

## Famine prevention strategies: Evidences from Bahawalpur state (1866-1900)

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### Abstract

This article analyses the strategies, which the Bahawalpur State employed to protect itself and its people during the years of great Indian famines, when its neighbouring areas and rest of India was in the clutches of dearth, hunger and mortality. This study covers the time period of three great famines of India. The article traces the leading features of preventive and relief measures during scarcity that were coordinated with the public works. These projects served both objectives: improving the economic conditions of the people and providing relief to the immigrants in distress. The study of these historical paradigms of a State that was situated on the verge of desert will certainly help to tackle the present paucity of water and food grains in the deserts of Thar and Cholistan in Pakistan. The paper is mainly based on archival documentation mainly official reports of famine and scarcity department under Government of India.

**Keywords:** Indian famines, Bahawalpur, export prohibition, relief strategies, immigration

### Introduction

The incidence of famine in the Subcontinent has a long history, occurring from time to time in different parts of the region. During the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, India encountered severe scarcities, which affected the entire country, though different regions were affected in varying degree <sup>[1]</sup>. In the period after 1858, when British political supremacy had completely been asserted in India, 10 serious famines occurred in the country. Out of these 10 famines, three were widespread and officially recognized as 'Great Indian Famines', happening in the years of 1876-78, 1896-97, and 1899-1901 <sup>[2]</sup>. It was due to this high incidence of famines in this period (1870-1901) that it has been called as the age of famines and epidemics in British India.

During the First Great famine of 1876-78, the Central and Northwestern provinces- Oudh and Punjab - were hit the hardest. The famine claimed four million lives. The Second Great drought affected the Northern India, Bengal, Burma, Madras, and Bombay, claiming more than five million lives <sup>[3]</sup>. The government documents showed that more than 44 million people were affected <sup>[4]</sup>. The Third Great famine was the longest in terms of duration and most devastating in terms of its impact, engulfing the regions of Punjab, Rajasthan, Northwestern and Central Provinces <sup>[5]</sup>. This famine resulted in massive casualties and major sufferers were the impoverished classes. Therefore, it was called a famine of employment. The affected population was sixty million, of which thirty-five million belonged to native states and twenty-five million from British districts. The livestock mortality was more severe <sup>[6]</sup>.

The government of India took many steps to ameliorate the situation. In 1880, the Indian Famine Commission was formed. It was the start of a regular relief system by the British in India. Famine codes were promulgated to take appropriate steps for relief work <sup>[7]</sup>. These famine codes contained the

manual of instructions for provinces and native states, which were to be implemented by the local administration. Moreover, the government of India took many other important policy measures to cope with the situation, including the suspension of revenue, *takavi* grants, opening of government forests for grazing cattle, and reducing railway fares for carrying stocks. Besides, the extension of railways and increase in irrigated areas for cultivation equipped the people against famine <sup>[8]</sup>.

With regard to the causes of these famines in India, there exist different views. The government documents concluded that climate and insufficient rains were the major factors for occurrence of famines in India <sup>[9]</sup>. In contrast, Indian scholars like B. M. Bhatia, R. C. Dutt, and Luxman D. Satya, held the growing commercialization and modernization responsible for these famines, arguing that there was no food shortage in India, but prices were very high while wages were low and remained stagnant <sup>[10]</sup>. Irfan Habib has argued that severe poverty of people, caused by the exploitative colonial political economy was the major factor that caused these famines <sup>[11]</sup>.

Climate indeed was an important factor for famines. Usually, in a great part of India, lack of monsoon rains caused large-scale destruction of *kharif* crops and fodder and then the breakout of famine. The climatic changes became the reasons for the dearth even in those few areas, which were formerly saved from famine owing to their government policies. One of them was the Princely State of Bahawalpur, which is now a division of the Punjab province in Pakistan.

### Bahawalpur State and Famine

The Bahawalpur State, was one of the thirty-six Princely States under the dependency of the Punjab government <sup>[12]</sup>. Its two-third area consisted of desert tract called Cholistan <sup>[13]</sup>. The State territory was intersected by 300 miles river border of Sutlej, Chenab and Indus. Cultivation in the State entirely

depended on irrigation by deluge canals taken from different rivers<sup>[14]</sup>.

