

FOOD AND POWER; IN THE CONTEXT OF MALABAR FAMINE

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Throughout the nineteenth century, especially during its latter half, famines were frequent in Colonial India. Under the British colonialism the district of Malabar, a unique socio-political and economic area experienced famine in alternative years. It is presumed that under the British colonial regime Droughts, starvation, famines and pestilences were the order of the day. The present paper contemplates on Valluvanad, Eranad and Wayanad Taluks of the colonial district of Malabar. The objective of the Paper is to scrutinize the economic and social causes of famine in Malabar, in general and Eranad, Valluvanad and Wayanad Taluks, in particular and focus on British nexuses with feudal lords, leading to the shortage of food and famine. The present article is organised in three sections; first part defines famine in the Indian context, the second part will discuss scarcity of food and famine, and the last section discusses the concept of food and power in the context of Malabar. The objectives of the study concentrate on how the Janmi monopolised the food through different tenures, customary practices, caste and newly formed colonial regime as tool of exploitation. To check the same in the case of the colonial power, harmonised through colonial court, law, taxation, free market policy, rice in price, famine camps, famine commissions and inadequate relief measures led to famine vulnerability.

Famines Defined

Famines of Malabar are virgin areas of serious academic research that warrant further investigation. The scholars and officials like William Logan, K.N Panikkar, A.R Desai, H.S Bhatia, Mike Davis, Amarthya Sen, Loveday, Dhigby, Malthus, Bhatia B.M, Alamgir, T C Varghese, Dhanagare, M Desai, Ajith Das Gupta, Jean Dre'ze, and Amaritha Rangasami provide enough thought for further study. Colin Gordon's edited and published work *Knowledge and power selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977* analyses Foucault's ideas of limitation of existing historical writings, seeking attention of unexplored ways of discourse

analysis. It is facts that the power controlled the knowledge in its all format, visas Vis concentrate both in the same point. It is very interesting to apply the same in the context of colonial famine, especially British –Janmi authority over the production relations of Malabar. The subjugated knowledge and disguised formal systematisation, here it's treated as subjugated food and systematized colonial- Janmi exploitation. The Ph D works of Amaritha Rangasami, exclusively examine the Indian famines in the concept of food and power².

It is remarkable to note that during the short period between 1869-1909 more than 20 major famines broke out in India.³The worst among them, the Madras famines of 1865-1866, 1876-1878.1891-1892,1896 etc were studied initially by the Indian Nationalist and Economic Historians. Under the British colonial exploitation, the Indian economy was worst affected, as a result of which Famine and Poverty emerged the order of the day. Economic Nobel Laureate Amarthya Sen defines famines as 'a particularly virulent manifestation of starvation causing widespread death'.⁴ To Malthus, British economist, 'famines were the last resort of a fallen economy'.⁵ it is quite interesting to notice that colonial famine can be classified as the part of Economic administrative failure.

As early as 1899, the various Indian famine commissions rightly noticed that food was available in the market but consumer capacity was poor. Famine," emphasizes Sen, 'is the characteristic of some people not having enough food to eat'.⁶ According to the famine commission of 1901 'it may be laid down as a general rule that any unusual or aimless wandering of men or herds in search of food or water is a sure sign that famine has already begun and that relief is urgently required'. The other 'sub states' to which attention was paid were diseases, eating of 'famine' 'food' and 'crime'.⁷ AmarithaRangasami'sopinion the great hungers have always been redistributive of class struggles: "a process in which benefits accrue to one section of the community while losses flow to the other"⁸.The words like scarcity for food, hunger, starvation and malnutrition are some of the paradigms to be clarified for making a proper definition of famine. When a large social group of people are affected by hunger and scarcity of food grains, it will lead to starvation and death.

According to Malthus, 'Famine seems to be the last, the most dreadful resource of nature. The vices of mankind are active and able ministersof depopulation. They are the precursors in the great army of destruction; and often finish the dreadfulwork themselves'.⁹Appleby locates the cause of widespread hunger and elevated death rates in Tudor- Stuart England primarily in

transportation difficulties and Bois offer fiscal relations between lord and peasant as the explanation for population stagnation in medieval Normandy.¹⁰ Famine can be classified broadly into Macro famines and Micro famines¹¹. History has concerned itself mainly with the study of macro famines. Micro- famines have been set aside. The state and its chroniclers tend to obscure or ignore them. It is the social historian or anthropologist who can contribute to their study. The present study can include in the later.

