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Famine Relief and Popular Action During Late Nineteenth Century in the North-Western Provinces of Colonial India

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ABSTRACT

The Indian subcontinent witnessed recurring famines during the second half of the nineteenth century. The British colonial state refused to intervene in grain trade, as per its famine relief policy while doing so in the labour market. This article examines popular action on relief works by famine labourers, comprising mostly marginalised castes. It contends that the state's utilitarian response to famines, which guaranteed neither wages nor food, led to popular action after state relief provisions were put into place. Moreover, the article reveals how popular action uncovered tensions between different levels of administration, particularly for local officials. In doing so, the article contributes to historiographies on famine relief in India by examining the response of labourers on relief works to the famine relief policy and the administrative complexities involved in its management. It explores the moral economy of the labouring poor and the limits of the colonial state's relief response in alleviating distress.

KEYWORDS

British empire; crime; famine relief; India; moral economy; popular action

Introduction

The nineteenth century in the Indian subcontinent was wrought with recurring famines, which intensified during the last decade. Termed as 'Late Victorian Holocausts' by Mike Davis, they caused widespread starvation, mortality and distress among the Indian population.¹ The Indian Famine Commission published a report in 1880 that understood famines in India as being caused by lack of wages to buy food rather than necessarily lack of food itself, which could be obtained through a well-connected road and railway network.² Therefore, the primary way in which the government provided relief to the affected population was by providing wages through employment on relief works, which comprised construction on railways,

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1. Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (Verso, 2017). Famines and scarcities in the North-Western Provinces and Awadh (NWP) were recorded in 1860, 1868, 1873–74, 1876–79, 1890–92, 1896–97 and 1899–1901.
2. *Report of the Indian Famine Commission (FCR) 1880* (Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1880).

roads or irrigation systems.³ Despite this policy, famine-related mortality in the subcontinent between 1896 and 1900 is estimated to be around twenty million, if not more.⁴ The worst affected were peasants, artisans and wage labourers, particularly in rural areas.

However, peasants did not endure famine periods as pliant victims, instead asserting their discontent through popular action.⁵ Interpreted as a form of collective bargaining through various response mechanisms, popular action during periods of scarcity involved challenging the market order and demanding basic subsistence. Rather than simply a manifestation of economic crisis and starvation, it was a form of collective consciousness to set a fair price for food.⁶ This form of an expectation of the poor classes from the elites of a 'right to subsistence', particularly during periods of dearth, has been read through the lens of 'moral economy'.⁷ As was also the case for India, poorer peasants expected the 'winners' of the famine to support them as a form of 'elementary justice'.⁸ More recently, famine 'crime' has been included as an expression of popular action, referring to thefts, robberies or riots specific to famines that signified subaltern discontent with the elite and the state.⁹ Peasants often targeted the grain merchant or the bania seen as profiting from grain speculation, to restore a form of moral societal justice and claim their right to subsistence.¹⁰

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3. Relief was also provided 'gratuitously' in villages and in poorhouses. Poorhouses were structures set up during famines to provide relief to people unable to labour on relief works: see Sanjay Sharma, 'Famine, Relief, and Rhetoric of Welfare in Colonial North India', in *An Economic History of Famine Resilience*, ed. Jessica Dijkman and Bas van Leeuwen (Routledge, 2019), 162–81; Sanjay Sharma, 'Poorhouses and Gratuitous Famine Relief in Colonial North India', in *A Cultural History of Famine: Food Security and the Environment in India and Britain*, ed. Ayesha Mukherjee (Routledge, 2019), 129–48.
 4. The estimated mortality during 1896–1902 ranged between 6.1 and 19 million: Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, 7.
 5. David Arnold, *Famine: Social Crisis and Historical Change* (B. Blackwell, 1988).
 6. Charles Tilly, 'Food Supply and Public Order in Modern Europe', in *The Formation of National States in Western Europe*, ed. Charles Tilly (Princeton University Press, 1975).
 7. Edward P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past and Present* 50 (1971): 76–136; James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (Yale University Press, 1976); Michael Adas, "'Moral Economy" or "Contest State"? Elite Demands and the Origins of Peasant Protest in Southeast Asia', *Journal of Social History* 13, no. 4 (1980): 521–46; R. Bin Wong, 'Food Riots in the Qing Dynasty', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 41, no. 4 (1982): 767–88.
 8. David Hardiman, 'Usury, Dearth and Famine in Western India', *Past and Present* 152 (1996): 113–56; 115. Subaltern studies historians have challenged the official narrative of riots as spontaneous and irrational in nature, arguing that in doing so, the state denied the subaltern subject a political consciousness and the ability to rationally premeditate an action: see Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Duke University Press, 1999).
 9. Sharma has analysed famine crime as popular action during the East India Company rule, when neither famine relief nor crime had been officially codified: Sanjay Sharma, *Famine, Philanthropy, and the Colonial State: North India in the Early Nineteenth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 79–134; Sanjay Sharma, 'The 1837–38 Famine in U.P.: Some Dimensions of Popular Action', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 30 (1993): 337–72. Jha has highlighted how women negotiated wages on public works, including relief works: Madhavi Jha, "'Men Diggers and Women Carriers": Gendered Work on Famine Public Works in Colonial North India', *International Review of Social History* 16 (2019): 1–28.
 10. David Arnold, 'Looting, Grain Riots and Government Policy in South India, 1918', *Past and Present* 84 (1979): 111–45; David Arnold, 'Famine in Peasant Consciousness and Peasant Action: Madras, 1876–78', in *Subaltern Studies III: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Oxford University Press, 1984).

This historiography concerns popular actions outside of the context of relief provision, especially in the beginning or at the peak of famine distress. We know little about popular action once famine relief began. What can evidence of popular action reveal about colonial famine relief? Why did popular action take place after relief provision had begun? This article shows how popular action was a consequence of the colonial state's famine relief policy. Famine relief provision under the British colonial state rested on the ability to labour on relief works, and the wages earned with this labour were to be used to access grain. I argue that popular action on relief work sites was the famine labourer's reaction to the policy, which created a double disconnect by assuring neither sufficient wages nor food to the labourer. The reason for this, I explain, was that labourers' moral economic expectations of entitlement to food did not disappear with relief works but simply shifted from the village elite to the colonial state.

I focus my analysis on the North-Western Provinces and Awadh (NWP), renamed as the United Provinces in 1902, and mainly on evidence from the famine of 1896–97. The province presents a peculiar case in that it was known for its fertile lands, which produced major grain and cash crops. Yet, despite its agricultural productivity, the province was regularly affected by famine under British rule. Moreover, NWP presents an important case for famine relief works because the ratio of relief provided through relief works to gratuitous relief, as well as the number of persons employed on relief works was almost double in NWP than other provinces for the 1896–97 famine.¹¹ The two late nineteenth century famines of 1896–97 and 1899–1901 are significant because high mortality rates led the colonial state to re-evaluate its policies in the Famine Commissions of 1898 and 1901. Notably, the Report of the 1901 Famine Commission stated that, following contraction of credit, private charity and slow grain trade especially in the NWP, the 'restlessness' during the onset of famine that led to 'increase of crime' would subside after 'the first panic of rising prices has passed'.¹² As I show in the article, these 'danger signals' that challenged the colonial state during famines continued even after relief works had been started.

