired by privation. Wages paid should be adjusted from time to time to provide sufficient food for a labourer's support. Secondly, it should be the duty of the state to provide gratuitous relief to the impotent poor and listed the category of persons entitled to receive it.

The relief provided could be in form of supply of raw grain or money or cooked food, to be provided on condition of residence in poor-houses or relief camps. For distribution of relief, the distressed tracts should be divided into circles and each circle placed under a competent officer. Supplies of food in distressed areas should be carefully watched. The commission also made suggestions in regard to suspensions and remissions of land revenue and rents. The cost of famine relief was to be borne by the provincial governments.

However, central assistance was to be made available whenever necessary. In times of excessive drought, facilities should be provided for migration of cattle to grassy forests areas where abundant pasturage was available. The Government accepted in general and commission's recommendation and steps were taken to fund new resources for the creation of a famine fund.

In 1883 the provisional famine code was formulated which formed a guide to and basis for the provincial famine codes. The code provided for precautions to be taken in ordinary times, the instructions to be followed during relief campaign and the duties of all concerned when the famine actually began.

Lyall Commission 1896

Closely following this came the famine of 1896- 97. It affected almost every province though in varying degrees of intensity and the total population affected was estimated at 34 million. The relief measures were conducted with a fair degree of success.

Expensive relief operations were undertaken and in many parts of the country, people were relieved in their own homes. A commission presided over by Sir James Lyall, ex-Lt Governor of Punjab, adhered to largely the views expressed by their predecessors in 1880 suggesting some alterations which were designed to impart greater flexibility to the maxims then adopted.

McDonnell Commission 1900

Following the famine of 1899-1900, the government of Lord Curzon appointed MacDonnell. It submitted its report in 1901 in which it summarized accepted principles of relief suggesting variations wherever necessary. The commission emphasized the benefits of a policy of moral strategy, early distribution of advances for purchase of seed and cattle and sinking of temporary wells. It also advocated the appointment of a famine commissioner in a province when relief operations were expected to be extensive.

It also emphasized enlistment of non-official assistance on a larger scale and preference in particular circumstances of village works to large public works which had hitherto been the backbone of relief schemes. The commission also stressed the deniability of better transport facilities, opening of agricultural banks, improvement of irrigation facilities, and vigorous measures to foster improved methods of agriculture. Most of the recommendations of the commission were accepted and before Curzon left India, he had taken various measures to prevent and combat famine.

With the enactment of the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms, the famine relief measures and responsibility was entrusted to the provincial government in the year 1921. Though, the British took the above said measures, on famine they proved inadequate to provide relief to the millions.

The vastness of the country, diverse causes for famines and supervisory approach by the government failed to bring out desired results. And above all the basic culture of a colonial rule with its exploitation and extractive orientation prevented any whole-hearted effort in this sphere and failed to provide relief and easy recovery to the millions in India.