Scarcity of Food as a cause of famine

There is a general assumption that famine is the outcome failure of crops. The Madras Famine Code observed that famines were happened because of insufficient and untimely rain fall resulting in failure of crops¹². The shortage of rainfall could also lead to scarcity of water and hay annoying the food shortage itself. The lack of food grains, water and fodder lead to hunger, scarcity and end with famine mortality. The social scientists of the world view that the economic aspects of the famines are related to higher demand than the supply of food grains. It is not true because food grains are available in the market, but purchasing capacity is poor. This can happen if particularly vulnerable groups with little or no assets suffer a drastic fall in purchasing power because of a fall in employment, or in the wage-rate relative to the price of food. Their effective demand for food could decline to dangerously low levels even if plenty of food is still being sold in the market. 'The argument can be stated in terms of a person's food 'entitlements' which turn on 'endowments' which means what goods or service one can exchange for access to food and 'exchange opportunities' i.e. at what rate one can exchange what one earns or owns for food'.¹³ In this view famine is the outcome of food-entitlement failures. Another important cause of famine is War and internal revolt which also leads to scarcity of food and crops failure. The millions of refugees create scarcity and starvation. The sanitary commissioner of Madras, 1878 records that one of the causes of south Indian crops failures was the attack of the Grasshoppers.¹⁴ Even though it is categorized as natural or human cause of famines, all these take place only because of human activity, as explained in detail in the work on *Drought, Hunger, Mutiny and Famines of Malabar(1876-78)* study¹⁵.

Food and Power

The colonial British nexus with native Malabar Janmi was the cause of famine. As it was a kind of monopoly in food and power like Foucault's theory of knowledge and power. The effects of Famine were more or less concentrated in southern Taluks of Malabar paradoxically it was the

place where paddy cultivation concentrated. The paddy producing fields hegemonies by the Janmi and majority of rice was collected from the peasants as rent or different dues, in fact a very a lesser amount of paddy as wage given to the actual tiller of the soil. The well known Malayalam poet's *changapuzha'svazhakula* narrates curb of peasants. The British made the Janmi as the owners of land instead of customary practices. With help of newly set up law and order they monopolized the food with their adequate power led further class struggle in the south Malabar as Famine mutiny¹⁶.

Famines were very frequent in colonial India. Extraction of heavy tax from the peasants that multiplied their liability made starvation very regular. The British claimed more and more, and the consequences were more dreadful. The total number of those who died cannot be told, unless it was possible to collect their skeletons, or gather up their dust.¹⁷ The British officials bear out that hunger and famines in India were not a product of British administration or their exploitation. In their official records they alleged that famines were not new to India and that the country witnessed frequent famines under the Ancient Hindu and medieval Muslim rulers.

How the British colonialist exploit the colonies were state very clearly with necessary proofs by the profounder of Drain theory. The drain theory was first developed by Dadabhai Naoroji in a series of speeches and writings, subsequently published in 1901, in a volume entitled 'Poverty and Un British Rule in India'. Marginal contributions to the theory were also made by RC Dutt, G K Gokhale and P C Ray. The concept of Drain Theory was supported by some of the British writers, including Mr. Frederic John Shore, a Bengal civilian and Seville Marriot, a commissioner of Revenue in the Deccan.

The word 'Colonialism' in Oxford English dictionary means that it is the 'alleged policy of exploitation of backward or weak people by a large power'. In his book '*Essays on Colonialism*', Bipan Chandra defines colonialism as a well structured whole, a distinct social formation (system) or sub formation (sub system) in which the basic control of the economy and society is in the hands of foreign capitalist class which functions in the colony through dependent and subservient economic social political and intellectual structures whose forks vary with the changing conditions of the historical development of capitalism as a worldwide system.¹⁸ How the colonial Malabar subjugated by the British power and monopolized over the food and led into famine discuss in remaining part.