The article relies on fresh evidence like the correspondence conducted during famine relief operations by local administrations in regional archives that have so far remained unanalysed for understanding popular action. An examination of these sources provides closer insights into the tense dynamics between local administrations, labourers and banias, otherwise obscure in official reports. Shifting the focus away from state policy itself,¹³ the evidence reveals how the colonial state inserted itself as the main provider of famine relief which not only reinforced the importance of the relief works regime, but also sealed the colonial governance of famine as a

11. *Report of the Indian Famine Commission 1898* (Government Central Printing Office, 1898), 205–12.

12. *Report of the Indian Famine Commission, 1901* (Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, India, 1901), 14.

13. B.M. Bhatia, *Famines in India: A Study in Some Aspects of the Economic History of India, 1860–1945* (Asia Publishing House, 1967); H.S. Srivastava, *The History of Indian Famines and Development of Famine Policy (1858–1918)* (Sri Ram Mehra & Co., 1968); Michelle Burge McAlpin, *Subject to Famine: Food Crisis and Economic Change in Western India, 1860–1920* (Princeton University Press, 1983).

utilitarian endeavour. But, more importantly, it shows that this utilitarian calculus did not always work in practice; instead, popular action compelled local officers to act flexibly in these moments. The sources thus offer a bottom-up picture of how famine codes were operationalised on the ground, uncovering the responses of the affected population to the famine relief works regime.

By connecting the cause and effect of famine relief and popular action on relief works, the article contributes to existing literature on famines and famine relief in colonial India in two ways. Firstly, it examines popular action on a new site—famine relief works—to bring to light the limitations of the colonial state’s utilitarian famine relief policy. Secondly, it illustrates how officers on the ground deviated from expected norms, demonstrating a more complex picture of management of popular action during famines beyond the dualities of the state and its subjects. Ultimately, the article not only unveils the inadequacy of the colonial state’s relief measures beyond discontent against banias, but also presents a deviation from the assumption of famine labourers as docile colonial subjects.

The article proceeds by explaining the first slippage caused by the famine relief policy for the labourers: wages. Next, it explains the second slippage: access to food through wages, by discussing the role of the bania and the colonial state in the moral economy of famine labourers. Further, by taking a step back to the pre-famine

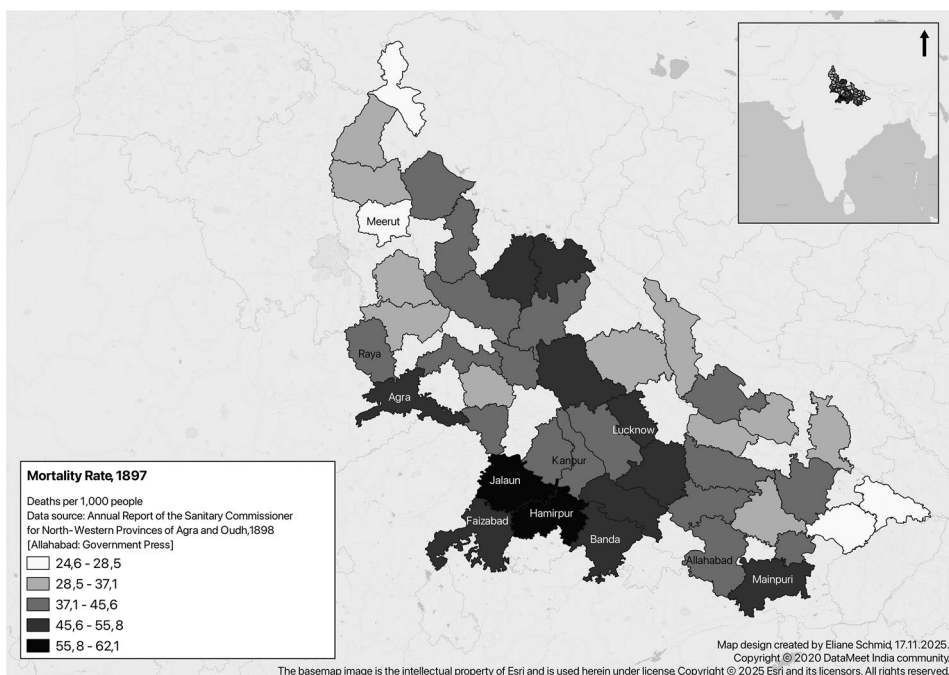


Figure 1. Map showing the famine-affected areas in the North-Western Provinces of India in 1897.¹⁴

14. Thank you to the reviewers for suggesting this addition and to Eliane Schmid for helping me with the map.

relief context, the article explains how marginalised castes formed the bulk of famine labourers. Then, moving to the sites of relief works, ‘looting’ of bania shops by labourers is examined, showing how popular action cut across hierarchies. The last section delves into tensions between different administrations in the management of popular action on relief works.

Famine relief, labour and wages

The colonial state’s famine relief policy had two issues: the definition of famine itself, which underestimated the lack of food, and the prevailing insufficiency of wages in buying available food.¹⁵ The Indian Famine Commission of 1880 identified the main cause of famine as lack of diversity of occupations in India, which caused a shortfall in work during famines, leading to the inability of the population to buy food when prices rose.¹⁶ It found the remedy to ‘famines of work’ as opposed to ‘famines of food’ in the form of providing employment to the able-bodied famine-affected population. Employment on famine relief works became the preferred way of providing relief.

The colonial state abstained from any interference in the grain trade. It justified its investment in public works, including relief works, by asserting that roads and railways would resolve issues of price rise for food through grain trade between famine and non-famine areas.¹⁷ Roads and railways were termed as ‘protective’ public works enabling an interregional crop trade, whereas irrigation works were viewed as ‘preventative’ measures for famines, which would aid in increasing agricultural production and address food-grain scarcity.¹⁸ But lengthy famine periods, high mortality rates and popular action show that the state fell short of alleviating distress and ensuring access to food. Instead, labouring became a prerequisite for receiving relief in the form of wages. Gratuitous relief provisions, such as doles in villages or management of poorhouses, was dominated by the upper castes, which ultimately meant that lower castes formed the majority of manual labourers on relief works.

Relief works were set up as per the Famine Codes, which contained the official policy on provision of famine relief for each province under British India.¹⁹ The

15. Due to lack of food, people were driven to ‘famine foods’ like berries, roots, etc.: David Arnold, ‘Social Crisis and Epidemic Disease in the Famines of Nineteenth-Century India’, *Social History of Medicine* 6 (1993): 385–404. The insufficiency of wages has been discussed in detail in Amal Shahid, ‘Wage Payments and Labour Productivity: The 1896–1897 Famine in North-Western Provinces and Oudh’, in *Wage Earners in India, 1500–1900: Regional Approaches in an International Context*, ed. Jan Lucassen and Radhika Seshan (Sage, 2021), 275–97.

16. *FCR 1880*, 34.

17. Rune Møller Stahl, ‘The Economics of Starvation: Laissez-Faire Ideology and Famine in Colonial India’, in *Intellectual History of Economic Normativities*, ed. Mikkel Thorup (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 169–84.

