

FAMINES AND RELIEF MEASURES UNDER THE BRITISH RULE

Famines were common in Tamilnadu. Due to lack of monsoons, the economy of the state received a set back. Agriculturists suffered a lot due to severe famines during the administration of the British. Thousands of people and animals died due to scarcity of food and water. Government adopted various relief measures during famines.

Famine of 1781

Tamilnadu experienced several devastating famines. Among them, the most important was the famine, which struck Tamilnadu in 1781. It was a severe famine. Almost all the districts in Tamilnadu were reduced to a state of absolute desolation due to this severe famine and the subsequent invasion of Hyder Ali. The venom of this famine swallowed a large number of the population. Due to scarcity of water for irrigation and poverty, the agriculturists migrated to various places of Tamilnadu. The Government adopted various relief measures to reduce the gravity of the famine. Food was distributed to them. At one time, about 4000 people were fed at government expense. Steps were also taken to send the affected people, to the unaffected northern districts of Tamilnadu. As a result thousands of people migrated to various part of Tamilnadu as per the directions of government. This famine lasted upto 1784.

Famine in 1790

Another cruel famine occurred in Tamilnadu in 1790. It lasted for two years. Its vigours were confined to the northern districts of Tamilnadu. It was an unprecedented worst famine. At the time of famine, the state witnessed anarchy due to mismanagement, maladministration and frequent plunderings. It aggravated the gravity of famine. Majority of the agriculturists of the northern districts were

victimized by this famine. As usual due to the poverty the agricultural population migrated to the neighbouring districts in large scale. Due to famine and the subsequent migration the land was left uncared.

The Scarcity in the South:

At the close of 18th century, the southern districts of Tamilnadu experienced severe scarcity for food. The southern districts of Madurai, Ramnad, Dindigul and their neighbouring districts were affected severely due to this scarcity. Its effects were rigorous and severe. Migration of large scale took place. Among the southern districts, Madurai and Dindigul were affected severely. It was recorded, that the scarcity cost of these districts exceeded more to the state treasury.

Famine during 1805 - 1807 :

Another wide spread famine - com - scarcity occurred in Tamilnadu during 1805 - 1807. Nellore, North and South Arcot, Madurai, Dindigul, Chingleput, Tanjore and Trichinopoly districts were affected by this famine. The famine was so severe, that Madras alone lost more than 17,000 lives. If this was the total number died in Madras along, imagine the loss in the other parts. No recorded evidence is available, to know more about this famine.

The drought in 1811

Tamilnadu witnessed more famine cum scarcity in 1811, in Madurai and southern districts. When compared with previous famines, it was not so severe. Even then, government adopted adequate steps against this drought. People recovered from the famine in 1813.

Famine in 1823 :

There was a famine in Carnatic and southern districts due to deficiency of rainfall in 1823. The agriculturists suffered a lot, due to this famine. The land were not cultivated. Hence, the prices of commodities rose very high. Though the scarcity

was not so potent at the beginning, it led the people to extreme distress later. There was innumerable instances of death, due to shortage of food. Due to poverty, parents sold their children into slavery. Beautiful and attractive girls were sold to the temple, out of poverty. They were converted into devadasis, and utilised to do temple services.

Famine at Raamundry:

Rajamundry fell a victim to a number of famines. Due to betrayal of monsoons in 1830, 1831, 1835, 1836 and 1837 and the subsequent calamities in 1838 and 1839 and 1840 there was severe scarcity for food and water in these districts. Nearly one and half lakhs of people died miserably due to this famine.

Famine at Guntoor:

In 1833, a severe famine occurred in Guntoor. Countless people and cattle died at Masulipatnam, owing to scarcity of food. Due to the unrest caused by riots, plundering and epidemics, the agriculturists migrated to nearby districts. Thousands of people died due to this famine, the people who fled to Nellore, also died without food. Their dead bodies were accumulated on the roads, people also fled to Madurai. Records mention, that the general health, of the people was affected due to this famine.

