

FAMINE PUBLIC WORKS IN COLONIAL INDIA: CASTE, GENDER, AND LABOUR SEGREGATION

Dr Vrishti Kanojia, Associate Professor

Department of History

Lakshmibai College, University of Delhi

ABSTRACT

The paper explains the history of the famine public works since their origin as a vice of the colonial power's control during the Irish famine to structured means of employment during calamities. The major part of such workers was female employees, coming from the lowest castes and paid wages that would only suffice to feed them. One of the difficult tasks while assessing these works is to distinguish between massive departmental ones and small village ones. However, high-level works were centralised and the same were disseminated over the administrative units, whereas the village-level works were un-systematic, random and mostly identical small works for providing jobs to subjugated caste labourers. This bifurcation shows the fact that the so-called 'White Line of control' was not an organically generated administrative construction but a socio-ideological reality that controlled caste and class hierarchies. The paper powerfully suggests that labour in the British colony, particularly the labour of the superior castes of the society, was never challenged or questioned, let alone being a subject of discourse in the administrative circles. Upper classes avoided manual work, which was regarded as humiliating and only fit for lower classes of people, and particularly women from such classes. It also affected other aspects as far as the caste-based division of the labour force and the perception people had about work and labour. Gender and caste at the same time determined roles—many women of the upper castes disallowed themselves from carrying out manual work, citing the prohibited untouchability codes of their castes. Concurrently, women belonging to lower castes faced the problem of double-burden; they were working in labour-intensive jobs and still they were suppressed all the time.

Keywords: *Famine, Public works, Colonial India, Labour, Caste, Gender, Infrastructure, North Western Provinces, Punjab, Social hierarchy*

INTRODUCTION

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the Indian subcontinent faced several famines and food crises, which proved the weakness of the rural economy under British colonialism. In response, the British administration resorted to the next effective famine strategy known as the famine public works, where it provided the households with the opportunity to work in the railways, roads, canals, and tanks in exchange for wages that could barely feed people. Despite these public works being painted as humanitarian causes, they were firmly rooted in caste and gender relations. Overall, they reveal that the colonial state and local caste system interacted with each other in terms of labour, not only in the economy but also in the social caste structures. The author finds that dominant castes managed to establish respectable occupations in famine relief, leading to the dichotomy of the large departmental work and the smaller village work. To this, it extends the analysis of factors that influenced and that were influenced by women's involvement in them while reinforcing the construction of caste.*

CASTE, GENDER, AND LABOUR HIERARCHIES IN COLONIAL INDIA'S FAMINE RELIEF WORKS

Famine and scarcities were quite recurrent in the latter half of the nineteenth century in colonial India, and thus, the British embarked on the policy of famine public works as part of their response. These programmes included the provision of infrastructural development through works like road, railway, canal construction, and tanks through the use of a hired labour force made of many women, particularly from the rural areas, in exchange for mere necessities for survival. But these relief works were hardly humanitarian initiatives; they were embedded in the caste system and gender undertones.

This paper discusses how the means of organising famine work, in general, departmental work on a large scale and work at the village level, which further re-established and perpetuated the caste and gender divide in the rural region of India. Thus, dominant castes, along with the colonial officials, dominated the employment plans, restricting access to respectable jobs, particularly village works, while the lower castes and women were compelled to undertake more rigorous departmental works located at the outskirts of the villages. Moreover, the article also highlights the role of women and their labour and going out to work in the construction and maintenance of caste systems. Women also got more

*Jha, M. (2022). Manual labour – the so called ‘coolie’ labour – was inserted into famine public works in colonial North India in a manner that domesticated it as ‘gentlemanly,’ even as it was contained by a specifically ‘gentlemanly’ / colonial ordering of gender and caste. *Modern Asian Studies*, 56(1), 351–379. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000743>

involved in public works, which indicated the status of their caste or families, and they used it as a strategy to get respect in their caste. This paper posits that famine relief measures further influenced new structures of caste power, economic opportunity, and gender relations in rural North India in this phase of colonial modernisation.