18. John Strachey and Richard Strachey, *The Finances and Public Works of India, 1869–1881* (Kegan Paul & Co., 1882); see also Ian D. Derbyshire, ‘Economic Change and the Railways in North India, 1860–1914’, *Modern Asian Studies* 21, no. 3 (1987): 521–45; Michelle Burge McAlpin, ‘Railroads, Prices, and Peasant Rationality: India, 1860–1900’, *The Journal of Economic History* 34, no. 3 (1974): 662–84; David Donaldson, ‘Railroads, Economic Development and Famine Prevention: Theory and Evidence from India, 1861–2000’ (unpublished PhD thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2009).

19. ‘Indian Famine Codes, NWP and Oudh’, India Office Records (henceforth IOR), IOR/V/27/831/56, British Library, London.

government used crime such as robberies and ‘petty’ thefts, especially of grain, as an index of famine. Accordingly, ‘test works’ were opened to gauge the level of distress in a district. After formal declaration of famine, either small works in villages or large works away from the villages would be set up as famine relief works. The labourers had to fulfil three conditions: that they were willing to travel to the relief works (distance test), that they would fulfil the tasks allotted (task test) for a low wage enough only to sustain life (wage test).²⁰ The use of a contractor was prohibited, unlike with so-called ‘ordinary’ public works that were not part of famine relief. The system recommended dividing labourers into gangs, and tasks were divided by gender into digging and carrying, although exceptions existed.²¹

Labourers were divided hierarchically into the following classes of workers, which also determined their wages: Class I (or Class B) of diggers, especially ‘able-bodied’ males and at times females; Class II (Class C) of carriers, including the ‘weakly’; Class III (Class D) was Working Children; Class IV (Class E) included Adult Dependents; and Class V (F and G), Non-Working Children. A final class comprised gang-mates (Class A), who occupied the highest hierarchy in a work gang. A person (usually male) of influence in the community, they were chosen based on their previously held privileged positions to exert control over a gang. These divisions often clubbed families and village communities together.

Wage rates for these classes of labourers had to correspond with prevailing grain rates in an area, calculated using a document called the ready reckoner. The Famine Codes associated the daily wages for labourers with a set diet required by each class of labourers, that is, the wages had a grain equivalent. The wage was determined based on a diet comprising pulses, salt, oil, vegetables and condiments, and, most importantly, grain. Grain referred to clean grain sold in shops that was fit for consumption; the effort and loss of cost in grinding grain was not considered, thereby undermining the tasks performed by women.²² According to the resolution of December 1896, male and female diggers were to receive 19 and 16 *chhattaks* as payment, respectively, and Sundays were unpaid.²³ Male carriers received 14 and females 13 *chhattaks*. However, using the ready reckoner periodically to adjust wages ignored the discrepancies in price fluctuations that would not keep up with the wages. For example, when, in March 1897, the NWP government fixed the conversion rate for each district, in Allahabad, the rate at 10 seers per rupee did not reflect the actual rate of 8.5 seers.²⁴ In the same month, the necessity for providing a Sunday allowance was also recognised. The wage scale was later adjusted to 20 for diggers and 15 for carriers without gender division.²⁵ The extent of distress, therefore, forced the government to adapt the rules of relief provision.

Daily wages were divided into a full ration (if the allotted tasks were completed) and minimum wage (if tasks were not completed). The minimum wage was based on

20. *FCR 1880*, 36–42.

21. Jha, “Men Diggers”.

22. *FCR 1898*, 272.

23. One *chhattak* was about two ounces.

24. *FCR 1898*, 59.

25. *Ibid.*, 273.

arbitrary and racist conceptions of the nutritional needs of Indians, which was too low even by scientific standards and based on rations for prisoners.²⁶ It reflected the utilitarianism of the colonial state's famine relief policy, which was concerned with keeping costs low, increasing productivity and maintaining control over labour. This led officials to potentially categorise many famine labourers as able-bodied without regard to their actual physical ability to perform labour. Those unable to perform tasks could be dismissed, although there might have also been extra-economic mechanisms of coercing the labourer into completing tasks. Physically weak labourers received a penal wage for not completing tasks, which was about half of the full ration.²⁷

Wages, the primary form of relief, thus became a tool of coercion, being determined as per outturn of tasks, which in turn ascertained the amount of food labourers could obtain. Matters worsened when, during the 1896–97 famine, two particularly harsh systems of labour, called the intermediate system and then later, from around May 1897 onwards, the modified intermediate system, began to be experimented with in NWP. These systems eliminated the minimum wage on relief works and replaced it with piece-work systems or 'payment by results' using contractors whose commission ranged between 25 and 50 percent.²⁸ It brought down wages for labourers unable to finish tasks, worsening their condition when insufficient wages affected their ability to buy grain.²⁹

In sum, the colonial state readily intervened in the labour market, but not in the grain market. There were increased demands by the public for the state to intervene in the grain market and regulate prices. One such association was Refah-i-Am of Lucknow, which suggested setting up cheap grain shops by the NWP government to reduce prices of grain by force of competition when banias held back their stocks, and to supply the deficiency if the withheld stocks of grain were to be depleted.³⁰ The lieutenant governor of NWP rejected any intervention, as 'competition with the grain dealers of the country, so far from being beneficial, would be mischievous in the extreme', because the grain trade of India was already flourishing with new railways and roads.³¹ This contradiction of the colonial state's policy, which intervened in markets only selectively meant that for relief-seekers, expectations were not being realised at two levels: labouring which did not guarantee sufficient wages, and wages which did not guarantee food.

26. The insufficiency of the diet set for Indians and the 'Temple Wage' reduced the diet in late 1870s Bombay (now Mumbai) and Madras (now Chennai) to maximum one pound of food, even below the diets of prisoners. The debate between Dr. Cornish and Richard Temple has been discussed in David Hall-Matthews, 'Inaccurate Conceptions: Disputed Measures of Nutritional Needs and Famine Deaths in Colonial India', *Modern Asian Studies* 42 (2008): 1189–1212; see also Nadja Durbach, *Many Mouths: The Politics of Food in Britain from the Workhouse to the Welfare State* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 100–1; Joanna Simonow, *Ending Famine in India: A Transnational History of Food Aid and Development, c. 1890–1950* (Leiden University Press, 2023), 24–26.

27. *FCR 1898*, 59.

28. *Ibid.*, 213.

29. Shahid, 'Wage Payments'.

30. 'Famine Policy in United Provinces', *Tribune*, November 11, 1896, MS. Eng hist. c 364, Official and private papers of Antony Patrick MacDonnell (1844–1925), Weston Library Reference Collection, Bodleian Libraries Oxford University, 14.

31. 'Famine Policy in United Provinces', MS. Eng hist. c 364, 14–15.

