

only by historians but also by demographers, economists, geographers, anthropologists and political scientists as well.

Before going to have a description about famines in Madras Presidency during the first half of the 19th Century a brief history of the famines in India from the earliest known period to the beginning of 19th century and their causes are discussed below. Along with the famines of India is given briefly some of the serious famines which have occurred in Europe and elsewhere during the above period from available records in order to compare the famines of Madras Presidency with that of other areas

#### **FAMINES IN THE WORLD**

In the earlier periods of European history famines and dearth were of frequent occurrences. Short in his book *Bill of Mortality* given the information that in all those countries of the world of which history was then generally known, 239 great famines and dearth had occurred since the Christian Era. Holingshed's chronicles of 13th, 14th and 15th centuries abound with famines in Great Britain and France. Voltaire had given a fearful picture of famine in France at the end of 17th century. There were numerous dearths in several quarters of the world.<sup>7</sup>

In 1784-85 a dreadful famine raged in Egypt owing to a deficiency in the inundation of the Nile. The French traveler Volney an eye witness to the misery has given a vivid picture of it. He described that the streets of Cairo were crowded with famished and dying skeletons a vast number of unfortunate wretches migrated to neighboring countries and towns of Syria. Similarly the empire of China had always been subject to famine and a very serious one occurred in 1787 when many famished wretches breathed their last in the streets of Canton while many destroyed their infant children and the young to save them from the agony of hunger. In Ireland, people suffered from a major famine in 1846-47 when the potato crop, their staple food failed continuously during 1845 and 1846 and a large number of people perished of starvation.<sup>8</sup>

#### **FAMINES IN INDIA**

Since time immemorial, those who had inhabited India had suffered and died from famine. Their pain and sorrow are revealed in legends and later attested by historic events. References are made to famine in one of

7 R. A. Dalryell. *Memorandum on the Madras Famine of 1866*, Madras, 1866, pp.2-3.

8 *Ibid.*, pp.8-9.

the first Indian economic treatise, the *Arthashastra* written by Chanakya, Minister of Chandragupta, between 322-289 B.C. describing "..... then came a terrible famine which resembled a kind of hell with the masses of starving people moving like ghosts, tormented by hunger, everyone thought only of his belly and forgot in his misery love for his wife, affection for his children and tender regard for his parents, each person strove apart to keep himself alive at the cost of all other living beings."<sup>9</sup> A. Loveday and B.M. Bhatia had recorded 70 famines in between the period 297 - 1943 A. D. The Table below gives the list of these famines.<sup>10</sup>

**Table: List of famines between 297-1943 A.D.**

Date	Place	Date	Place	Date	Place
297	Magadha	1577	Hutch	1790-92	Bombay, Hyderabad, Gujrat, Madras, Kutch & Orissa
445	Kashmir	1592	Sholapur	1799-1804	North West, Bombay, Central India & Rajputna
917-18	Kashmir	1594-98	Central India & Hindustan	1806-07	Karnatak
1033	Hindustn	1613-15	Punjab	1812	Bombay, Agra & Madras
1116-19	Daccan & Buranpur	1623	Gujrat & Ahmadabad	1819-20	Rajputana Deccan & Broach
1200	Bombay	1628-29	Hoozoor	1824-25	Deccan, Bombay & Madras
1259	Bombay	1629-30	Deccan	1832-33	Shaolapur & Madras
1291	Delhi & Siwalik	1650	Ahmadabad	1833-34	Gujrat, Kandish & Deccan
1305	Delhi	1660	Auranjeb's Dominions	1853-55	Bellary, Madras, Deccan, Rajputana & Bombay

9 A. William Dando, *The Geography of Famines*, London, 1980, p.133.

10 *Ibid.*, pp.128-129.



Date	Place	Date	Place	Date	Place
1343-45	Delhi	1676-77	Hyderabad	1860-61	Punjab, Rajputana & Kutch
1351-63	Kashmir	1685	Deccan & Hyderabad	1862	Deccan
1396	Deccan	1702-04	Bombay & Deccan	1866-67	Orissa, Bihar, Ganjam Bellary, Hyderabad & Mysore
1423	Deccan	1709	Bombay	1868-70	Punjab, Gujrat, Deccan & Rajputana
1471-72	Bahmini & Bombay	1718	Bombay	1873-74	Bundelkhand & Bengal
1494	Delhi	1737	Bombay	1876-78	Madras, Bombay, Mysore & Hyderabad
1500	Delhi	1739	Bombay	1877-78	Kashmir
1520	Bombay	1746-47	Bombay	1888-89	Ganjam & Orissa
1527	Sind	1759	Bombay	1896-97	Bengal, Bombay, Central Prrovinces, Bihar, Madras Delhi, Hyderabad & Rajputana
1540-43	Sind	1770	Bengal	1899-1900	Baroda, Kutch, Kathiwar Central Provinces & Punjab
1540	Coromondal Coast	1781	Madras	1900-02	Gujrat
1554-55	Delhi, Agra & Bajana	1782	Bombay & Madras	1906-07	Darbhangha

Date	Place	Date	Place	Date	Place
1556	Hindustn	1783	Bengal, Bellary Kashmir & Rajputna	1907	United Provinces
1576	Delhi	1787	Mahratta	1943	Bengal

