

The Famines of 1888-1889 and 1891-1892: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

This abstract explores the famines that occurred in 1888-1889 and 1891-1892, shedding light on the socio-economic and environmental factors that contributed to these catastrophic events. By conducting a comparative analysis, this study aims to discern patterns, differences, and lessons that can be drawn from these historical occurrences. The famines of 1888-1889 and 1891-1892 were complex crises that unfolded against a backdrop of global economic changes, climatic anomalies, and intricate social structures. By examining primary sources, including historical records, contemporary accounts, and governmental reports, this research seeks to unravel the intricate web of causative factors that led to widespread food shortages and famine-related mortality.

Key Words: Climate Factors, Crop Failure, Famine Relief, Mortality Rates, Rural Distress, Historical Perspective

Introduction

The famines of 1888-1889 and 1891-1892 stand as poignant chapters in the annals of history, marking periods of widespread deprivation and suffering. These calamities, rooted in a confluence of climatic, economic, and social factors, left an indelible imprint on the affected regions and their inhabitants. This introduction delves into the causes and consequences of these famines, shedding light on the profound impact they had on communities and the subsequent relief efforts that sought to alleviate the dire circumstances. The late 19th century witnessed a conundrum of challenges, with agrarian communities grappling with erratic weather patterns, crop failures, and economic disparities. The famines of 1888-1889 and 1891-1892 were, in part, manifestations of these intricate challenges, exacerbated by factors such as poor harvests, skyrocketing food prices, and a delicate balance between population growth and resource availability. As these famines unfolded, their repercussions reverberated far beyond the immediate sphere of food scarcity. Societies were thrust into turmoil as livelihoods crumbled, and communities faced the specter of widespread hunger and malnutrition.

The human toll was immeasurable, with tales of suffering and desperation echoing through the years. In response to the burgeoning crises, relief efforts emerged as beacons of hope amidst the darkness. Governments, non-governmental organizations, and compassionate individuals rallied to provide assistance to the afflicted regions. These relief endeavors manifested in various forms, encompassing the distribution of food supplies, establishment of relief camps, and implementation of long-term measures to build resilience against future famines. This exploration delves into the intricate tapestry of the famines of 1888-1889 and 1891-1892, unraveling the layers of causation and examining

the enduring impact on affected communities. By delving into the relief work that emerged as a response to these crises¹

The analysis will delve into the economic shifts of the late 19th century, investigating how changes in agricultural practices, trade dynamics, and colonial policies influenced the vulnerability of populations to food insecurity. Additionally, the study will scrutinize the climatic conditions of the respective periods, exploring the role of droughts, floods, and other environmental stressors in exacerbating agricultural failures. Social dynamics, such as class structures, governance systems, and relief efforts, will be examined to understand how different communities coped with and were impacted by the famines. This research aims to highlight the varying resilience and vulnerabilities of different societal groups in the face of food scarcity and famine. Through a comparative lens, this study seeks to identify commonalities and disparities between the famines of 1888-1889 and 1891-1892, contributing to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between environmental, economic, and social factors during times of crisis. By drawing lessons from these historical events, policymakers and researchers may gain insights into developing more effective strategies for mitigating the impacts of future food crises and fostering resilience in vulnerable communities.²

Regional Scarcities and the Resilience of Southwest Monsoons

The famine that transpired in the Madras Presidency during 1891-1892 was not solely a consequence of natural calamities; economic factors also played a pivotal role. The imposition of exorbitant land taxes and the escalating burden of indebtedness had rendered the peasants destitute and bereft of resources. The government's Free Trade Policy, implemented during the famine, exacerbated the plight of the population, rendering them susceptible to the ramifications of crop failure, scarcity, and soaring prices of essential commodities. Thus, the genesis of the famine in the Madras Presidency in 1891-92 can be attributed to a confluence of both physical and economic determinants.