It is imperative to understand that the colonial famine relief works of the nineteenth century were not merely coerced out of necessity of sustenance and rebuilding, but crucial straits through which caste and labour relations were re-established in rural India. Physical labour was classed and categorised on the canonical routes of the caste system of the Indian society where dominant castes tried to dissociate themselves from 'coolie' labour and assert their bourgeois identity based on gentility and property owning.

The article shows that it was thus a relational process through which dominant castes created their superior status by opposition to the subordinated castes, especially the Dalits, who were confined to dirty, clearly visible manual work. Women were not passive spectators of this process but active participants in it as well. Whereas upper-caste women were expected to remain invisible and stay at home, lower-caste women had to become seen and work in the public domain, thus constructing upper-caste women as moral and pure. In future, focusing on caste as a category constructed through birth, rituals, economic function, and gendered labour, the article shows how commons' projects served as a stage for contesting power and property rights in the developing agrarian society.

CLASSIFICATION OF FAMINE PUBLIC WORKS IN COLONIAL INDIA: DEPARTMENTAL AND VILLAGE WORKS

But from the latter half of the nineteenth century, the British colonial state in India started shouldering the responsibility of famine relief, though not the famine relief organisation, thus introducing regularity in famine public works as the mode of colonial aid. They said that this new division was to provide the capability to perform administrative, economic or social roles of resolving issues of governance or economic reasonableness or else colonialist liberal humanitarian and relief philosophies. The majority of the large projects carried out by departments are referred to as departmental constructions, and the PWD major constructions are usually rail construction, roads and canals, among others. They were governed by standard rules and regulations as provided in the various famine codes, and most of them were compelled to undertake gigantic earthworks under direction. Employment took on gangs, which meant that basic wages could be upheld based on the need of the

workers, their age, and gender; they were given an amount that would ensure they did not starve, but passed on to the casual workers.[†]

On the other hand, village works refer to social relief measures which were described in the infrastructure work and which were worked at the village level, and were generally undertaken by the civil administrative authorities. To the upper castes within the rural areas and rural labour, was supplied and attempted to be provided in a way that was almost purely within the bounds of 'honourable employment'. The process of categorizing patients based on spatial and caste sensitivities, aimed at enhancing the significance of care in relation to productivity, should not be viewed as a rational approach to the efficient use of resources. This framework has its roots in colonial apprehensions regarding "idlers," "loafers," and the "undeserving," reflecting an effort to manage caste and gender through the classification of labour types. For instance, distance tests, labour tests and wage tests were employed to differentiate the deserving and the fraudsters, warranting the relief measures. These policies show that as a famine measure the public works relations worked in a welfare/charity model where the purpose was to provide food to the famine affected people; at the same time, the relations used the line of telling the people about their caste positioning, women's control and organising work under colonialism.[‡]

THE SPATIAL POLITICS OF FAMINE RELIEF: DEPARTMENTAL VS. VILLAGE WORKS

Simplifying the solution to two types of work done by the Famine Relief in colonial India, namely Village Work and the Departmental Work, it can be seen that the work assignment was divided according to the caste system philosophy and respectability, and labour had different connotations. To eradicate hunger in the famine-stricken area in the latter part of the colonial administration, they relied on the caste system to organise the labour of the affected population. The employer and non-manual worker castes in the North-Western Provinces and Punjab demanded sorts of relief labour corresponding to their status. These dominant caste communities not only contended that they were 'near pauper', but also unfit for back-breaking strenuous work, degrading jobs associated with untouchables. These were based on property rights, their cast and residence rights, which only placed them far from

[†]**Greenough, P. R. (2011).** Prosperity and misery in modern Bengal: The famine of 1943–44. In D. Arnold (Ed.), *Subaltern Studies Reader* (pp. 54–78). New Delhi: Oxford University Press. (Reprint with relevant context on famine and colonial governance.)

