

**IMPACT OF FAMINES IN DECLINE OF TRADITIONAL
INDUSTRIES DURING MYSORE WODEYARS PERIOD**

H.M. SUNILKUMAR¹

INTRODUCTION:

Famines were caused by many factors, physical as well as economic. The physical causes include drought or excessive rainfall, lack of irrigation facilities and transportation network. The important economic causes that led to famines in 19th century were commercialization of agriculture decline of cottage industries and traditional handicrafts, heavy land revenue burden, growing rural indebtedness and export of food grains.

The British blamed the physical factors and particularly the rainfall for the famines. They gave a wide propaganda to this aspect during the great famine of 1876-78, which embraced the whole of Karnataka. But economic aspects and the policy of British were equally important in causing famines during this period. The British encouraged commercialization of agriculture, particularly the cultivation of cotton in Bombay Karnataka and Bellary. This reduced the area devoted for the cultivation of food crops and caused famines, when the rainfall failed. In order to pay the home charges, it was necessary for India to maintain an export surplus in her balance of trade. This she did by exporting her agricultural commodities including food grains.¹ This also has led to famines. Therefore it was complained that famines in 19th century Karnataka were manmade rather than natural, owing to the politico-economic decisions taken by the British.

¹ Marimallappa College, Mysore

But the British tried to project them (famines) as natural. Sometimes they tried to shift the responsibility on the native craftsmen of Karnataka, for causing famines. The Madras times writing in 1890 blames the indigenous, iron (who needed charcoal) manufacturers for the denudation of forests in Mysore province, which has led to the failure of rains and there by causing famines, the News paper writes:

“Unlike gold mining, iron mining and iron manufacture is an old established and well known industry in Mysore. Cannon and cannon balls of indigenous manufacture and of first class quality are still to be seen in all parts of the province. Hyder and Tipu had large factories for the manufacture of these weapons of war and it has been asserted with some show of truth that the denudation of all forests in the vicinity of the iron mines is due to the large demand for fuel for iron-smelting and iron manufacturing. That this denudation of the forests has been a curse to Mysore and cause of the famines, which periodically visit the country...”²

The large quantity of charcoal required by iron smelters, which they got from the nearby forests, due to lack of coal resources in Karnataka has reduced the forest cover and has caused famines according to the Newspaper (The Madras Times) report.

The richest soil in Mysore the black cotton soil of the Chitradurga district was left uncultivated simply from the want. The scarcity of water. The scarcity of rainfall there was attribute to the extensive working of the rich iron ore mines in the district. Mr. Bowring in his “Eastern Experiences” tells us that this district shows signs of once being covered with extensive forests. He tells:

“May not the requirements of the iron mines have had much to do with this clearing of forests which has resulted in making this rich tract of country the most arid in the province?”³

Thus commissioner Bowring attributed the aridity of Chitradurga and the recurring famines there to the iron smelting practiced by native craftsmen. But as already mentioned the British were equally responsible for the famines in the 19th century Karnataka. Let us examine the famines that occurred during this period.

Famines in the First Half of the 19th Century

In the first half of the 19th century famines occurred during 1804, 1824, 1831, 1833 and 1850 in several parts of North Karnataka. The letter written by Dewan Poornaiah to the Governor of Madras Lord William Bentinck in 1804 gives the following account: “1615. Mentions again the immigration of people from the famine stricken districts of Tungabhadra and Krishna and the removal of grain by the merchants to sell it outside.”⁴

This shows that north Karnataka experienced famine in 1809 and people from it immigrated to Mysore in search of food and employment. The imperial gazetteer tells that Bellary experienced scarcities in 1802-04, 1805-07, 1824 and famine 1833.

In Mysore, Morison, Cubbon’s predecessor had to face the famine in 1832-33. Amines also had occurred previously in 1824 and 1831.

