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Famine In South East Punjab And Its Impact on The Society In 19th Century



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Famine has been defined as "a state of extreme hunger suffered by the population of a region as a result of the failure of the accustomed food supply". In the various parts of India, it has been observed that in the annals or any other land has not been such frequency of famines as during the fifty years after the revolt of 1857. There was a major famine once in ten years and every fifth year was one of severe scarcity in one part of India or the other. Between 1860 and 1908 famine or scarcity prevailed in one part of the country or the other in twenty out of the total forty-nine years. The notable famines however, occurred in the years 1860-1861, 1865-1867, 1871-74, 76, 79. 1896-98 and 1899-1900. The immediate cause of each of these famines was generally the failure of monsoons and deficiency of rainfall but the underlying factors leading to the recurrence of such frequent famines are considered to be "poverty of the agricultural masses and growing destitution among them, rising prices of food grains and stationery wages, and the increasing population obtaining little scope for employment outside agriculture".

South-East Punjab region was visited by famines, scarcity and drought a number of times during the 19th century. Famine affected every class and community of society. The region of South-East Punjab had poorer resources than most other parts of Punjab. This region was far away from Punjab perennial rivers, and the river Jumna's course was along the eastern boundary of the state. The non perennial river Ghaggar, which passed through the northern parts of this area, caused considerable yearly damage to agriculture. Small rivulets, mostly dry, except during the monsoon, caused more damage, rainfall was low and erratic, and in the peak period, July to September, there were often early local and widespread floods. The soil was sandy and light in texture. The massive irrigation facilities provided by the British elsewhere in Punjab was absent in this region. Starved of this basic requirement, this region continued to remain agriculturally backward, famines stricken and draught prone.

The well known Chalisa [1783 A.D.] famine was terrible in the whole of Punjab. The grain was sold

at a price of five to four seers a rupee and the horror of which had been handed down by tradition to the 19 century generation the Satha [1803] famine was due to total failure of crops. In Unhatra [1812], the scarcity was so much that prices of grain rose from 10 to 9 seers a rupee. In Nawania [1833 A.D.] the whole region was overwhelmed by the most terrible famine which the village tradition could recall, forming the epoch from which old men started fixing the dated of events. John Lawrence mentioned that "As early as the end of April 1833, there was not a blade of grass to be seen for miles and the surrounding plains were covered with carcasses of the cattle which had died from starvation..." It was on this occasion that the government refused the prohibition of export of grain to the west calling it "highly objectionable to temper with the grain market." The price of grain raised to 8 seers a rupee and it became unprocurable.

A popular saying was:-

"Baniya bhar gaya Kothi mein ,
Balak rowe roti mein".

(Meaning that the money lender purchased the whole grain and filled his store, and the children were weeping for bread).

After that the Sattarah (1860) famine was so server that entire crops failed and grain price shot up steadily from 24 seers a rupee in 1859-60 to 8 seers a rupee in 1860-61. The following saying was in the mouths of people:

**"Channa Chironji ho gaya aur gehun ho gaya dakh;
Sattarh bhi aisa parha chalisa ka baap."**

**Parte Kaal Jullahe mare, aur bich mein mare Teli,
Utarte Kaal Baniya mare, rupiya ki rahgai dheli,"**

It means that, "In the beginning of the famine, the weaver died; in "the middle, the oil-men' and at the end, the traders, and that gram was sold at the price of pista-chio nuts and wheat at the price of raises, the famine of seventeen (1917 Samvat) was more severe than that of forty (Samvat 1840) Again a well known song of the same famine was:-

**"Bodi bhagar ki leliya lagakar bol,
Baniyon ne kar diya mehnga mol,
Tut gae takri, phat gaye batt,**

**Ji gaya Baniya, mar gae Jat,
Tul gae garhi mar gae bail,
Be muklawo ho gae gail."**

This version is that traders collected old and bad grain; and sold it for an enormous price. The beam of their scale broke, and their weights were worn away by constant use; the traders lived and the Jat died. The carts remained useless because the oxen were dead; and the bride went to her husband's house without the due formalities. The last line of the song is most expressive of the intensity of the distress. The parents being no longer able to feed their daughter and to perform the formalities of the after marriage ceremonies, she was forced to go in an irregular manner etiquette.

He further wrote, "..... in Balbgarh Pargana of the Delhi district the greatest distress was among persons of the lowest menials and labouring classes, who crowded about in the utmost misery of want. In most villages many persons had died of starvation and may mere had fled to Delhi where they heard that food could be given to them. Those remaining had almost given-up hope, and would soon had followed, so that the village communities of the greater part of the district were on the point of breaking up and dispersing over the face of the country in search of food". In Ambala district the situation was further aggravated by the influx of migrants from Bikaner and Hariana, who flocked into the district in many instances only to die from exhaustion.