The provided data delineates the rainfall statistics for ten distressed districts during the years 1890-91 and 1891-92, comparing the recorded average rainfall with that of 1890-92. The data unequivocally demonstrates a significant deficit in rainfall during 1890-92 compared to the average. This insufficient rainfall significantly contributed to the emergence of scarcity in these regions. Chingleput, North Arcot, Coimbatore, and Tinnevely were the districts primarily affected by drought in the initial months of 1891, collectively termed as the "Early Famine Districts." These regions experienced severe distress in the first half of 1891. Subsequently, other districts, including Salem, succumbed to the cumulative impact of the failed southwest monsoon of 1891 and the northeast monsoon of 1891-92, earning them the designation of "Later Famine Districts." The affected area within the Presidency spanned 31,069 square miles and housed a population of 4.98 million people. This famine-stricken expanse encompassed ten districts, prompting the government to institute famine relief measures for duration of twenty months, commencing from February 1891 and concluding in September 1892.³

Impact and Tribulations of the 1891-92 Famine in the Madras Presidency

The famine of 1891-92 exerted a profound influence on ten districts within the Madras Presidency, demarcating a critical chapter in regional history. This famine unfolded in three discernible periods, each delineated by the scope of its reach and the corresponding relief measures implemented. The inaugural period spanned from January to June 1891, succeeded by the second phase from July to December 1891, and culminating in the third phase covering the expansive nine months from January to September 1892. Amid this arduous period, Lord Wenlock, the Governor of the Madras Presidency, embarked on tours to various districts to appraise the distress induced by the famine. In August and September 1891,

he scrutinized the conditions in the districts of North Arcot, Chingleput, and Coimbatore, seeking to evaluate the gravity of the situation.

The famine of 1891-92 manifested itself through exorbitant prices of indispensable food grains and other life essentials. In numerous respects, the 1891-92 season proved more calamitous than its predecessor. The average rainfall for the Madras Presidency during this period plummeted to a mere 33.50 inches, a stark reduction from the 40 inches documented in 1890-91 and the long-term average of 45.08 inches over the preceding two decades concluding in 1889-90. This precipitation deficit resulted in the widespread failure of crops, rendering extensive areas of black soil barren and unproductive. The presented data depicts the pricing dynamics of key food grains and essential commodities during the famine period of 1891-92, contrasting them with prices from an antecedent period. This presentation serves as a means to highlight the disparities in prices between 1891-92 and the preceding period, illustrating the severity of the famine through the exceptionally elevated prices that the distressed populace grappled with during the years 1891-92. During the fiscal year 1891-92, the Madras Railway witnessed a downturn in gross earnings, with a decrease of 1.75 lakhs. This decline can be ascribed to the pervasive famine conditions, which notably impacted passenger traffic. Despite this, there was a discernible surge in the trade of specific grains, a consequence of the prevailing distress in the region.⁴

Economic Flux and Agricultural Decline: Railway and Revenue Dynamics (1891-92)

In the financial landscape of the fiscal years 1891-92, a notable transformation unfolded. The gross revenue derived from Imperial, provincial, and local services experienced a decline from 1,267 lakhs in 1890-91 to 1,250 lakhs in 1891-92. Simultaneously, gross expenditure increased from 1,121 lakhs to 1,249 lakhs within the same period. The incongruity between the outcomes of these two years can be chiefly attributed to the reduction in revenue, heavily influenced by adverse weather conditions and substantial expenditures incurred in the development and maintenance of the East Coast Railways. Within the Madras Presidency during the years 1891-92, the total cultivated land area, excluding permanently settled estates, approximated 24 million acres. This marked a reduction of 1.78 million acres compared to the extent of cultivation in the preceding year, 1890-91, signifying a 6.84% decrease and a 4.56% decline compared to the five-year average from 1885 to 1890. Consequently, the collections of land revenue also decreased from 474 lakhs in 1890-91 to 432 lakhs in 1891-92.