After the defeat of Tippu Sultan in the Anglo-Mysore war of 1792, by the peace settlement of Srirangapattanam, Mysore ceded Malabar except Wayand to the British East India Company. Immediately, the East India Company imposed over the region, its special economic and political agenda. In this venture British used to practice some of the economic and political institutions for the smooth functioning of Colonialism. The first and foremost aim was to make over the province into a successful source of income. They totally disregarded the traditional socio-political system of the Malabar district¹⁹. The British taxation policy and its administrative measures made the people of Malabar in hideous situation. Feudal lords collected tax on behalf of East India Company and maintained strict code of conduct²⁰. Malabar tenurial relations are considered to be one of the reasons for its shortage of food and famine. Hence the Malabar settlement and British land revenue policy deserves meticulous scrutiny. The special terms like *Pattom*, *Kanam*, *Kuzhikanom*, *kutiyan*, *janmam*, *Bhogam*, *Verumpattam* etc are discuss in detail by numerous scholars²¹. There was a typical form of Janmi-kutiyan relationship in the regions. In pre colonial Kerala much tax was not payable to the rulers.

The British arrogantly imposed laws which made the *Nairs* and *Namputhiris* the sole property owners of the land, empowered to collect tax compulsorily. As per the Roman idea of property ownership that was well thought-out, they introduced property ownership in Malabar. Each and every *Janmi* was considered the proprietor of the land, where the actual crises of Malabar begins. For easy collection of tax British administrative system supported sturdily the *janmis* against their *Kutiyan*. There was large scale eviction of farmers from the land and more tax was imposed on cultivators. This contributed to the decrease in agricultural production, causing intensive and extensive shortage of food grain. The land revenue system introduced in Malabar was basically different from the pattern in other parts of the Madras presidency. In the ideal system envisaged by Munro, the classes of laborer, farmers and landlords were combined in the *ryot* with whom the settlement was made.²²

The most common features of exploitation were through the enhancement of rent, eviction and imposition of renewal fees. Those who held land directly from *Janmi* under a variety of tenures like *kanam*, *Kuzhikanom*, and *otti* and sub-tenants and tenants at will like *pattomkars* and *verumpattakar* were all subjected to the rapacity of the landlord.²³ Other than *Janmam* and *kanam* rights in Malabar economy was the *Melkanam* or Melcharth, which means that if a land lord desired to raise further money on the security of the same property, he could

execute a second *kanam* either in favour of the first *Kanamdar* or of a new tenant. After the twelve years of tenancy right was expired, the same *Kanamdar* getting the favor to continue as tenant after providing tenure is known as *Melkanam* or *Melcharth*.²⁴

By regulation Act XXV of 1802 the government of madras the land holders were to enter into written agreements with their ryots²⁵. Customary practices of remitting of pattom become legal agreement. The problems were the traditional practice of remission of *Pattam* at the time of Drought, flood or other calamities associated with seasonal changes also vanished. According to the system the State's share should be half of the net produce of the land, after deducting cost of cultivation. Thus, the actual cultivator was entitled to half of the net produce only. In Malabar the *Janmis* used to take 2/3 of the total produce. The peasants were forced to manage the entire cost of production with the remaining 1/3. Thus the poor peasants, who were responsible for paying land revenue with no ownership rights over land, were reduced to poverty and heavy debt, which was aggravated by exploitation of the money lenders.²⁶

With the establishment of colonial power, there emerged a new claimant for agricultural surplus. Consequently it resulted in widespread discontent among tenants and impoverishment of the vast majority of people, whose primary occupation was agriculture.²⁷ Mr. Loveday is of the opinion that the insecurity and uncertainty of the policy of land tenure and revenue take away all incentive for agricultural improvement. In consequence the Indian farmer has been left resource less to withstand the incidence of drought or famine.²⁸ The population growth and lack of an alternative source of income made the issue further complicated. In the pre British period the produce was in equal shares between the farmer (*Kanakkaran*), the actual cultivator and the *janmi*. But in the settlement of 1805 the cultivator was allowed only 1/3rd of the produce in wet land and garden where as the *Janmi* received 2/5th of the produce. Though the district contained about 6270sq. miles, only about one sixth or 1000sq.miles had been taken up for paddy cultivation.²⁹ In the Taluks of Wayanad, Mr. Baber revises the standard of rate on rice land Pattom on the principle of taking one half of the gross produce, which has been continued more or less ever since.³⁰