Famine at Orissa:

In 1886, a severe famine visited Orissa. Due to inadequate relief measures, thousands of people died. Though it happened in Orissa, its effects badly affected Madras Presidency also.

Famine of 1876

A terrible famine ravaged the Madras Presidency in 1876. It was a cruel famine. It caused untold miseries to the people. The peasantry of Madras were reduced to starvation. Relief operations were not carried out in time. Large number of villagers were depopulated. Vast tracts of country were left uncultivated. Five

million people perished in this Madras famine, in one single year. This famine lasted for three years. Since the famine of 1876, no famines of much potency visited Tamilnadu, During the great famine of 1876-78, the ryots began to sell their cattle and other property, and to emigrate in thousands, to Ceylon, leaving their children and womenfolk. Government introduced various schemes to eradicate famine from Tamilnadu. Periyar scheme was introduced to protect Madurai districts from famine.

Subsequent Famines:

The next famine occurred in 1892. Thousands of people died in the famine due to the scarcity of food. There was another famine in 1900. People suffered a lot due to tikis cruel famine. The famine which occurred in 1981 also devastated Madras Presidency. Similar famines also occurred in 1920 asid 1936, due to the failure of monsoon. Southern districts including Madurai and Ramnad were affected severely during these famines.

Like the drought, the floods also caused damages to the people. Floods were common during those days. Due to floods, crops were washed away. Tanks were preached. Huts, bridges and topes were destroyed. Thus droughts and floods were permanent menace to the people of Tamilnadu.

Relief Measures:

As a result of the famines, millions of people died without sufficient food. Poverty during those days was mainly due to scarcity of cultivable land, adoption of backward techniques, and low agricultural productivity. Even at the time of famine, government was keen of collecting the land tax from the people.

The Government adopted several kinds of relief measures at the time of famine. It established stores of food-grains and free kitchens and alms houses at various centres as measures of poverty relief and famine insurance. Orphanages, rest houses and choultries were also constructed at important centres. The famine code

of 1883 recommended to provide special fund to carry out relief measures. Sufficient persons were appointed to carry out relief measures in the famine affected areas. It also utilised trains for the transportation of grain from unaffected areas. The Collector of Madurai was authorised to purchase food-grains on government account and distribute in to the famine affected people, at the time of the famine in 1799. During 1812-1914, 42000 persons were appointed for relief works. Government also advanced 2000 pagodas to the grain merchants to purchase food stuffs from elsewhere. In five months government spent Rs.3,25,000 for relief works. A number of people were employed, on public works. At the orders of the Collector of Madurai, the funds belonged to the Madurai temple were utilised for relief measures. The government authorised the Collector of Madurai to sell the food-grains at cost price. In 1877, government adopted relief measures in an orderly manner.

The staff of every District Engineers office, were strengthened, by the addition of several Assistant-Engineers. The staffs of Survey department were also utilised for famine duty. As a result, the gratuitous relief increased in 1877. Steps were taken to pour grain into every affected district by trains. The officials found it very difficult to distribute the grains to the villages, due to lack of road transportation. The weavers of Dindigul and Palani were relieved, by giving them raw materials in advance. In 1876, the government spent Rs.6.15 lakhs on gratuitous relief in Madurai district and 4.50 lakhs on public works. According to official record the government spent nearly 17 lakhs rupees for relief works in Madurai district.

Based on long experience, and experimentation, Government constituted a famine commission in 1900. The commission framed a famine code. Based on the code, relief measures were adopted in the future. The Collector of Tanjore was appointed Controller of Civil Supplies following the famine of 1918. He was empowered to take immediate steps to relieve the people affected by famines and floods. In 1919,

the Indian Board of Agriculture was constituted, with a view to improve agriculture. This Board recommended various schemes for the development of agriculture

After Independence, the Government of India took keen interest to improve irrigation and to prevent famine. New techniques and methods were adopted in the large scale production of food stuffs. New medicines were utilised to protect men and animals from death. In short, the five year plans, gave importance to industrial and agricultural progress.