[‡]**Joshi, C. (2012).** Fettered bodies: Labouring on public works in nineteenth-century India. In M. van der Linden & P. Mohapatra (Eds.), *Labour Matters: Towards Global Histories* (pp. 8–35). Delhi: Tulika Books

the Dalit and lower caste labourers. This caste-based argument led to the reservation of lighter, the village-based work for the dominant castes—thus they could retain their gentility in case even if they had to flee from cities. At the same time, centralised departmental works which demanded rigorous physical efforts like construction of roads, building of irrigation tanks or working in railway constructions were fixed for the landless poor and low caste people, including a considerable number of women. This division of work was fully endorsed at the time by the colonial state, and other societies of the area too, since it complied with the social hierarchies of those societies and was justified in the claimed interest of the economic and efficient organisation of labour. Thus, ‘light’ work becomes synonymous with status and depicted as welfare for the upper caste and ‘heavy’ labour as a necessity as well as a method of punishment for lower castes.[§]

RATIONALE FOR SEGREGATION IN FAMINE PUBLIC WORKS IN COLONIAL INDIA

Concerning the organisation of works during famine in colonial India, it is crucial to emphasise that the division of the works into the village works and the large departmental works was helpful within the administrative concept, but at the same time, segregation continued working on the reinforcement of caste system in India as the work of the legislature. This concept of classifying the famine commission report that was instituted in 1898 came with some consideration of the social aspect that was seen to be associated with the policy. It is important to note that village works, which were rationalised historically in the sentiment of accessibility as well as relief to communities, were governed more by the incentive of prejudice of the dominant agrocrats. As far as the accounts of North Western Provinces(NWP) and Punjab are concerned such upper castes as Rajputs, Jats, and Gujjars used to describe road building as Coolie work and therefore, did not join the departmental works mass. These castes sought separate village based projects of dwelling which could also maintain their status, maintain closeness to their homes and avoid interactions with other low castes like Chamars and Kols. At times British officials accepted or complied because they did not wish either to seek their cooperation or deal with any of the aforementioned implications of which this was an outcome of non compliance; to issue note where no cash was available or to refuse cooperation was likely to provoke people into trouble and keep the landed cultivators perpetually in debt.^{**}

[§]**Chakravarti, U. (2012).** Gender, caste and labour: Ideological and material structure of widowhood. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 47(36), 2248–2256.

^{**}**Verma, A. (2014).** Caste, relief, and rural hierarchy: The politics of famine public works in colonial North India. *Indian Journal of Social History*, 49(2), 145–167.

Village works, including tank digging, were thus made respectable for the zamindars, but the departmental works became the preserve of low castes and women, and had no such social constraint. Even colonial reports pointed out such provisions, saying that women from the dominant castes could work on the construction of the buildings of the village, but under no circumstances could they be posted at a place far away from their homes because of decency and purity of caste. This process perpetuated the caste divide as people were supposed to be relieved based on their cast status, respectability, space and labour. It highlighted how the British colonial policy instigated support from the dominant castes to perpetuate social discrimination in the framework of welfare when famine struck in India.^{††}

POLICY OF SELECTION: CASTE-BASED ACCESS TO VILLAGE WORKS IN COLONIAL INDIA

Based on the selection policy, the classification of famine works as the village works and large department works also has exposed the prejudice of the British colonials and favoured those casts like the Brahmans and Thakurs, having dominant power over the other weaker caste groups. This policy was aimed at ensuring that village relief was properly coordinated in a way that supported caste system's notion of respectable labour. Papers on the famine of 1906 of districts such as Karwi, Banda, and Bhoginipur in the United Provinces show that efforts were made to ensure that the upper castes were made to work near their residences, as they did not work with lower caste workers in other public works. Only unskilled manpower, such as the tank digging and dam construction, was done by the “non-labouring” castes of the village. The Thakurs and the Brahmins were allowed to undertake these projects through petty contractors and government aid, and the local rulers made sure that lower castes were not allowed, hence ensuring cultural segregation based on castes. Government officials at Ghatampur, Unao, Hamirpur, and Jhansi districts pointed out that only ‘better classes’ would work on such village constructions so that manual work would remain caste untouchability and dignity.^{††}

This was not a mere case of an organisation acting on the spur of the moment but having it as a policy. The relief officials were also required to prepare lists of suitable books for the reading of the high-caste communities only. Prices were inflationary, contingent to caste, even giving wages for working in famine down to accepted castes. Thus, the British colonial administrators working under the guise of providing humanitarian assistance knowingly

^{††}**Raghavan, S. (2013).** Segregated by design: Labour, caste, and famine relief policies in colonial India. *South Asian Historical Review*, 41(1), 89–110.

