

Madhavi Jha
Doctoral Candidate
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi
madhaviha1@gmail.com

'Relief' and 'Work': Women as Economic Subjects in Famine Relief in Colonial North India

Famine and scarcity occurred with a certain regularity in the second half of the nineteenth century in North India. Both, the scarcity of grains and/or their high price had a deleterious effect on peasant and labouring households. As lack of employment was seen by the officials as one of the main causes for distress during famines, public works (roads, railways, canals, tanks, etc.) were opened in the famine affected areas to provide a minimum wage or nutrition to ensure the survival of the population. Famine public works became one of the central modes of administering relief in the second half of the nineteenth century. By the end of this period, women formed around fifty percent of the total number of people employed on famine public works all over India.¹ Famine works were one of the earliest sites of large scale employment of women by the state, where women were individuated as workers and their wage and diet became central to public policy discussions and deliberations. In this paper I propose to explore the archives generated around the famines and scarcities in late nineteenth century North India as well as the contemporary economic literature (English and vernacular) to locate women as economic subjects in famine relief. I propose to investigate the following two sets of questions.

First, I look at the specific sites of famine relief work to study the notions and practices around sexual division of labour – around what work women could and should do. In India, the analysis of sexual division of labour has been focused on factories (cotton, jute, leather) in the early decades of twentieth century, specially around the colonial legislation from the 1920s.² A study of the sexual division of labour in the famine public works allows us to both explore the process through which women's labour was employed and the gendered notions and justifications around women and work, around skill, strength, diet and wage. In this paper, I first trace the evolution of the norms around sexual division of labour in the famine codes through a study of the changing classification of labourers within these codes and reports. More specifically, I examine the gendered notions and practices around the two main tasks on the public works – digging and carrying. Next, I see how these ideas get interpreted and reworked in the work sites by the relief administrators. The archives also contain evidence of the different kinds of responses of the women workers to the tasks allotted to them on the works. I reflect on how women themselves negotiated the emerging practices around gender and work.

1 Report of the Indian Famine Commission 1898, Government Central Printing Office, Simla, 1898, p. 212.

2 S. Sen, *Women and labour in late colonial India, the Bengal jute industry*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999; R. Kumar, *City Lives: Women Workers in the Bombay Cotton Textile Industry, 1911 to 1947*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 1991 and C. Joshi, *Lost Worlds : Indian Labour and its Forgotten Histories*, London: Anthem Press, 2005.

Second, we study the debates and discussions in contemporary reports and writings around famines to locate the 'worthy' woman relief recipient/labourer in the employ of the 'charitable' colonial state.³ In the context of famine relief works where state aid mediated cheaply available women's labour for productive public purposes, how were questions of charity and entitlement resolved? We find discussions on the social location of women working on public works both in the official reports and the contemporary newspapers. Reading these two archives together on the questions of caste, family, motherhood and sexuality of the women workers makes it possible to explore how these questions were negotiated in the making of the 'employable' woman relief recipient. What were the shifts and changes in the state's perception of women's economic utility, her productivity? How did these changes reflect in the relief policies and the very definitions of famine, scarcity, want?

The sources for the proposed paper include official records (mainly Revenue and Agriculture Department and Public Works Department), official reports, private papers, newspapers and the contemporary commentaries on economy in English and Hindi.

3 The historiography on famine relief has examined the role and nature of the colonial state and the responses and oppositions to the relief efforts from Indian elites as well as changing peasant attitudes towards relief and state benevolence. Some of the later works include, Dreze, J. and A. Sen, *The Political Economy of Hunger* (3 Vols.), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990; S. Sharma, *Famine, Philanthropy and the Colonial State: North India in the Early Nineteenth Century*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001; D. Hall-Matthews, 'Inaccurate Conceptions: Disputed Measures of Nutritional Needs and Famine Deaths in Colonial India', *Modern Asian Studies*, 42: 6, 2008, pp. 1189-1212; G. Brewis, 'Fill Full the Mouth of Famine': Voluntary Action in Famine Relief in India 1896–1901', *Modern Asian Studies* 44:4, 2010, pp. 887–918.