Migration from famine affected areas to areas of work or food was adopted by the distressed population as a spontaneous measure of relief. The affected people migrated from Ambala, Thanesar and Delhi to the Eastern Jamuna Canal where construction work was available. The largest transfer took place among the Rajputs and Gujjars. In Balbgarh pargana of the Delhi District, 10.5 percent of the total population had out migrated. In Hissar district 21,405 persons were said to have been driven away by the famine. Though no exact figures are available yet it is on record that the migration took place on large scale. According to an estimate, about 3 to 4 percent of the total population of the severely affected area migrated. While the figure of those who had shifted from the affected areas of western Punjab to the areas of work or food turn out to be 1.20,000. According to one source of information there occurred 470 starvation deaths in Hissar district. The number rising to 4,296 (or 4 percent of population) in Balbgarh in Delhi districts.

The morality rate turned out to be 8.5 percent of the total population of Delhi districts. The cattle were equal victims in the calamity, owing to the severe

lack of fodder. In Hissar districts done 33,000 cattle died of absolute starvation, while 47,500 were driven away. The famine resulted in an increase in crime against property. The number of such case 50,094 in 1861 as against 47,195 in 1860 and 46,918 in 1859. The number of burglaries increased by 2,177 thefts by 2,471 and cattle stealing by 1,682.

Some of the hard-pressed in the affected areas took to criminal activities and the incidence of crime showed an upward trend, as the number of cases showed an increase of 7,997 in the year 1868. Bulks of offers were directed against property such as petty thefts and house breaking. An increase in cases of robbery was chiefly witnessed in districts of Sirsa, Hissar and Gurgaon, bordering on the Princely States and over-run with starving migrants from Rajputana. Of the decoity cases, 25 were of the nature of petty plundering raids by men of independent territory of Tonk. Some rich merchants of Delhi were robbed of 20,000 rupees by dacoits and two camel men were deprived of 10,000 rupees along with their camels in the same district.

During the famine of 1877-78, as many as 409 grain riots occurred. The shortage of food grains also led to a corresponding increase in number of crime; 60 cases of decoity and 232 of robbery were reported in 1877-78. In the district of Gurgaon, 600 to 700 villages were completely ruined by the ravage of famine. Again a well known Proverb of the famine was:-
"Mere bebehe (O sister), Nandian par dharti dedeh (give me some canal land)".

**And "Mere bhayion (O brother),
Nahron par dharti baizone
(sow some land on the canal)".**

So great was the burden of this phenomenon on the dwellers' of the canal estates that they refused to marry their daughters with young men belonging to rain-fed villages, if they could help it.

The drought was dreadfully fatal to the cattle. In the district of Gurgaon, out of a total 3, 05,607 cattle, 1, 46,670 died of famine. Of which 31,692 were bullocks. Many of them were in the indirect result of famine-related diseases such as fever cholera, small-pox and bowel complaints, etc. The process of land alienation in the form of sales and mortgages grew rapidly among the poor peasants. The number of land sale cases increased from 9,922 in 1877-78 to 18,946 in 1879-80, while the figures for mortgages stood at 27,444 in 1877-88 and 30,846 in 1878-79.

Thus, the menials, artisans, labourers and poor agriculturists were hit the hardest; while the big landlord hide-traders and grain-dealers reaped the harvest of profit. The overall impact of the famine was

also evident from the following popular proverb:

**"Ek roti ka bail bika, aur pisa bik gya unt,
Chautisa ne kho diya, bains bae ka bunt;
Chautisa ne chautismara, jiye baish kassai,
Wuh mari takri, aur us ne chhuri chalai."**

("An ox sold for a piece by bread, and a camel for a frothing, the year thirty four had killed thirty four tribes, two only the traders and but cher had survived, the one by the use of this scales and the other by the use of his knife (to slaughter the cattle").

During the famine of 1883-84, when there was no grass and the people were grubbing up roots and feeding the cattle on leaves, much old fodder was being exported from Rohtak and Sampla tehsils towards Delhi by banias and speculators who found that it fetched better price there. In the Karnal District, the area of distress was confined to the western Jamuna canal. The tehsils of Kharar and Naraingarh in the district of Ambala experienced a great shortage of fodder that ultimately led to a huge loss of cattle.

Migration formed part of the survival process of the affected population. In the district of Karnal 30,300 people left their houses for areas of food and work and in the district of Gurgaon some Meos followed the same course. Besides migration, some of the affected people took to thefts, robberies and dacoities. The total number of such offence reported were 90,920 in 1882 which to 95,446 in 1883 registering an increase of 4,526 cases. The scarcity of grain and fodder had or adverse effect on a vast population including menials, artisans, agricultural labourers and peasants.

Gurgaon Districts the maximum number of persons employed on the construction of tanks stood at 169. The District Board spent an amount of 41,006 rupees on relief efforts. In the district of Hissar, affected people were given employment on ordinary works, railway construction, canal villages and at the cattle farm. The repairing of tanks and roads formed the special works. The number of persons employed or such works was 750 in May 1884.