The State had two diverse physical regions: the Eastern part and the Western part. The Eastern part was located on the strip of Sutlej, which was its sole source of irrigation. Its main cities were Minchinabad, Khairpur, Shehrfarid and Bahawalpur. In the Western part, irrigation was dependent on the combined waters of Sutlej, Chenab and Indus. Its main cities were Uch, Allahbad, Khanpur, Noushehra and Sadiqabad.

The ruling family was Daudpotra Abbasids. The State had hereditary form of government<sup>[15]</sup>. In 1833, the sovereignty of the State and its right on the rivers within its boundary was recognized by the paramount power, the British. This pact resulted in good relations between the State and the British Empire and had transformative impact on political and economic life of the State in the subsequent period<sup>[16]</sup>.

In 1866, the *de facto* ruler of the State, Muhammad Bahawal Khan Abbasi-IV (1837-1866) died during a civil war. At that time, the crown prince Mohammad Sadiq Khan was a minor, and therefore, the British took over the management of the State till the maturity of crown prince in 1879. Again, in 1899, the British assumed the charge of the State due to the death of Muhammad Sadiq Khan-IV (1861-1899) till 1903. After a brief interval of the native rule, the State again went under the British management in 1907 and remained until 1924. In all three cases, the Government of India executed the affairs of the State through a Council of Regency<sup>[17]</sup>.

In the Pre-Agency period, there was no sign of famine because population was sparse and almost all people were connected with subsistence-based agriculture. Moreover, jungles spreading over large tracts provided pastures to their cattle and saved them from hunger. The first known scarcity took place in 1867, owing to late summer rains<sup>[18]</sup>. The second dearth occurred in 1872, which was averted by successful working of canals<sup>[19]</sup>. In both cases, scarcity was at small level and there were no signs of famine even during the First Great Indian famine.

The State faced the first famine-like situation during the Second Great Indian famine. It was largely caused by the dwindling water supply in canals owing to insufficient rainfall in Himalayas as well as due to the construction of perennial canals in the Punjab, mainly Sirhind canal<sup>[20]</sup>. The same situation appeared in 1897, when canals dried up earlier, which produced below average *kharif* crops. Insufficient water supply devastated the cultivated areas of Minchinabad, Khairpur, Bahawalpur and Ahmadpur. It completely ruined the crops of indigo, millets, rice, and pulses.

Late rains and floods worsened the situation. A large part of cultivated area was rendered unfit for the next cultivation. Almost half of the State faced food shortage. For the first time in the State history, prices of basic commodities rose dramatically and inflation rose sharply. Its 3.36 population was distressed<sup>[21]</sup>. This situation had effected various segments of population in different ways and at different levels, depending upon their livelihood, gender and social status. The menial class and daily workers suffered more due to the failure of crops than did the *zamindar* class. One great loss was that of livestock. These severe conditions were a forerunner of famine.

The main reason of the famine like situation was the constant arrival of immigrants mainly from the Rajasthan States, which

recurrently became vulnerable to famines during the period from 1868 to 1890. Therefore, short-distance migration of their people took place in large numbers<sup>[22]</sup>. The Government of India also recognized that immigration added to the anxieties and problems in the districts adjacent to the esurient areas<sup>[23]</sup>. A large number of people from Bikaner, Jaisalmir and other districts come into Bahawalpur and became the major cause for the increase in prices. The Indian Famine Codes for Native States authorized the local governments of Native States to arrange the protective and relief measures<sup>[24]</sup>.

According to these codes, the Bahawalpur State made a careful use of its resources to overcome exacerbation. The local administration was declared as the famine control agency. The Revenue Minister was in charge of overall relief and preventive measures with the assistance of his staff. *Nazim* was the first rank responsible officer of the area concerned, and on the basis of his report the relief works were to be sanctioned<sup>[25]</sup>.

The State's policies for the prevention of famine are being analyzed in two sections: the first section deals with protective measures and the second examines the relief measures undertaken for immigrants.

### Section I. Protective Measures

During the draught, the first strategy adopted by the State was instant supply of food to the affected areas. In this regard, the State's division into two physical parts had always been a blessing. If one part of the State produced poor crops, the shortage was made up by the abundant production in the other part, which ensured that the State's residents would have sufficient food supply<sup>[26]</sup>. Fortunately, *kardaris* of Khanpur, Sadiqabad and half of Ahmadpur produced normal crops thanks to sufficient quantity of water in Chenab and Indus rivers. Therefore, no food shortage occurred in the State. The State made immediate arrangements to purchase food grains from areas of excess production and to provide them to the scarcity-hit areas within a short span of time. For that purpose, funds amounting to 299,680 rupees were released to meet the local demand for food<sup>[27]</sup>.