Famine relief, grain merchants and the moral economy

During periods of famine and scarcity, peasants in the Indian subcontinent became dependent upon aid from village elites such as landlords or banias who had acquired access to their food-grains.³² At times, the landlord would also perform the function of a moneylender, resulting in a nexus of credit, output, labour and land in rural India.³³ According to Hardiman, the relationship between merchants and peasants was characterised by 'credit', whereby the handouts during periods of famines were equated to a 'debt', repayable with interest by the peasant. Often extending to several years, the high amount of arrears kept the peasant in a perpetual cycle of indebtedness and dearth.³⁴ Under colonial rule, export trade of agricultural goods as well as the imposition of exploitative land revenue systems fractured the traditional ties of peasants with the older elite, which caused further destitution.³⁵

The colonial state's market policies had gradually transformed hierarchies in rural areas.³⁶ It disrupted expectations of reciprocity and dependency on the part of the peasant, which arose, from a moral standpoint, from landlords and peasant proprietors. Even though this relationship was based on subordination and power, the peasant proprietors had some obligations towards the labourers because the labour needs of non-famine times had to be taken into consideration.³⁷ However, the famine relief policy created a new social order in which the peasant's expectation of an implicit promise of handouts from the elites during distress was disrupted. Due to disintegration of the rural fabric and community ties, peasants looked to the colonial state to provide relief.

Nevertheless, the state itself relied on grain merchants to provide grain on relief work sites and markets. In the absence of government intervention in private grain trade 'as a purchaser or importer', banias emerged as the main sellers of grain.³⁸ They were essential for providing and selling grain in towns and villages as they managed imports of stocks of food-grain within the subcontinent, on which local governments and peasants depended greatly.³⁹ This process integrated banias into the market, making them a dominant class unaccountable to the rural poor, and often engaging in grain speculation. Vernacular newspapers frequently published allegations against grain dealers making profits, especially during famines.⁴⁰

32. Hardiman, 'Usury', 113.

33. Amit Bhaduri, *On the Border of Economic Theory and History* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 10–11.

34. Hardiman, 'Usury', 114.

35. Sharma, *Famine, Philanthropy*.

36. Asiya Siddiqi, *Agrarian Change in a Northern Indian State: Uttar Pradesh, 1819–1833* (Clarendon Press, 1973).

37. Arnold, 'Famine in Peasant Consciousness', 79.

38. Correspondence from Denzil Ibbetson, Revenue and Agriculture Department, to the provinces of NWP and Bengal, details the government's reasons for non-interference in private grain trade despite famine conditions: 'Scarcity in the NWP and Oudh', Scarcity Department, January 1897, nos. 293–352, File no. 73, Uttar Pradesh State Archives (UPSA), Lucknow, 243–47.

39. See Baijayanti Chatterjee, 'Famine in a Rice Economy: Natural Calamities, Grain Scarcity and the Company-State in Bengal, 1770–1803', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 46, no. 2 (2023): 370–87.

40. See, for example, *Anis-i-Hind*, Meerut, February 24, 1897, Selections from the Vernacular Newspapers, IOR/L/R/5/74, 150.

By depending on banias, the colonial state absolved itself of providing grain directly. In exceptional cases, particularly for remote localities, district collectors could enter into contract with the bania to supply grain on relief work sites. They would be given advances to import food-grain and possibly maintain reserves. In this manner, banias on relief work sites became the main suppliers of grain in exchange for the wages received by labourers. These banias faced a different context than their counterparts in markets outside relief works in terms of their domination, power as well as compulsions to set grain prices. While this meant that the bania could wield unchecked power, it also made him spatially vulnerable to the labourers' anger.

Two simultaneous aspects worked against the labourers. Firstly, the colonial state established its own authority wherein the policy of non-intervention in the grain trade made the banias central to food provision. They would turn to the state for protection of their property which included their grain stores. In most cases, government intervention ensured that the banias were compensated for their losses, despite allegations of fraud against them. By contrast, crimes against the banias' property by peasants were dealt with strict punishments. In this manner, the colonial state built support for itself from the trading classes, which gradually became more dominant by acquiring profits. By creating public policies that attracted social discontent from peasants and fostered crime, the colonial state entrenched its own authority when merchants turned to it for restoring order.

Secondly, once famine relief measures were in place, physical displacement when migrating to distant relief work sites restrained the ability of labourers to negotiate collectively. Besides the 'sahukar-zamindar-sarkar' nexus weakening their bargaining position,⁴¹ famine relief measures served to prevent popular action. During the famine of 1896–97, one observer noted how relief works served the dual purpose of keeping the poor from dying and from rioting.⁴² Employment on famine relief works had kept 'the people quiet by keeping them at work' by providing 'small wages' because in places without relief works, there were severe famine riots where 'desperate people' ransacked grain markets.⁴³ Labouring, a measure the state equated with 'disciplining', thus became a way of quelling moral economic expectations.

At the same time, when famines struck, the labourers' expectations of reciprocity shifted from the traditional elites to the government due to the possibility of receiving wages on relief work sites. When peasants travelled to relief work sites, they carried with them their moral economic expectations. Famine relief itself was informed by moral hazard and appeared as a moral economy intervention due to the nature of employment on relief sites. That is, relief works offered potential for subsistence during famines, albeit preconditioned on labour. The moral economy of

41. Biswamoy Pati, ed., *Adivasis in Colonial India: Survival, Resistance, and Negotiation* (Indian Council of Historical Research and Orient BlackSwan, 2010).

42. George Lambert, *India, The Horror-Stricken Empire, Containing a Full Account of the Famine, Plague, and Earthquake of 1896–7* (Mennonite Publishing Co., 1898).

43. *Ibid.*, 73.

peasants was thus not fixed to villages nor was it suppressed with 'discipline'; instead, it was brought to relief works alongside their labouring capacity.

And yet, despite employment and remuneration on relief work sites, relief wages often could not keep up with grain rates in the market.⁴⁴ In theory, wages were calculated in accordance with the prevailing grain prices, but in practice would be insufficient to buy a full meal if the grain seller did not sell at the reported grain rates. Bantias on relief work sites could be dishonest and were left unchecked, 'giving short weight and inferior flour mixed with the wheat', as was noted by Surgeon S.C. Townsend, on special duty with the Famine Commission in 1878.⁴⁵ On its part, the colonial state took no measures to ensure that the purchasing power of relief wages could be sufficiently realised by the labourers. As discussed above, it was difficult for local officials to match wage rates to prevailing grain rates, which fluctuated almost weekly.

The contradiction in the state's selective market intervention manifested itself through popular response on famine relief works. Wages, or famine relief, were preconditioned on the ability to labour, so wages were not guaranteed to labourers. Those who did labour in dire conditions were not guaranteed food with those wages. This created a double disconnect for the famine labourers, where the government could not assure subsistence. The breakdown of moral economic expectations on relief work sites was due to the utilitarian famine relief policy, which, like other coercive structures designed under colonial rule, reinforced the pressure to make the colonial subject into a wage labourer susceptible to the vagaries of the market. While the policy created a non-static, travelling moral economy, it gave no guarantees to the labourer. When promises of famine relief were not fulfilled, it inevitably gave rise to popular reactions and riots that targeted the bantias on the relief work sites. In villages, as in relief work sites, the bania remained the embodiment of the market that was chipping away at the moral economy. Popular action on relief works thus aimed to challenge the logics of the market that continued to deny subsistence to labourers.

Dakaitis and dakaities

Before delving into popular action on relief work sites, it is important to understand the composition of the labourers. For this, a discussion of famine crime outside of relief work sites, particularly against property and those accused of it, shows who was impacted first by scarcity and the prevailing inequalities between caste groups.