Famines regularly occurred in India in the 1st millennium B. C. There are frequent mentions in *Vedas* about prayers in favour the lord of rain; "Bestow on us pure and copious rain even as cow gives us milk". Apart from areas watered by large rivers and irrigated systems associated with these, agriculture in India depends on monsoon rains. The monsoon sweeps over the peninsula from the south west in June and July and retreats in September, the main crops being reaped in December. There are also secondary monsoon rains arriving in November and December which sustain smaller harvests in March and April. It is the south west monsoon which really matters in most parts of the country and its arrival is anxiously awaited by Governments, Central and Provincial and with deep personal anxiety by the cultivator. Consecutive failures of these monsoons bring famines.<sup>11</sup>

Till the end of 17th century India was an advanced nation in agriculture, traditional industries and trade. Economic deterioration however began in the 18th century and reached its climax under the rule of East India Company. Chief causes are political disintegration on account of decay of Mughal Empire, rise of Marathas, Jats and Sikhs, invasions and exploitation of richest provinces by the East India Company. The economic transition in India, retardation of the process of industrialization under the compulsion of colonial economy, excessive pressure on agriculture and land policy of the Government aiming at exploitation of farmers contributed to the progressive decline of the economic condition in India.<sup>12</sup> Famine frequently visited India in the period of British conquest 1707-1815 at least one famine every seven years. The famine of 1770 that brought great hardship to the people was followed by famines in 1784 and in 1803 in Bombay, in 1833 in Madras Presidencies and in 1861 in North West Provinces.<sup>13</sup> The frequent

11 W. R. Aykroyd, *op. cit.*, pp.48-49.

12 S. N. Kulkarni, *Famine, Drought and Scarcities in India*, Allahabad, 1990, pp. 8-9.

13 A. William Dando, *op. cit.*, pp.130-131.

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visit of famines in India exposed the defective British administration. Generally the people could store food against the danger of crop failure and save some money to buy food from outside in time of need. But in India, poor cultivators, living from hand to mouth could not store or save. So their scanty resources were soon exhausted. Ill health, diseases associated with malnutrition were common among their children. Their diets were unbalanced and inadequate even in normal time. So their physical reserves were small to help them sustain in the period of dearth.<sup>14</sup> B.M. Bhatia an eminent economist believed that food shortages under the British rule were magnified and intensified by tremendous increase in the price of food grains. This led to death by starvation because rural poor were unable to purchase food to feed them. So he equated catastrophic famine with British colonialism.<sup>15</sup>

#### EARLY FAMINES IN MADRAS PRESIDENCY

The Presidency of Madras was also not free from the horrors of famine. Dalyell has stated<sup>16</sup> "indeed a year rarely passes without distress being felt in some quarter from severe loss of crops, occasioned by failure of the seasonable rains."

##### Famine of 1729 – 33

In 1729, severe scarcity began. The cause of the scarcity was the neglect of tanks which could not provide sufficient water to fields. The price of rice rose from 25 *seers* per rupee in 1729 to 17 *seers* per rupee in 1733. The rise in price caused considerable inconvenience to the Madras Government and the later fixed the price of rice and ragi. The scarcity lasted for several years. In 1730 a committee was appointed to superintend the sale of grain. All persons were required to give them notice if they possessed more than 5 *graces* (about 21 tons) and a reward of Rs.35/- to informers about concealment. Subsequently the sale of grain was prohibited except between 6.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m. and the prices were fixed at 24 *seers* per rupee.<sup>17</sup>

##### Famine of 1781 – 82

Another famine took place in 1781-82. Its main cause was the Karnatak War. Hyder Ali of Mysore devastated the surrounding area and the settlement

14 W.R. Aykroyd., *op. cit.*, p. 49.

15 A. William Dando, *op. cit.*, pp.130-131.

16 R. A, Dalyell, *op. cit.*, p.10.

17 *Report of Indian Famine Commission*, 1878, London, 1880, Part III, pp.2-3.



of Madras was reduced to great straits for food as the whole country in its vicinity was suffering from a general scarcity. Early in 1781, the Government of Madras remitted all import duties on grain and called upon the officers in charge of the subordinate settlements, to forward all available grain to the Presidency. On 20th May, they deemed it necessary to appoint a Grain Committee to superintend the daily distribution of grain. This Committee was authorized to fix the price at which grain should be sold and to limit the quantity disposed of each day. The native merchants were also required to enter into penal bonds not to withhold any of the grain in their possession, and were required by proclamation to inform the committee of the extent of their stores.<sup>18</sup>

After having made a minute enquiry into the available food supply of the settlement, the Committee reported about the scarcity of grain that food stocks could hardly support till the end of June. In reply the committee was directed to restrict the daily sales. This precaution caused the greatest distress among the poorer classes but despite the committee's utmost endeavour, they were compelled to report on the 6<sup>th</sup> July that there was only two days consumption available. They at the same time expressed their belief that a considerable quantity of grain was concealed by the merchants in different parts of the town. The Government then permitted to sale grain at such rates as they thought proper independent of the regulation of the Grain Committee. The Government also at the same time resolved to supply the committee with 400 bags of rice daily to support about 60,000 people from the Company's stores to be sold by retail under the Committee's superintendence. In January 1782, pressure of the distress became much more severe. Public subscription was raised for the poor. The Europeans subscribed Rs.2800/- per *mensem* and some small subscriptions were also received from the natives.<sup>19</sup>

The Government also contributed to the fund of the relief institution known as Monegar Choultry. In the month of May, 4,000 people were fed by the managers of this fund which further increased later in the year. In August a contribution of Rs.30, 000/- was sent to the fund from the European inhabitants of Bengal. But still it was difficult to provide for the multitudes of starving poor. They therefore suggested to Government that the paupers should be deported to the northern districts which were under the authority of the Madras Government where provisions were

18 R. A. Dalyell, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

19 *Ibid.*, p.13.