Furthermore, the excise duty of two and four *annas* per *maund* was imposed on the export of the grains. The excise duty shored up the State revenue, which it would spend on the relief plans the relief plans. The duty was abolished after the objection of the British government<sup>[28]</sup>. However, of all the protective measures against the threat of famine, the most important was the policy of prohibiting grain export. There were certain circumstances that led to this step. As mentioned earlier in 1895-96, more than half of the cultivated area in the State failed to produce any crops. Khanpur and Sadiqabad were the only areas where yield of crops was good. These *kardaris* had to meet the food requirements of the rest of the State as well as to afford a large stock of grain to export to the famine stricken areas of India<sup>[29]</sup>.

The grain export caused severe shortage of food grains in the State, to the extent that they had to be imported from Montgomery district. Montgomery government, after providing grains for some time, stopped the export of grains, though only for a short span of time<sup>[30]</sup>. Resultantly, Bahawalpur found itself facing a catastrophe and unable to keep balance between supply and demand. To resolve this issue, an emergency meeting of the State Council was called, in which landowner and traders were also called to represent

the public. Ultimately, a consensus was arrived to prohibit grain export so that increasing threat of food scarcity should be mitigated. The decision was also indispensable to meet the growing demand of food by constant arrival of refugees from Rajasthan States [31].

The Bikaner Durbar protested against the prohibition policy of Bahawalpur and made several requisition to the Government of Punjab as well as the Government of India, to urge the Bahawalpur State to cancel the prohibition order [32]. Owing to logical justification, the Bahawalpur State was not willing to snatch the food from its masses and give it to others, especially at a time when it already had a problem of food shortage and was shouldering the burden of many immigrants. Moreover, the existing stock of grain was enough for the State uses until the next harvest. The inter-state trade in scarcity days was limited merely to one thousand *maund* of wheat.

In this situation, the removal of export restriction would have resulted in a famine in the State. On the other hand, there existed some evidence that in British districts non-intervention policy in private trade added to the sufferings of the people in distress of the areas concerned. Non-interference in trade permitted the merchants to export grain even from famine-stricken districts to the markets [33]. In contrast; the native states were independent in their interim policies and generally had a hold over trade affairs. In Bahawalpur, a complete check and control was abided by till the danger of famine was over and only then the restriction policy was terminated.

In addition, the agriculture in Bahawalpur was subsistence-oriented and peasants were never forced to grow commercial crops. This step was just in contrast with the commercialization policy of the Government of India, where it was a blessing for the commercial class but was a burden for cultivators [34]. Actually, a vast area of Bahawalpur was still barren and water availability was scarce. Therefore, peasants, who were mostly self-cultivators, grew the crops according to the availability of water. Indeed, the subsistence agriculture was their first choice. Most of the peasants would first meet their own requirement of food grains, and then would send the surplus to the market. In the following years, some irrigation projects were initiated and the State encouraged the farmers to cultivate commercial crops in order to boost its agrarian economy [35].

The landowners and merchants had always been considered the apex of the economic structure. The Bahawalpur government involved both of them in alleviating the agonies of scarcity. The landowners at Bahawalpur were encouraged to work in close cooperation with the State officials mainly on canal projects. They were asked to employ the immigrants. On the part of landowners an amount of Rs. 34,000 was paid to refugees as wages to clear the canals. In connection with merchant class, the State adopted a strict system of keeping a check on traders, and *Bunyas*. They were directed to split the hoards of grain on fixed prices and its desecration was prone to a penalty of minimum Rs. 1000 [36].

In addition, moneylenders of Bahawalpur were bound to keep their interest rate low during scarcity days. In this connection,

some examples were found in Gujarat and Rajasthan, where during the dearth moneylenders compelled the cultivators to give their lands as security. In this way, many peasants became their tenants [37]. No such incident occurred in Bahawalpur during the scarcity days. Instead, the State advanced money without interest to retain the people at work on their own land and saved them from becoming insolvent. The remissions in revenue were lavishly granted in scarcity-hit regions. Sir Theodore Morison called these sorts of precautions as Prophylactic Treatment of Famine [38].