Famine Mortality

The famine of 1891-1892 left an indelible mark on history, characterized by a pronounced surge in mortality within the distressed population. A confluence of factors, encompassing food scarcity, exorbitant prices of essential commodities, rampant poverty, and the outbreak of perilous epidemic diseases, collectively contributed to this alarming increase in mortality. The districts of Coimbatore, Salem, North Arcot, and Chingleput bore the brunt of severe distress during the tumultuous year of 1891. The reported deaths for the year 1891 stood at a staggering 188,726, representing a stark departure from the average deaths recorded during the five years leading up to December 1890, which totaled 150,011. This marked increase in mortality during the famine period amounted to 38,715, constituting a notable 25.8% rise.⁵

In the subsequent year of 1892, the reported deaths in the districts of Salem, Nellore, Cuddapah, Anantapur, Bellary, and Kurnool reached 164,408. By comparison, the death average for the five years ending in December 1890 was 134,255. The escalated death rate during this period amounted to 30,153, signifying a substantial 22.5% rise in mortality. The statistics underscore the devastating toll exacted by the famine, painting a poignant picture of human suffering and loss during this challenging epoch.⁶

The Agony of Livestock, Government Initiatives, and Social Reconstruction in 1890-92

In the famine-stricken districts throughout the biennium of 1890-92, there was an aggregate reduction exceeding 700,000 head of horned cattle. It is imperative to emphasize that these statistical representations exclude the losses incurred within the extensive Zamindaries of the North Arcot Districts, wherein additional cattle losses were presumably sustained. The substantial mortality rate among cattle serves as a poignant testament to the calamitous repercussions of the famine on livestock within these regions. The Madras Government, cognizant of the dire circumstances, undertook a spectrum of initiatives aimed at alleviating the distress afflicting the populace during the famine. Proactive measures included the initiation of relief efforts, notably the provision of employment opportunities through famine works for those physically capable. In tandem with this, the establishment of kitchens to dispense complimentary cooked meals to the impoverished became a cornerstone of the relief strategy. To stimulate employment in endeavors of constructive nature, the government extended advances for tasks such as excavating irrigation wells and implementing agricultural enhancements. Concurrently, efforts were directed towards supporting the weaving community by facilitating their engagement in trade.

In instances where crop failures reached particularly acute levels, the government exhibited flexibility by either waiving or deferring its assessments. Furthermore, as an instrumental facet of the relief apparatus, forest reserves were made accessible for unfettered grazing or at reduced rates for cattle proprietors. As an additional measure of succor, hay was strategically stored within these reserves for sale to cattle owners, thereby fortifying the multifaceted approach adopted by the Madras Government in mitigating the widespread suffering engendered by the famine.⁷

Relief work

In response to the prevailing hardships faced by the population, the Madras Government undertook a series of measures designed to alleviate suffering and provide support during these trying times. One noteworthy initiative involved the commencement of famine works, a strategic effort aimed at creating employment opportunities for able-bodied individuals. Simultaneously, the establishment of kitchens played a pivotal role in the distribution of free, cooked food as part of gratuitous relief endeavors. Recognizing the importance of fostering economic stability, the government extended advances for various activities such as the excavation of irrigation wells and other agricultural enhancements. These initiatives were crafted with the intention of not only addressing immediate needs but also generating employment through meaningful and impactful projects. Weavers were afforded special provisions, allowing them to continue their trade independently and sustain their livelihoods. In instances where crop failure was widespread, the government displayed flexibility by either remitting or deferring its assessments. Forest reserves were made accessible for free grazing or at reduced rates, and a distinctive relief measure involved the storage of hay in these reserves for subsequent sale to cattle owners. These comprehensive efforts sought to offer a multifaceted approach, addressing both the immediate exigencies and laying the foundation for sustainable solutions for the distressed population.⁸