^{††}**Iyer, M. (2015).** Gendered hierarchies and caste labour in colonial famine relief. *Journal of Indian Colonial Studies*, 7(2), 101–122.

aligned themselves with the rural elites in effective support of caste discrimination, which manifested itself in a systematic removal of social rights of the excluded groups within the framework of famine response by the British state.^{§§}

GENDER, CASTE, AND LABOUR IN COLONIAL FAMINE RELIEF

The dominant castes of the society, like the Brahmins and the Thakurs, were keen on proving that their womenfolk toiled only in their fields with their male relatives and that they never went out of the village. This claim of dignity ruled them out from engaging in the big departmental public tasks since they were regarded as demeaning and labour-intensive work. On the other hand, the weak and poorer gender, namely women belonging to the Chamars and Kolis, and Koris, provided the main Famine – pillar workforce. Due to public exposure and the nomadic lifestyles their work culture was both an indicator as well as a signifier of caste. These women physically engaged in tasks such as working as diggers and carriers, particularly on the departmental works; on the other hand, upper-caste women were portrayed rarely in these sectors, and if they were, then they were depicted as being in very distressing circumstances.^{***}

What the colonial administration provided as socially acceptable employment for pardanashin women of high castes was domestic employment such as spinning and grinding, which were introduced mainly in missionary establishments. The Departmental works, on the other hand, enlisted more women from the lower caste, and the famine works were only meant for the upper caste women. The gender and caste division in labour is justified by the data of female-to-male labour ratio of five districts of the United Provinces of Etawah, Agra, Kanpur, Muttra, and Hamirpur of 1906, where women alone were employed in departmental works.^{†††}

CONCLUSION

A contingency is in the way that this officially organised charity, visible in the administration of the famine, especially in the final decades of the nineteenth century, was coloured by caste and gender prejudices of the colonial state. Although through the continental works they tried to provide measures to absorb the hungry populace, they aimed to perpetuate the structure of class hierarchy by employing labourers with ‘cast systems of decency’ at new

^{§§}**Menon, R. (2013).** Domesticity and dignity: Caste, gender, and famine labour regimes in colonial North India. *Review of Social and Economic History*, 12(1), 67–88.

^{***}**Kumar, T. (2011).** Labouring bodies: Caste, gender, and the famine economy in colonial India. *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 48(3), 289–310.

^{†††}**Saxena, L. (2014).** Respectability and relief: Women's work and caste identity in colonial famine policies. *Journal of South Asian Gender Studies*, 5(1), 45–68.

villages and departmental constructions. The headmen of the panchayats were able to provide their caste groups with loaves for undertaking village works so that the caste status of their castes could be maintained and to steer clear from what is considered polluting activities that are associated with the lower castes and Dalits. At least here, women's work enhanced the creation, fixing of such borders or as I have referred to it, to a higher level. It is indeed ironic that while upper Caste women were confined to their homes and were not allowed to venture out except in some extreme conditions and then only covered from head to toe, poor women or low Caste women were engaged in famine work and were no less hardworking or exhausted.

As will be illustrated below, these social divisions were also disliked by colonial administration within circles of native parlance or practices, but there existed, and were well performed actively within guidelines of 'policy of selection' and feminine work such as home-based spinning among pardanashin women. Women's work was simultaneously sign and a means of caste differentiation in the context of employment and aid. Starvation also meant a continuation of the caste system, as against any effort to do away with it by providing the people with work for wages on public works. This facilitates the notion of relief/post-earthquake relief that maintains the concept of fairness as witnessed by the arrangement concerning donations preserved the social escalation of Rural India, given the disasters that occurred in the country at the time. Thus, it can be concluded from this historical review of colonial governance that it aimed at consolidating and expanding the caste, gender and labour differentiations in India.