During this period the communication network was not established effectively in Karnataka and railways were virtually absent. As a result trade in food grains was severely limited as food could not be transported over longer distances in a short span of time. Precisely for this reason, pockets of acute food shortage existed in several parts of the state. A very

good example for this is Bellary district, which faced frequent famines during this period. The whole of Bellary lied within the famine zone, irrigation work were few and any shortage in its scanty rainfall is liable to produce distress.⁵

During this period, agriculture was mainly subsistent in nature. As communications in the interior were poor before the 1850s, village was required to grow wide Variety of food crops. Again agricultural prices even among not too distance place during the same season. This is because of the absence of transportation facilities, which would have effected the necessary transfer of food grains from surplus area and equalized the prices. But this has a beneficial effect in one way. Any excess production of food grains was stored in the traditional ground pits and could be used in times of scarcity. Thus “Read,” tells that the stock of grains from the previous year helped the people of South Kanara during the famine of 1806-07.⁶

In a letter dated 1805, Munro declared that real famine was rare. This is true only in the sense that deficiency of crops seldom occurred simultaneously in all the districts. And indeed abundance in one district and scarcity in another, not far away was a common feature of the period, owing to the undeveloped state of communications. But this does not mean that famines were unusual and Munro himself observes that scarcity was often magnified into famine by wars, excessive assessment and by absurd though well meant regulations.

Compared to the famines of the latter half of the 19th century, the famines during the first half were milder and less frequent. In the words of Elliot, an European planter in Mysore:

“In looking over the list of famines from 1769 to 1877, I find that comparing the first 84 years of the period in question with the years from then up to 1877 (i.e. from 1769 to 1849 and from 1849 to 1877) it is found that famines have more than doubled in number and scarcities causing great anxiety to the state.”⁷

The precautionary measures taken by Cubbon in Mysore, went a long way in this regard. Cubbon has understood the problems caused by the famine of 1832-33, that occurred during the time of his predecessor Morison. The greatest problem, which he had to tackle, was scarcity of foodstuffs. But he had solved it quit early in his administration in a variety of ways. The waste of grain caused by the moving troops was definitely ended. The abolition of grain duties and the network of new roads helped to distribute ragi and rice, wherever they were wanted.⁸

When the rest of India experienced scarcity of grain in 1804, Mysore had plenty of it, so that it can give shelter to the neighboring inhabitants suffering from famine.⁹ In Bombay Karnataka, considering the board trend of agricultural prices, in the period as a whole, it can be said, that after 1808 and especially after about 1820, the prices of agricultural produce started to fall off considerably. The thirty years period between 1820 and 1850 may be described as a time of cheap grain. In Dharwar market agricultural Prices had started falling after 1820.¹⁰ Even people in Bellary were accustomed to cheap food in the earlier periods.¹¹

Thus we can conclude that the intensity and extent of famines in the first half of the 19th century were not so severe when compared to the latter half.

Famines in the later half of the 19th Century

Bellary suffered from famines in 1854, 1866, 1876-78, 1891-92 and 1896-97; and it has been truly said that the unfortunate ryot has hardly emerged from one famine before he is submerged under another. The famine of 1896-97 was severely felt in all but Rayadurga and Harapanahalli taluks.¹²

The famine of 1876-78 affected Bidar only slightly but the district suffered severely from that of 1899-1900. On the other hand Bombay Karnataka experienced severe famine in 1876-78 like Mysore.

In Mysore the famine of 1866-67, however proved disastrous, especially to the Nagar division, where its effects were most intensely felt.

In addition to famines Bellary faced distress due to scarcity of grains in 1884-85 and Bombay Deccan in 1891-92 (Belgaum, Dharwar and Bikapur). During this period, particularly after 1880^s, the rapid development of railways brought about a radical change in the nature of famines, for now a scarcity remained no more local. The available food supply was distributed over the entire country so that, in times of scarcity food prices rose all over. This change is well illustrated by the famine of 1896-97 when food was always “purchasable in the market though at high and in some remote places at excessively high prices”. This led many to draw the conclusion that the nature of famines in the second half of the 19th century had changed from a shortage of food supply to lack of purchasing power. It may be noted that shortage of food still remained. The difference however was that instead of absolute lack of food in one region, the scarcity now was spread all over the country. In other words, the famine problem was changed from one of intense local suffering to

that of higher prices of food over a wider area, accompanied by the inability due to poverty of large proportion of agricultural population to feed itself.¹³

It was during this period that the commercialization of agriculture received great impetus owing to the American civil war (1860-65). Bombay Karnataka, and particularly Dharwar district, where experiments for cultivating long staple cotton has succeeded, underwent rapid transformation. Bellary followed Dharwar's foot steps. This diversion of land meant for food grain cultivation to growing cotton was responsible for the severe famines of 1876-78 and 1896-97. The importation of food grains from Mysore into North Karnataka, caused shortage in Mysore itself.