Given that one's caste was often related to one's socio-economic position, lower castes, who formed the bulk of the poorer peasants and casual labourers, were the first to be impacted. Triggered by a failure of moral economy obligations in the rural fabric, they often appeared in crime reports. For instance, in Faizabad in 1897, there was an '...increase in petty burglaries and in the thefts of cattle chiefly by the

44. Shahid, 'Wage Payments'.

45. 'Proceedings of the Famine Commission', December 1878, IOR/L/E/5/64, British Library, 12.

Chamars with the object of obtaining food...⁴⁶ The same year, in Mainpuri, 30–40 people were accused of a raid on a threshing floor close to the police lines.⁴⁷ They were identified as Lodhas, Chamars and Ahirs from two neighbouring villages who carried off grain valuing ₹40. Similarly, during October 1896, the collector of Jalaun noted that in an ‘aggravated house breaking,’ a gang of the Beria caste, ‘aided by some neighbourhood *badmashes*’, broke into a house.⁴⁸ Chamars were typically tanners, leather-workers and day labourers, Ahirs were herdsmen or agriculturists, and Lodhas, agricultural and labouring castes.⁴⁹ The Beria or the Bediya caste were a nomadic community. These were marginalised castes and more vulnerable to the effects of grain scarcity.

When famine had advanced, private charity from landlords would stop. Some small landowners from upper-caste backgrounds would also suffer and take to crime. In 1906, in Kanpur, officers observed that Meo Thakurs who were ‘badly off’ were ‘inclined to take to dacoity for subsistence.’⁵⁰ Here, using their caste privilege, they did ‘not consent to come on test works,’ forcing the government to open village works for them, and leaving lower castes to migrate to test works away from home.⁵¹ Jha has shown how the upper-caste Thakurs and Brahmans guarded their ‘respectability’ by finding employment in villages, while large public works away from villages employed ‘non-dominant’ castes.⁵² The above evidence demonstrates that by taking to famine ‘crime,’ upper castes were able to negotiate preferential forms of relief for themselves at the expense of lower castes facing displacement and hard labour.

In fact, some famine ‘crime’ went unreported out of fear of threat as it was instigated by local landlords or other ‘respectable’ men of the village. Sharma has noted from the 1837–38 famine in NWP that landlords ‘abetted or assisted their’ men.⁵³ A similar incident from September 1899 attests to this. A dakaiti was reported on Aligarh Road near Raya in Agra division. At night, around forty–fifty men broke into the house of a bania called Dalla Ram, carrying one gun and lathis (sticks). They intended to raid an old grain pit, but when they found it empty, they ‘looted

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46. Minutes of various conferences held in the districts of the NWP during the months of December 1896 to March 1897 in connection with the prevailing scarcity, May 1897, Part B, nos. 13, Revenue and Agriculture Department, Famine Branch, National Archives of India, Delhi (NAI).
 47. ‘Undertaking and Control of Village Works in Affected Districts’, Scarcity Block Department, File 110 Box 29, April 1897, UPSA, 9.
 48. ‘Famine Relief Operations in the Allahabad Division’, Commissioner of Allahabad, 1896, File no. 2237, S. no. 16, Box no. 313. Uttar Pradesh Regional State Archives (UPRSA), Allahabad. The term *badmaash*, literally meaning ‘of bad livelihood’, described a ‘plebian criminal’ or a degenerate member of the ‘respectable’ classes who was dangerous and powerful in ways he was ‘not legitimately entitled to, in ways that threaten person, property, and respectability’, according to Singha: Radhika Singha, ‘Punished by Surveillance: Policing “Dangerousness” in Colonial India, 1872–1918’, *Modern Asian Studies* 49 (2015): 241–69; 242.
 49. William Croke, *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, Vols. 1–3 (Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1896).
 50. ‘Scarcity in the Cawnpore District’, Scarcity Department, 1906, File no. 126, UPSA, 5.
 51. ‘Scarcity in Cawnpore District’, 1906, UPSA.
 52. Madhavi Jha, ‘Doing “Coolie” Work in a “Gentlemanly” Way: Gender and Caste on the Famine Public Works in Colonial North India’, *Modern Asian Studies* 57 (2022): 1–29.
 53. Sharma mentions this as emergence of solidarities between classes: Sharma, *Famine, Philanthropy*, 91.

whatever they could lay their hands on'.⁵⁴ The bania, his son and four other men were beaten, but the bania did not report or reveal the names of the '*dakait*s' out of fear because they were men from the neighbourhood. The circle inspector suspected that it could not have been labourers because they had employment as grass-cutters and in irrigation, but rather '*zamindars* and others who have a strong feeling against the *banias* for putting up prices and exporting grain'.⁵⁵ This recognition by the inspector, however, was an exception. Despite the bania being a common target for the traditional elites and peasant labourers alike, the former were able to conceal their involvement. Local government officials tended to assume that 'crime' was usually committed by marginalised groups.

Other than lower castes, so-called 'criminal tribes' were considered 'habitual miscreants' and associated with criminality. They were described as 'bad characters' in reports and correspondence, the terms '*dakait*s', 'beggars' or 'criminals' being used interchangeably. In NWP, the criminal tribes proclaimed under Act XXVII of 1871 were the Sanauriahs, Barwars and Sansiahs and Doms of Gorakhpur and these came under state surveillance. These men were, however, often youths who had suffered years of starvation, bonded labour, exploitation and resisted colonial rule.⁵⁶ Therefore, those whom the colonial state classified as 'criminal tribes' were those for whom crime was the only means left for livelihood.⁵⁷

To summarise, lower castes and tribes disproportionately suffered the consequences of famines. The causes of crime as well as its reporting in rural areas were such that these groups became the target of the state's utilitarian famine policy and comprised most of the labourers on relief works. Official reports painted them as ignorant and defiant for escaping government rules and in need of forceful legal intervention for 'disciplining'. Disciplining then took the form of regulated labour on relief works, as a '*coolie*' in service of the colonial state. The colonial state's assumption of responsibility for famine relief nevertheless enabled the fraying moral economic expectations of labourers to shift towards the government on relief works.

The 1896–97 famine and looting of relief works

To reiterate, the government recognised rise in crime as one of the main indicators of prevalent distress in a region.⁵⁸ In 1896, insufficient food-grain production in the kharif season and failure of rain preventing the successful sowing of rabi crops

54. 'Scarcity in Agra Division, Agra and Muttra Districts', Scarcity Block Department, Index to File 335, November 1899, UPSA.

55. Although arrests were made, the form of punishment was not mentioned: 'Scarcity in Agra Division', UPSA.

56. Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, 84.

57. *Ibid.*, 84.