During the famine of 1896-97 in the districts of Ambala and Hissar the famished people ate jungle products. In Ambala, the Assistant Commissioner, M.R. Hailey, visited the locality of the chamar community, and he obtained from their hearth-stores sample of nine different wild products constituting their daily food. Those products were: Husks of Jowar (Millet); Tuss of husks or rice; Sank or Swank, wild millet;

In Delhi, The aftermath of famine was noticed ever among the art workers. The Brahmins had lately published an edict prohibiting any Hindu Weddings, as the year was an 'unpropitious one'. This had

a disastrous effect upon the wire-drawers and embroiders of Delhi, as the lack of demand for wedding garments had, to a very large extent, stopped their means of subsistence. "I drove to the Chandni Chowk", wrote Merewether, "which was the principal seat of Delhi, and where the large purveyors of Indian merchandise and goods had their shops. I first went to the shop of Ram Chand Hazari Mal, who kept on the premises some 40 to 50 workmen. There I saw few men at work The proprietor, however, told me that his order had fallen off considerably in the last six months, and lamented his lack of consumers.

The gratuitous relief was rendered in the poor-houses which were opened in the districts of Hissar, Delhi, Rohtak and Karnal. In Delhi, the poor-houses were like soup kitchens at which food was distributed daily but residence at the premises was not enforced. There were three such institutions at Delhi, Mchrauli and Nujjafgarh. Majority of the distressed, however, were supported in the Delhi city poor-houses at the cost of the Municipal Committee. In Hissar, The first poor house was opened on 22 March 1897 and then had been established at each tehsil headquarters. It was found that the scale of rations prescribed by the code was in sufficient and a dietary was introduced. One half of the inmates of poor-houses in Hissar were the Migrants from the princely states, of whom a vast majority belonged to the state of Bikaner. Men formed 30 percent, Women 25.5 percent and children 44.5 percent of the poor houses population in the districts of Hissar.

During famine 1899-1900 many cases of abandoning and selling of children by their parents occurred in the district of Hissar. It was also reported from the same district, "that in the village of Tehvandi Rana, majority of the people deserted it, leaving behind the aged and infirm There was an old man who had lost two of his sons. He was keeping their wives and children and his old mother of whom he got a living, were dead Besides desertion many people sold or parted with their children or women folk to anyone who would buy them or support them. A Brahmin widow in Bhiwani had a daughter married during the life-time of her husband. In concert with her brother, she took the daughter to a village in the Meerut district, and married her to a Brahmin there from whom she received 500 rupees A certain number of women gave-up pardah and worked on the relief works A family of Bishnois became pressed by want, and the mistress of the house turned her daughter-in-law out of doors who took to beginning. The neighbours did not like it and told the old lady for the disgrace brought on the caste by girl begging and ac-

cepting food from anybody. This worked on old lady's mind and she committed suicide. Thus, the pressure of calamity operated in a matter that ties of family or caste were loosened.

It is significant to note that the missionaries kept in mind the states of converted Indians while distributing relief and thus practiced racial and caste discrimination, as they mentioned the words as 'native' 'chamar', Brahmin etc, in their record. The Annual Christian Report, while revealing this tendency, also brings out the real project of relief. It is mentioned, that the relief was mainly given to the 'native' Christians among whom most were from the 'chamar' community so that non-Christians could be tempted to join Christianity. As a result of the missionary relief efforts the Bapist Mission Society was able to convert 59 persons in Delhi. Of these, 39 were Hindus and 19 Muslims. The cast wise break-up of 39 Hindus was as follows: Brahmin-2, Kayasth-1, Chamar-33, Khatri-3 and Jat-1 and of the 19 Muslims, Pathan-10, Sheikhs-4, Mughals-4 and Sayyid-1. One of converts was a granddaughter of the former King of Delhi, who had been reduced to extreme poverty in consequence of the revolt of 1857. Another was the Zamindar or proprietors of the village Rana, and the third one was the son of the Maulvi of the same village.

During famine of 1899-1900 people used to say proverbs:

**"Trepan men punji gai chowwan men gaye bij.
Pachpan men neota gaya aur chapan sab chiz.
Satawan ke sal men laga mahina jeta,**

Haiza ki bimari hui chuta munh or pet."

It means that

"In '53 stores were exhausted; in '54 seed would not germinate.

"In '55 they could not subscribe to a wedding, in '56 everything went.

"In '57 jeth started well; then came the cholera and stomach and mouth were emptied."

In this way, the famines hampered the agricultural development in numerous ways, Loss of livestock further made the task difficult to improve the state of agriculture, as the latter was heavily dependent on pet animals. Consequently, the mean of agriculture remained traditional, and nothing could be done in this direction. The victims of famines were forced by circumstances to do anything even illegal and immoral acts to satisfy their hunger. The situation turned into a living-hell. The incidents of looting the food grains were common.

The famines have influenced the social structure also, and disturbed the traditions and customs at a large scale. Hunger and starvation killed the gap of cast and class in the society. Marriages took place without taking into minds the suitable matches. The matrimonial ceremonies and customs were ignored by the people. Starvation forced the people even to religious conversion. Many Hindus and Muslims got converted into Christianity to get the bread and livelihood.

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