**Section II. Relief Strategies**

The system of relief provision through offering employment on public works can be traced back to 1868, when ten thousand Bikaneris were employed by the State government to excavate canals in Bahawalpur. When the threat of famine was over in the State, the relief projects were still continued for the sake of immigrants. The famine code for native states of India contained two sorts of relief work: small –scale relief work and large-scale relief work. Small-scale relief work was meant to improve communications, repair roads, wells, and cuts, clear water tanks and to improve harvesting. Large-scale relief work was aimed at providing employment to at least ten thousand persons for three months. This was started in the Bahawalpur State. The adjacent states of Rajasthan and other parts of India were still in the grip of famine and a large part of their population was moving towards the protected parts of the country, including the Bahawalpur State [39]. The movement of famine-stricken people to Bahawalpur was mainly due to two factors. First was the availability of commodities of life at cheaper rates as acknowledged by the Government of India:

*‘The prices in Bahawalpur, which have been fixed by the State, are much lower than the British territories’.* [40]

Secondly, Bahawalpur had started many relief projects not only for the locals in distress but also for the immigrants who were mostly impoverished people. Besides the epidemics, which had been widespread in drought-hit areas had not affected in the State. These conditions were very appealing for immigrants. The Bahawalpur State generally adopted a compassionate attitude towards immigrants. One of the reasons for adoption of such attitude was that several public works were going to be started in Bahawalpur, and the State government had planned to employ these immigrants to work on these projects. In this way, the public work was being done in tandem correlated with scarcity relief work.

The following table depicts the number of immigrants in the State. These figures show that very few of the famine-stricken people returned to their native areas. Most of them were integrated in the State and frequently continued to be settled in the upcoming years.

**Table 1:** The number of immigrants at Bahawalpur State 1881 to 1901.

Year	1881	1891	1901	Total	Returned to home areas	Permanently absorbed in Bahawalpur
Rajputana States, Ajmir and Merwara	10483	10842	32487	53812	1590	52222
Hissar	581	1835	1621	4057	1606	2451

*Source:* The Government of Punjab, *Punjab States Gazetteers: Vol. XXXVI- B. Bahawalpur State, Statistical Table, 1913* (Lahore: 1913), xii.

Since, irrigation has always been proved to be the best protective step against famine, the construction of canals was prioritized over all other public works with the twin aims of extending the irrigation and providing relief to the immigrants. The canal works were planned at a total estimated cost of Rs. 4,00,000 with the special purpose of engaging the immigrants<sup>[41]</sup>. These works included the excavation of *Qutub wah*, *Bahawalwah*, and *Hussainwah* canals. The work on widening of eastern *Sadqia* canal engaged one thousand people. In addition, five thousand immigrants were employed in the building of new head works on *Fordwah* canal. Five large streams that had dried up were excavated. Overall, these projects enabled thousand of famine-stricken people to make some money<sup>[42]</sup>. The other major public work undertaken by the State was the construction of railways, which commenced in 1872 and employed a large number of refugees mainly from Bikaner State.

In every relief work, local officers were instructed to pay the laborers their wages daily, three *annas* to every male and two *annas* to every female and boy worker. Food and shelter to labourers were provided by the State. It is worth mentioning here that the persons, who were weak, old or unable to work for any other reason, were given relief without having to work. According to the instructions by the Government of India, "poor houses" or *lungars* were opened at the State expenses throughout the State. These "poor houses" were provided with several facilities including with drinking and bathing water. The State fed 1,500 weak and infirm refugees daily<sup>[43]</sup>.

Apart from undertaking relief measures within its own jurisdiction, the State also contributed a sufficient amount to the Indian Famine Relief Trust<sup>[45]</sup>. The policies of restricting grain export, not forcing peasants for commercialization and involvement of human agencies in the relief process were in contrast with the policies of Government of India. Simultaneously, these steps were taken by a native State like Bahawalpur according to its indigenous socio-economic circumstances, which ultimately became a rescuer for the people.

### Conclusion

A famine is a prolonged period of socio-economic calamity marked by hunger, disease and mortality. The strategies of Bahawalpur State clearly demonstrate that prevention is better than cure. Because of such strategies, no starvation deaths occurred in the State. Neither any migration nor any transfer of land from poor to rich owing to scarcity occurred. The decision by the State authorities to put the restrictions on food export was quite well in time.

It cannot be denied that the protective works ultimately benefitted the State. These policies and measures manifested the humanitarian character of a Princely State, which was not only entitled to take the revenue but also was generous enough to expend at a time of paucity. Such norms can be adopted to crush the present poverty and to brighten the future prospects of the present-day famished areas of Pakistan.

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