58. Local commissioners or collectors filled out a form called 'Progress Report on Famine Relief Operations in the [place] District for the [time period]', which included indicators of famine like 'the condition of people and state of crops', 'range of prices of food grains', 'increase or decrease of crime; nature of prevailing crime', etc. For example, 'Fortnightly Progress Reports of Relief Operations', Allahabad division, Scarcity Block Department, Proceedings for August 1897, nos. 346–466, File no. 58/1, Boxes 63, 64 and 65, UPSA, 13–15.

resulted in famine conditions by the end of the summer.⁵⁹ Despite rise in dakaities, as well as decline in private charity, the NWP government had not opened relief works in many districts by September–October; only a few places had test works.⁶⁰ However, an incident of grain riots reported in the newspaper, *The Pioneer*, forced the government to open both relief works and poorhouses in the Agra division. On September 30, 1896, the newspaper reported grain riots and a robbery in Agra, which took place on the evening of September 27 and the morning of September 28, 1896, in the main grain market of Simsonganj.⁶¹ It said that ‘hungry mobs had attacked the grain marts’, and that due to ‘looting and rioting’, several men were injured. One boy died when he came under a passing grain cart. Twenty-eight maunds of grain were taken from one bania shop alone in the Lohamandi quarter of the market. The newspaper blamed the district magistrate for not restoring order, prompting both him and the commissioner of Agra division to in turn accuse the banias of halting distribution of grain due to rising costs. They dismissed the riot as ‘theft’ by ‘two dozen needy people—boys, women, and others’, who were arrested for stealing grain from a cart in the neighbourhood of the Fort railway station, demonstrating that the riot was led by women and young adults.⁶² Their popular action pushed the government to open relief works, which nevertheless continued to downplay the existence of famine, asserting that ‘such agitation as there was—and it was never serious in its character—except as indicating the possibility of greater distress than was at that time anticipated—continued for about two days and entirely ceased with activity on the part of the police and the opening of relief works.’⁶³

Popular action did not subside after the opening of relief works. Archival sources show various cases of looting and plunder of bania shops at relief work sites in NWP during the 1896–97 famine, especially when working conditions had become particularly harsh due to the intermediate systems in 1897. Consequently, the collective backlash also increased. Popular action in or around relief work sites indicates both how the state’s relief efforts fell short of assuring grain for wages, as well as how solidarities were formed among labourers. Families and communities often migrated together to these works, which enabled them to collectively negotiate on a new work site. Spatiality thus became important, wherein relief work sites and bania shops attached to them represented failures of the moral economy. Denied subsistence both outside and on relief work sites, labourers felt entitled to appropriate that which was (im)morally not provided to them.

Experiencing a double slippage of unguaranteed wages as well as food on relief works further allowed labourers to come together across work hierarchies. Large

59. Kharif means the summer or monsoon crop sown in June–July and harvested in September–October. Rabi refers to the winter crop, sown and harvested in October and March, respectively.

60. ‘Scarcity in Agra District’, Scarcity Block Department, Nos. 74–126, File 78 Box no. 24. 1897, UPSA.

61. No. 357—XIII-2, dated October 8, 1896; ‘From the Commissioner of the Agra Division, to The Secretary to the Government of the NWP and Oudh’, August to December 1896, Progs. No. 79, Revenue and Agriculture Department, Famine Branch, NAI.

62. ‘Note by H.C. Conybeare, dated October 7, 1896’, Progs. No. 79, Revenue and Agriculture Department, Famine Branch, NAI.

63. ‘From the Commissioner of the Agra Division to the Secretary to the Government of the NWP and Oudh’.

public works employed a range of other workers, such as clerks (*muharrirs*), gang-mates (heads of labour gangs) and accountants. Nevertheless, collaborations between work hierarchies are evident in popular action, although not to be understood plainly as the collective consciousness of a homogenous crowd, but, rather, solidarities contingent on negotiated goals. That is, collective action need not have obviated underlying divisions. Yet, these situational solidarities momentarily cut across differences due to a common dissatisfaction with famine relief. Therefore, even though old solidarities broke down when labourers migrated, new ones were formed on sites of relief works.

Collective consciousness on relief work sites therefore allowed mobilisation in which both women and men participated. For example, on June 1, 1896, a peon at a relief works site identified as Nandkishore from Banda district, asked a Sadhari bania, who was selling grain to labourers, for four days' supplies.⁶⁴ When the bania declined, Nandkishore mobilised some 'coolies' to plunder the shop. It might be conjectured that Nandkishore's request for a customary advance loan of grain or grain at a lower price was exaggerated as him requesting supplies 'free of cost' in official reporting.

In other instances, gang-mates coordinated with labourers to resist the high prices charged by banias near relief works. In April 1897, Mahbub Ali, Mohib Haidar and Sajjad Ali, likely gang-mates on relief work sites in Lucknow district, were charged with ordering 'coolies' on Chinhat lake to 'loot the *banias*' shops in the Chinhat *bazaar* and with taking part therein, but were discharged due to lack of proof after a local inquiry.⁶⁵ Either out of fear of the men or in their support, witnesses did not reveal to officials evidence that would implicate the accused.

Similarly, in another episode in May 1897 in Hamirpur, labourers employed on the Mirbala tank relief work were reported to have looted banias' shops.⁶⁶ The labourers, of which potentially women were in the majority, had supposedly heard that the banias were going to reduce their rates because an inspecting officer was visiting. It suggests that banias on relief works were known to raise rates when not being inspected. Both men and women working on the gang closest to the *bandh* (dam) where the banias had their shops, made a 'rush' and 'took whatever they could lay their hands on.' Labourers from other parts of the relief works followed suit. The rest of the working gangs joined in while the *muharrirs* who were in charge of the gangs ended up accompanying the labourers in the looting.

When the officer, Sayid Mahmud Ali, tried to enquire with the gang-mates and *muharrirs* about the origin of the looting and those involved, he could not gain much information. The gang mates and *muharrirs* built solidarities with the labourers to conceal implicating information. Ali concluded that some *muharrirs* were able to keep their gangs in check, but others lost control of the labourers. Officials on

64. 'Reports of Fraud and Dishonesty in Connection with Famine Relief Operations in the NWP and Oudh', Scarcity Block Department, Nos. 1-70, File 185, Box 37, 1898, UPSA, 28.

65. *Ibid.*, UPSA, 14.

66. 'Plunder of *Banias*' Shops on Relief Works in the NWP and Oudh', Scarcity Block Department, Box 35 File 167, 1897, UPSA, 2A.

relief works arrested numerous labourers of whom 21 men and 22 women were tried and convicted. The men received 10–25 lashes of the whip immediately and the women were imprisoned for 24 hours. The fines collected from all the gangs were used to compensate the banias for the loss of ₹51 and one anna.

Crimes against property, including grain, drew punishment as per the Indian Penal Code (IPC) of 1860, particularly if labourers were involved. ‘Thefts’ or burglaries were often referred to as ‘petty’ crime, which attracted fines or short-term imprisonment as per the IPC, and at times physical punishment not coded in the IPC.⁶⁷ Flogging as public shaming was a common method of punishing ‘petty’ offences, the number of lashes inflicted on an individual varying between 10–200.⁶⁸ As a public spectacle, whipping made a larger statement about who the state sought to protect in the context of the famine—that is, it gave the impression that the colonial state saw itself more as the protector of private property than as a welfare provider for those impacted most by the famine.

Colonial law thus stood in sharp contrast with the needs and moral legalities of the poor. Punishments such as imprisonment or fines derived their justification from the same ideological basis as the famine relief policy: that of ‘disciplining’ through labour. A common suggestion of local officials on how to deal with these crimes was to send the accused to the poorhouse. Physical punishments therefore had a larger point of inculcating ‘discipline’ through public humiliation, while entry to poorhouses would achieve the same goal, through a rigorous disciplinary regime.