One more factor that has to be observed here is that local scarcities did not aggravate into famines during this period, unlike in the first half of the 19th century. This is best illustrated by the distress experienced by parts of Bombay Karnataka in 1891-92 and Bellary in 1884-85. The Indian famine commission report of 1898, brings out these instances as follows: "The failure of the south west monsoon of 1891 which led to distress and to relief operations in the Madras-Deccan was also felt in parts of the Bombay Deccan. The area affected in Bombay comprised the whole of the Bikapur district, the Athni, Gokak and Paragad taluks of the Belgaum district and the Gadag, Ron and Navalgund taluks of the Dharwar district. The total area affected was 9,484 square miles with a population of 14,67,000. The rains in this tract were capricious and insufficient. In some localities there was no rain at all. When October and November passed without rain and the failure of the crops was certain a brief period of panic set in and prices rose to famine level. The highest prices touched in December were 12 and 13 seers for Jowar. But from

this point they soon declined as the extreme apprehensions of the people became allayed and from January to July 1892 they ranged between 14 and 16 seers. These rates were every where decidedly more favorable to purchasers than those which prevailed in the famine of 1876-77, but they were sufficiently high to cause very appreciable difficulty and privation to the poorer classes. The imports from other districts into the distressed area amounted to 24,000 tons for the whole period, an amount sufficient to feed 1/5th of the affected population for six months. At no was there a true famine or an absence of food stuffs in the three districts and the tract is now so well served with railways, that famine in this sense is scarcely possible.”¹⁴

The above testimony illustrates how railways and goods transportation prevented distress caused from scarcity of food grains aggravating into famine by timely importation.

A similar type of situation occurred in Bellary during 1884-85. The South West Monsoon rains of 1884 were deficient over a great part of the Madras presidency. The rainfall for the period from the 1st April to 30th September was nearly one half less than the normal rainfall in Bellary. As a result of it there was crop failure. The extent to which the rainfall failed is shown in the table below.

Rainfall deficiency in Bellary district in 1884

Taluks	April-Devenver 1884(Inches)	Normal(Inches)
Bellary	7.67	17.24
Alur	7.42	19.85
Adoni	16.92	24.08
Hospet	13.91	22.56

Hadagalle	8.14	21.31
Kudligi	15.25	23.03
Harapanahalli	12.17	23.33
Rayadurga	9.91	19.13
Average	11.42	21.32

The price of cholam (Jola) or greater millet stood at 18½ seers the rupee in Bellary at the end of December 1884, against 38 seers in December 1883. These comparatively high prices pressed heavily on people of Bellary accustomed to cheap food. A state of distress though not famine existed.¹⁵

The Great Famine of 1876-78

The ten years following 1851 were a time of great trial for Mysore. Year after year scanty and unreasonable rainfall kept the agricultural classes in constant dread. The failure of rains in the year 1875-76 and 1876-77 brought about a famine which was more widespread and more severe in its effect than any famine in the 19th century. The calamity began when there was partial failure of rainfall in 1875. Most of the food crops were lost and the price of grains rose to double the ordinary rate. In 1876, the rainfall was again very short and barely a third of the ordinary harvest was reaped. Matters were aggravated by the fact that crops had failed in the adjacent districts of Madras and Bombay.¹⁶ This famine of 1876-78 affected Bidar only slightly.¹⁷

The year 1876-77 was the year of a terrible famine and Dharwar had a disastrous season, the like of which she had not experienced in the last 70 years.