Alliance between the *Janmi* and the British was the real factor behind the Malabar hunger. The commercialization of Agriculture led to shortage of grain in Malabar and peasants really starved without the grain. The new socio-economic conditions, law court in favour of land lords, frequent change of tenant, eviction, peasantry deteriorated-and more than that hike in

price of Agricultural products in 1832 led to total Scarcity and famine of Malabar. It was recorded by the commissioner that the actual rate of the staple food grain rate was famine rate i.e. very high. The millet is the usual food grain of five - sixth of the people but its price was increased in double compared to ordinary days. While these famine rates of food grains continued throughout the famine years. The usual practice of the food producing class never sell the grains in the market, they stored major share for their family and for providing wages for labourers. The cultivators received great scares and their first efforts would be given to the replenishment of domestic stocks. Commissioner also notice that the correlation between increase in the prices of food and increase in the mortality.³¹

Within a short period of three months Temple and his team compiled a report by the pressure of Bombay Governor. The important one firstly noticed by Temple was the overcrowding in the famine camps. He further suggested, that fresh admissions to relief works should be stopped, the existing labour force on relief camps should be properly screened with a view of eliminating those who are not in need of relief to reduce the wage from one and half lb of grain to one lb of grain (from 2 anas to 1.5 anas per day) and to pay wages everywhere in cash instead of grain. The 1lb ration on relief camps nick named as 'Temple Ration' had the effect of driving away large numbers from relief camps. It also led to the increase of mortality from the famine camps.

Sanitary commissioner of Madras record that the export of wheat during the famine years was high in the presidency but it was not an important food of the people of the South.³² The fact is that rice, the principal diet of the south Indians was also exported throughout this period without any control. During the Drought stricken periods of 1876-78, madras government did not try to increase its food availability through imports from outside the state. It is obscure that during the famine years there was not much decrease in the export of rice and wheat when ten millions of people died throughout India without sufficient food.³³

The rice was the single item of Indian foreign export in many Years.³⁴ As the followers of the Policy of Free Trade, the British did not interfere in the private trade. Lytton, Governor General, excused that if public expenditure was increased for famine relief it will become a tax burden to the people³⁵. At the same time he spent lakhs of rupees for his Delhi Durbar without regard to public treasury. The British begin famine relief works were confined mainly to the urban centers. For participating in the famine relief work villagers had to move a long distance away

from their home. The village depending communities like women, children and aged, were unable to shift from the village to the centers. The food provided from the relief camp was also very less, and this served as one of the causes for the hesitation of the affected people to join the famine camps. In 1877 the labourers on relief works offered even "passive resistance" to the government offering the cruelly low rates of wages and showed their resentment by mass desertion of relief works.³⁶ Only For those who were working in the road, canals etc got the food instead of wages; the depending communities were not considered by this time. The only relief work conducted in Malabar was the construction of road from *Cherpulasseri* to *Mannarakkad*. Another road constructed in *Kolatturamsam* was by using the fund from the Mappila outrage Act. It was lesser than the labour demand of Malabar during the famine.

In nutshell, we combine all these different ideas together, that famine is the upshot of a fallen economy, which may be the result of the failure or scarcity of food availability. First it started as scarcity of food grains afterwards hunger and starvation. The people of India under colonial rule subjugated severer hunger and malnutrition, which hike the number of death toll in famine days. Here we prove that the failure of exchange entitlement and endowment along with colonial – janmi power as exploitation of farmers led them to the scarcity of food. The sub topics like lack of wage, hike in price, Temple wage rate, inefficient famine camps, the policy of lazy fare, free export of grains, large scale land evictions, changing customary practice into written agreement and inadequate famine relief, discussed above in detailed in food and powered led the conclusion that British control over food and with their power by various measures and tactics. "The system of right, the domain of the law, is permanent agents of these relations of domination, these polymorphous techniques of subjugation. Right should be viewed, I believe, not in terms of a legitimacy to be established, but in terms of the methods of subjugation that it instigates"³⁶. The subjugated knowledge and disguised formal systematisation, here it's treated as subjugated food and systematized colonial- Janmi exploitation led scarcity of food and famine in the colonial Malabar.

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