Overall, labourers were able to mobilise against banias on relief work sites who overcharged them for food, but were punished with fines or flogging if apprehended. Therefore, labourers on relief works faced dual disciplining—one of labouring itself as a measure of ‘discipline’, and the other of punishment for challenging the bania. To this end, the provincial government demanded detailed reports from local officers, who were expected to mete out heavy-handed punishments as a way of suppressing collective action.

Reporting looting on relief work sites

Reports of looting on relief work sites suggest that local officials, often Indian, approached these instances differently from their British superiors. That local administrators were answerable for their decisions is evident from the detailed correspondence between various levels of the government. Officials at the provincial level, perhaps answerable to other senior-ranking bureaucrats, demanded regular reports on famine crime to ensure that the utilitarian famine policy was being strictly imposed. To them, looting on relief work sites were an indication of labourers being

67. IPC 1860, ‘Of Offences Against Property’. Thefts and burglaries were referred to as ‘petty’ in NWP during the 1896–97 famine in *Statement Exhibiting the Moral and Material Progress and Condition of India During the Year 1897–98* (Erye & Spottiswoode, 1899), 32.

68. ‘The Question of Flogging Being the Usual Punishment for Petty Offences in British India’, Government of India, Home Department, July 24, 1882, IOR/L/PJ/6/78, File 1240a, British Library. The dispatch asserted that there was ‘an increase in the number of persons whipped in most provinces during the years when scarcity prevailed’.

'lazy' and led to the tightening of norms, such as devising the intermediate systems, eliminating rest days or imposing penal wages. Productive, docile labour was a measure of successful application of the famine relief policy, but the responsibility of any deviation from this meant that the labourer needed 'disciplining.' The assumption remained that the utilitarian calculus had to hold in practice.

By contrast, local officials, especially the Public Works Department (PWD), involved in famine administration, appeared to be more lenient in dealing with popular action, potentially due to their proximity to the labourers. Physical and administrative distance between local operations and the provincial government created tensions between them. Two reasons might explain this. First, although the local administration acted as the enforcer of the state-dictated law and order, any admission of failure on their part to control disorder would attract the scrutiny of officials higher up in the hierarchy. They would hence conceal incidents from their superiors while preserving their own reputation. Popular action reflected their difficulty in managing competing interests on the ground between the banias and the labourers, between the rule of law and the harsh realities of famine.

Second, riots and looting on relief work sites exposed the limits of the utilitarian famine policy. Despite Famine Code norms being adapted to increase labour productivity and heavy-handed punishments meted out to the accused, regular incidents on relief work sites were an indication of the failure of the policy to alleviate distress. The officials in charge who were in constant contact with the labourers had a better understanding of the latter's double disconnect of no guarantee for subsistence through employment on relief works. This generated more nuanced responses by them to resistance by labourers, observable in their reporting of misconduct by banias as the main trigger and target of public wrath. Shifting the responsibility to the banias also worked in their favour, as the banias were then blamed for causing unrest.

The cases outlined below reveal the strained relations between different officials, their reporting, as well as their justifications of their management of popular action. It becomes clear that with some understanding of the labourers' condition, local officials acted flexibly in everyday situations also to deflect responsibility for being unable to control unrest on relief work sites. Whereas for higher officials every incident warranted detailed reports and punishments, local officials opted for quick and lenient solutions. For instance, in Allahabad district, a gang *moharrir*, Wasi Haidar, and some gang-mates looted a bania's shop near a relief work site as the bania refused to sell the *muharrir* grain at seven pice per seer, selling it instead at nine pice a seer.⁶⁹ They were convicted under IPC Section 379 for theft against property, punishable by fine or imprisonment or both. The property looted was estimated at ₹4. The deputy magistrate, Gaya Pershad, decided that the accused did not deserve severe punishment and fined the *muharrir* ₹10 and the gang-mates ₹5 each. The matter came to the notice of the commissioner of Allahabad through

69. 1 ser or seer (16 *chhattaks*) = 933.10 grams. 'Reports of Fraud', UPSA, 34. The number of gang-mates mentioned were 83, but in Cruickshank's correspondence with Evans, the number of gang-mates are mentioned as 3: 'Plunder of *Banias'* Shops', UPSA.

another British officer of unspecified rank, as the collector, police and PWD officers did not officially report it. The commissioner asserted that the punishment should have been more severe, which was then considered for enhancement of punishment in the court.⁷⁰

This was among numerous other cases of disagreements between different hierarchies of the provincial government. At times, PWD officers openly supported the labourers. Their spatial and relational proximity to the labourers reflected in their defence of the labourers, in their reluctance to file formal complaints against labourers, and their highlighting of unfair prices or violence by the banias. A looting of grain valued at ₹53 occurred on relief work sites in Manjhanpur tehsil on March 30, 1897. The reason was reported to be the exorbitant prices charged by the banias despite 'loud complaints' by the labourers. 11 men were convicted and sentenced to flogging. The collector of Allahabad reported that certain PWD officials 'sided with the coolies' and encouraged the labourers.⁷¹ The PWD was asked to pay the banias about ₹50.

Yet, tensions were not only hierarchical but also departmental within a district, as evident in the friction between the PWD officials in charge of relief works and the local police. Situations on the ground were also more complex than colonial sensibility recognised, evident in an incident over the actions of a PWD official, which was probed in some detail. On June 12, 1897, at around 1 pm in Hamirpur, the shop of Musammat Latkari, a *banyain* (female bania) on the relief work site of Girwar tank, was looted by 8–10 labourers because she was selling puris (fried bread) at 2½ annas a seer instead of the market rate of 2 annas. The incident was confined to this shop despite there being several similar shops, showing that the grievance was only with Latkari. She told the labourers that if they were not satisfied with the rate, they could take their pice back, but then refused to return the money. An argument ensued and the labourers lost their patience and snatched some of her puris and ate them.⁷² Such on-the-spot eating was a rebellious measure that should be understood as a statement in a broader political process.⁷³

The blame came on Munshi Bhawani Sahai, the officer in-charge (naib-tahsildar) who had allegedly told the complaining labourers to get their money back from Latkari. Sahai however denied his involvement, stating that the accused could not be apprehended immediately. However, to placate Latkari, he compensated her by collecting 1½–2 rupees from the labourers nearby. The next day he found 2 seers of wheat and 11 annas in the possession of two men whose names he concealed, and returned it all to Latkari while dismissing the labourers.⁷⁴ He did not reveal the basis on which he suspected the two men of being complicit in the matter. Instead, Sahai protected their identity and highlighted that since they had been

70. 'Reports of Fraud', UPSA.

71. 'Plunder of *Banias*' Shops', UPSA.

72. 'Letter from Superintendent of Works Office, Buildings and Roads Branch, NWP and Oudh, to Commissioner of Allahabad Division', no. 40267/3–3436 of 1897; 'Looting Cases on Famine Relief Works', Bundle no. 23, Box no. 37, S.no. 13, File no. 1/4896. Commissioner of Allahabad, UPRSA. I am grateful to Anshuman Srivastava for assistance with this source.

73. Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, 147.

74. An Indian rupee consisted of 16 annas, which was made up of 4 pice or 12 pies.

overcharged, they had demanded some of their money back. The loss reported by Latkari amounted to ₹2, and she was not probed for overcharging the labourers. Sahai insisted that the matter was not reported to the police as Latkari did not wish to take the matter further after being compensated.⁷⁵ To him, the matter was trivial and did not require an official report.