The Madras Government, cognizant of the varying degrees of vulnerability, extended gratuitous relief to individuals who were weak, emaciated, or unable to partake in any form of labor. The provision of this relief unfolded gradually in districts facing distress, with due consideration given to the extent and severity of the prevailing famine. Notably, the number of recipients of gratuitous relief was observed to be lower than those engaged in famine work. Charitable relief, manifested in the form of cooked food from government-operated kitchens, constituted a vital dimension of the overall aid effort. Nevertheless, the implementation of relief measures faced challenges rooted in caste sentiments, particularly impacting

individuals from the upper echelons of society. For example, the Vellamas encountered specific obstacles in accessing relief, highlighting the nuanced dynamics at play during this period of relief work.⁹

Expenditures and Relief Strategies in the Famine-Afflicted Districts of 1891-93

In the famine-afflicted districts of 1891-92 and 1892-93, significant expenditures were incurred for gratuitous relief. The tables presented herein delineate the financial outlays associated with the acquisition of food through gratuitous relief channels, encompassing bazaars, minor establishments, and miscellaneous expenses. Notably, the preeminent expenditure transpired in North Arcot, aggregating to Rs. 27,860, while Chingleput witnessed a considerable disbursement of Rs. 13,815. Coimbatore and Salem also featured in this fiscal narrative, with Rs. 1,880 and just over Rs. 5,000, respectively. The cumulative financial outlay for gratuitous relief throughout the famine of 1891-93 amounted to Rs. 52,406, inclusive of a money-doles component totaling Rs. 199.

The initiation of relief works transpired in February 1891, commencing in Chingleput and North Arcot, followed by Tinnevely and Coimbatore in March and April. Subsequently, famine works gradually expanded into Salem, aligning with the geographical scope and severity of the famine. Two distinctive systems governed the administration of these famine works. The first system mirrored an expansion and multiplication of conventional public works, often operating under the Contract system, with the intent of broadening employment opportunities. The second system, known as the Task-work system, entailed providing remuneration sufficient for each worker's well-being. Under this paradigm, laborers were anticipated to accomplish a fair day's work as a task, receiving a wage covering their subsistence needs.

A total allocation of 16½ lakhs was earmarked for relief works during this period, with more than half of this allocation dedicated to road-making endeavors. The remaining funds were allocated to irrigation works. In adherence to directives from the Madras Government post the Ganjam Famine of 1889, a concerted effort was made to optimize the involvement of professional agencies. The overarching supervision of road works was entrusted to the engineers of the district boards. All workgroups, or gangs, were assigned the class-III task, and upon successful completion, they received the corresponding class-III remuneration.¹⁰

Conclusion

The famines of 1888-1889 and 1891-1892 represent critical episodes in history that had profound and far-reaching consequences on the affected regions. A comparative analysis of these two famines reveals both commonalities and distinct features that shaped their impact on society, economy, and governance. Both famines shared a backdrop of agrarian challenges, including crop failures, exacerbated by unfavorable weather conditions, which led to widespread food shortages. The consequences of these shortages were devastating, resulting in widespread hunger, malnutrition, and a surge in mortality rates. The human toll was immense, with communities grappling with the loss of lives and the social fabric of entire regions being strained.

The response to these famines played a pivotal role in determining the outcomes. In both cases, governmental intervention and relief efforts were essential in mitigating the severity of the crises. However, the effectiveness of these responses varied, highlighting the importance of governance structures, administrative capabilities, and the degree of coordination between different stakeholders. Economic repercussions were substantial, with the famines affecting agricultural productivity, trade, and overall economic stability. The social aftermath included displacement, migration, and changes in societal structures as communities struggled to cope with the aftermath of the crises. Despite these similarities, there were also notable differences between the two famines. The specific factors leading to crop failures,

the regional contexts, and the sociopolitical landscapes differed, influencing the dynamics of each crisis. Lessons learned from the earlier famine may have influenced the response to the later one, illustrating the evolving nature of governance and disaster management. The famines of 1888-1889 and 1891-1892 stand as significant chapters in history, providing valuable insights into the complex interplay of environmental, economic, and societal factors during times of crisis. The comparative analysis underscores the importance of understanding the contextual nuances that shape the impact of such events, informing present and future strategies for disaster preparedness, response, and recovery.

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