This famine embraced both Bombay Karnataka and Bellary. It was estimated that 1/4th to 1/5th population of the ceded districts of which Bellary was one, perished. As usual it was the agricultural labourers, sharecroppers and small farmers who suffered the most. It has been suggested that the famine was so great, because it was the large land owners of the Bellary district who decided what to grow not only on their own farms but in those cultivated by their tenants or by ostensibly independent small framers in debt to them; moved by the high prices of cotton they put a lower percentage under grain than an independent small farmer. In some districts cultivation was held back for years by the loss of population and by a disgracefully severe policy of land revenue collections resulting in an enormous increase in sales of property for arrears of land revenue.¹⁸ The collection of land revenue was also rigorously taken up in Mysore during the famine of 1876-78. The Chief Commissioner was adamant and didn't accepted the recommendations of Deputy Commissioners to postpone land revenue collection. Besides relief measures were taken up slowly and half heartedly. The famine reduced the population of all the districts in Mysore. In 1871 the population stood at a little over 50 lakhs; and in 1881 at a little over 41 lakhs showing a decrease of 17.19%.¹⁹

The Mysore state was compelled to contract a large debt amounting to no less a sum than 80 lakhs of rupees in order to enable it to meet the obligations and expenditure entailed by the famine of 1876-78. This debt entailed a steady charge of 4 lakhs per annum as interest, the Government of India having provided the loan at a charge of 5 percent interest. Later a sinking fund was established to extinguish this debt in a span of 28 years.²⁰

The total expenditure of Government upon famine relief in 1876-78 may be estimated at 11 million sterling, not including the indirect loss of revenue, nor the amount debited against the state of Mysore.²¹

As a part of the famine relief, railway construction between Mysore and Bangalore was taken up. There has been however a large increase in the import trade of chief articles of food owing to the unfavourable character of the seasons. There was only one railway linking Madras to Bangalore. These railways from Madras to Bangalore brought in only 500 tones of food. This could support only 900,00 people. But the British government followed the principle of laissez faire, and abstained from distributing food at fixed prices. This led to many starvation deaths. In Mandya many farmers in village gave up their land and went to coffee estates of the Malnad in search of employment. This further has repercussions on food grain cultivation.

The famine commission reports were over-cautions in this respect. They discussed about the importance of providing trade relief to weavers at great length and in several pages, but when it comes to implementation, they say that it should, be provided to a limited extent, where there is absolute necessity and no other alternatives exist. Thus the report of the Indian famine commission 1898 recommends:

“Distressed weavers shall if possible, be given special relief in their own craft if their sole occupation is weaving and if they are deemed:

- a) Unfitted by the practice of their profession and hereditary habits for hard out door labour.

Or

- b) Physically incapable of earning a sufficient livelihood on the ordinary relief works.

Or

- c) Not susceptible to the ordinary labour test on such works without risk of impairing or injuriously affecting their manual skill or delicacy of touch necessary for the successful carrying on of their own craft or without otherwise endangering their connection with their own profession”.²²

The above recommendation makes it clear that trade relief should be an exception rather than the rule to relieve the artisans from the burden of famine. Besides there were clear instructions to organize special relief to weavers in their own trade only in localities where they were found congregated together in considerable numbers in the same town or village or in a group of adjacent towns or villages.²³ The cost factor played a crucial role in this aspect. Providing trade relief involved large initial expenses for purchasing materials required for weaving. On the other hand ordinary relief work required less working capital and was more labour intensive, thereby large population can be provided relief with little expenditure.

Even then, the famine commission's made careful study and expressed the necessity of providing trade relief at least to a limited extent to weavers and showed genuine concern about their health. Thus the report of the Indian famine commission 1898, tells:

“We are of opinion that so long as the net cost of trade relief to weavers (to the limited extent we propose) is not likely to exceed very materially either of

- a) The net cost of relieving the same people by employment on ordinary relied works.

Or

b) The cost of relieving them by gratuitous village relief.

Preference should be given to the trade form, in spite of the objection based upon the inconvenience of the larger expense.

Our reasons are as regards.

a) The reasons of policy and humanity already indicated.

b) That to support in idleness a number of weavers capable of working at their trade would be demoralizing.”²⁴

Finally one of the Important effects produced by the decline of Traditional Industries were famines. The crafts men who lost their jobs turned to agriculture.

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