Mutually and locally resolvable matters were still probed by the commissioner of Allahabad. Two different versions of the incident were provided by the sub-inspector of police, Shahamat Khan, and by the superintendent of works, C.G. Palmer. The differences in their report indicate varying loyalties and perceptions. Khan reported that Sahai was displeased at the woman selling her puris at the relief camp at a higher rate and therefore ordered the labourers to take them away. On the other hand, Palmer defended Sahai by stating that it was the labourers who were displeased. Palmer justified Sahai's actions because, as with many officers in charge, the expectations from him for supervision were too high and he could not prevent small disputes any more than a police officer could.⁷⁶ Sahai was eventually punished with a fine of ₹30 from his salary.⁷⁷

Thus, the PWD officials had to be practical in their day-to-day decisions. By contrast, the superior officers detached from the local context were more particular about the imposition of procedures and discipline. But the hesitation to reprimand officials accused of laxity suggests that not only was it difficult to replace trusted officers, but also that such incidents on relief work sites were commonplace and would require lengthy investigations.

A final incident attests to this. The bania shops in a famine camp on the Kondar-Rajapur road were looted in August 1897. There were problems in the supply of wheat flour. About 150 'coolies' claimed that they had been thrashed by the banias and had injury marks on their legs. In what followed, the labourers ran up to about 8 banias and looted their shops. The men convicted belonged to the gang of *muharrir* Janki Pershad, a 'bad character', along with Sheo Narain, who hit the police constable on duty.⁷⁸ The police stayed in the village all night to prevent things escalating further.

Usually, the names of labourers do not appear in reports, erasing their identities. Here, perhaps due to the severity with which the matter was received by the administration, the men arrested were named: Ramadhin, Budhai, Pitya Dulya, Phenku, Umer Khan, Adhar Chatura, Chutkona, Baren Din and Sheoram, a mix across religious lines. They were sentenced to 15 lashes each in a public flogging and fined a total amount of ₹57, 13 annas and 6 pice, which was paid to the banias as compensation.

A PWD work agent called Herrenkohl was blamed for inciting the riot. Herrenkohl and the *muharrirs* Janki Pershad and Sheo Narain were accused of failing to check the 'coolies' involved, if not actively encouraging them.⁷⁹ As the officer in-charge, Herrenkohl was particularly reprimanded for 'the lawless character' of the workers, but he claimed to have been in Allahabad on the day of the incident.⁸⁰

75. *NWP and Oudh Proceedings, Vol. 10, Parts I and II*, Scarcity Department, September 1897, UPSA.

76. 'Looting Cases on Famine Relief Works', UPRSA.

77. *NWP and Oudh Proceedings, Vol. 10*, UPSA.

78. *Ibid.*

79. 'Plunder of Banias' Shops', UPSA.

80. *NWP and Oudh Proceedings, Vol. 10*, UPSA.

Officials at the provincial level questioned Herrenkohl's retention in his position without a trial. It can be surmised from the reluctance to dismiss Herrenkohl that, like Sahai above, replacing him was difficult. Herrenkohl denied encouraging the workers by saying '*loot lo*' (instructing them to rob), but believed that some banias had exaggerated their losses. By examining false claims by the banias, he claimed he struck a wrong chord with the police constable, who Herrenkohl believed to have been protecting the banias in return for a fee. Here too, there were evident strains between the police and the PWD officials, who had different alliances. Interestingly, the *muharrirs* formed solidarities with the workers, and possibly with Herrenkohl. But while the *muharrirs* were punished, Herrenkohl was retained 'because of the difficulty of replacing him'.⁸¹ Despite initial objections, senior officials concurred that local officers could decide better because the former were merely 'guided by probabilities' based on paper correspondence.

To sum up, local officials, especially PWD officers, had some understanding of the double slippage being caused by the colonial state's famine relief policy, and thus potentially sympathised with the moral economic expectations of the labourers. This becomes apparent in the examples above when PWD officials appeared to side with the labourers and place blame on the banias. When questioned by their superiors, they attempted to downplay incidents or engaged in blame-games to protect themselves from reprimand. Overall, such cross-hierarchical solidarities point to a broader consciousness of the limitations of the colonial state's utilitarian famine policy.

Conclusion

This article provided an insight into how popular discontent was expressed during a famine after the colonial state commenced relief operations. The colonial state inserted itself as the main provider of relief during famines, while refusing to control grain prices or the grain trade. Relief works emerged as the core of the famine policy, designed to 'discipline' through labouring. It weakened the bargaining position of the rural poor, while aiming to suppress potential collective action.

Famine conditions impacted all castes and classes. Ultimately though, it was the labouring poor, peasants and marginalised castes that were most impacted by famine conditions and formed the bulk of the labourers on relief work sites. Colonial rule created a context in which peasants found themselves limited in their negotiation with the moneylender-landlord-grain merchant in rural areas, and hence, like the bania, looked to the state for famine relief. They directed their immediate anger towards the banias, who embodied the failure of the moral economy, and this discontent did not abate after the famine but, rather, strengthened it. However, it would be presumptuous to deny their consciousness of the colonial state's inability to assure subsistence. It may be conjectured that the labourers perceived a complicity between the banias and the government, particularly when the latter protected the banias' property and did not intervene in price-setting. The shortcomings of the famine relief policy became more obvious when wages given for relief works were insufficient to buy grain from the bania.

81. 'Plunder of *Banias*' Shops', UPSA, 3.

This article showed how the famine relief policy failed to ensure subsistence at two levels—when labouring did not guarantee wages and then wages did not guarantee food. It was the consequence of the colonial state's selective market intervention that created this double disconnect for the labourers, who saw their moral economic expectations remain unfulfilled despite their labour. They then expressed their frustration and helplessness through popular action. These episodes were analysed using reports and correspondence on looting of relief work sites from regional archives. They showed that certain circumstantial solidarities emerged contingent on discontent towards relief measures, despite the fact that the famine conditions disrupted the rural fabric by deepening social divisions and triggering migrations. Nonetheless, it would be simplistic to understand instances of collectivity across hierarchies as permanent or without negotiation. This is not to justify official narratives, but to emphasise the caste and class divisions that prevented large-scale upheavals or allowed inequalities to persist within the relief system.

The despotic governance of the colonial state manifested itself in the punishments meted out to labourers, which ranged from fines to flogging to imprisonment. Superior officials expected local officers to maintain discipline, but the latter, however, found themselves balancing between managing day-to-day situations and their recognition that the utilitarian famine relief did not translate as effective in practice. This sometimes led to administrative frictions, with PWD officials placing blame on the banias. These findings complement the literature on famine relief by painting a more nuanced picture of official response to popular action.

Overall, including the aspect of famine relief allows an understanding of how labourers responded to their circumstances. The article highlighted the hitherto unanalysed site of relief works as one of continuous challenge. In this way, it complements histories of famines in India by showing that popular action was not limited to the beginning of a famine but continued even after relief had been officially commenced. The article foregrounded numerous instances of popular action to emphasise both the limits of the colonial state's famine relief policy and its utilitarian governance, as well as the collective consciousness of famine labourers.

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