



## 1876-78 FAMINE IN BOMBAY PRESIDENCY & WORK OF THE POONA SARVAJANIK SABHA

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### ABSTRACT :

*The Poona Sarvajanik Sabha established in 1870, was one of the earliest organized attempts, under British rule at what the sabha itself described as “a mediating body which may afford to the latter (the people) facilities for knowing the real intention & objects of the Government as also adequate means for securing their rights by making timely representations to Government of the real circumstances in which they are placed”. In those days the sabha was a successful political organization in the sense that it helped create an informed & educated public opinion, on the one hand & make the Government realize the existence of a growing body of public on the other. How far its efforts at such mediation were successful is a different story. However, the fact of its success in the political education of the people remains unchallenged.*



**KEYWORDS :** *sabha's activities , political education , famine & famine Relief.*

### INTRODUCTION :

One of the earliest problems in which the sabha greatly interested itself-one that ultimately cost it its formal relations with the Government of the day was famine & famine Relief. The activities of the sabha, in relation to the famines in particular illustrate the two aspects of the sabha's contribution to current political problems and policies and the intellectual basis of approach to such problem. Firstly, it is an interesting example of the successful implementation of the task of the political education of the people as well as of the rulers a take in the best tradition of the liberal thinking of the time, and secondly, it show the spirit of scientific study of gathering information and analysing it systematically for the formulation of a correct policy. In this note and attempt is made to bring out these two aspects of the sabha's activities.

The first serious famine in the Deccan faced by the sabha, was the famine of 1876-78. During these two years the sabha undertook extensive inquiries in to the famine condition in the affected districts, examined the relief measures adapted, and suggested various measures of relief, in five, long, well-return written, closely argued 'Narrative' sent to the government.

The Narrative were sent from time-to-time, in the course of the famines spread over to years. They raised issues of the policy as when these called for comments, and kept the government posted with the empirical findings of the sabha, regarding the famine situation. The investigation made the sabha itself to change it's mind on some issues: In the first Narrative, despatched towards the end of 1876, when the rain had failed and the **kharif** crops were showing signs of complete failure, the sabha approved of the dominant official views at the time, of not opening fear price shops for selling grains, and of not benning exports from the affected area's; it was opposed, on “general grounds of principle”,

to such official interference in the normal trade channels. Similarly, while welcoming public works for the relief of the able-bodied working population, it was of the opinion that private charity ought to be chiefly directed to provide for these classes (the infirm and the non-working) and there is every reason to hope that the munificence and public spirit of the large towns will be sufficient to keep these men from starvation. By the time the sabha sent the second narrative these hopes had vanished and the sabha came to the conclusion that no great dependence could be placed on the source for the relief of the poor. The states interference was sought similar was the experience with regard to given trade: the sabha referred to instance of large relief works center in various parts of famine effected reason in the neighborhood of which not a single grain shop had been opened to enable the laborers to purchase grain. In contrast to this the sabha took up from the very beginning the case of the famine stricken cattle. It pointed out that throwing open forest grazing land for the starving cattle was not enough, it was essential to take the cattle, under government supervision to hilly regions where forests and fodder supplies were adequately available. It pointed out the crucial role of cattle in Indian rural economy and repeatedly insisted on saving them from death due to starvation. Soon after this famine began the sabha undertook a detailed survey of the extent of migration of men and cattle from the affected villages the nature and extent of water supply and the specific characters of the relief works that in view of the people and the investigation were most suited to the wants of the distressed people." A tabular statement was accordingly framed and extensively circulated all over the country the information called for has been spontaneously supplies mostly by the distressed people themselves....."

The data showed that more than 50% of the population and a larger proportion of the cattle had left the survived villages within two months of the on-set of the famine. These data relating to the affected areas and the subsequent influx of these people into the relief works wherever started were pointed out as evidence of the seriousness of the situation and the lack of timely and adequate measures of relief.

The sabha repeatedly demanded remission or suspension of land revenue in the famine affected areas. It pleaded that the question of exemption or no exemption should be made dependent upon the partial and total failure of crops and not upon the reported means of each individual holder, which was the announced the policy of the government at the time. Similar objection were taken to and identical approach by the government to the problem of relief to the distressed. Indeed on the overall the policy level the sabha took exemption to the decision of the government to limit their duty to the extent of the resources at their command, and insisted on saving life at all cost during the famines.

The wages on famine works was a sore point of policy with the sabha. During the famine the government had followed sliding scale of wages with a maximum ceiling in the large public works and fixed wage rate in the civil work, the rate being the value of one lb, of grain per workers per day. The sabha drew upon its investigation to impress upon the government the evil effects of this starvation wages rate. When people began leaving the large public works center in the large number during the famine period, Sent a narrative detailing various for this :

- 1) It showed that the sliding scales of wages in these large public works resulted in the physical emaciation of the workers & a wage as low as those on the civil works, the labourers naturally preferred the civil work which also happened to be nearer their villages.
- 2) The requirements that the labourers on public works should provide their own work-baskets & axes a condition that was not possible for the famine-stricken to fulfil, added to this hardship.
- 3) The larger the number of sick & infirm persons or children in a family, the less easy it was to migrate to distant public works, on the other hand, since low wages led to increase in disease & infirmity, the tendency to stay nearer home increased.
- 4) The inability of the Government to guarantee adequate work in distant places led to much distress. This uncertainty provisions for adequate work was one of the reasons for low attendance at public work.
- 5) The large out migration from the affected villages early in the famine as shown by the survey reported in the third Narrative was pointed out as evidence of the basic willingness of the people to migrate long distances under favourable conditions. But it was argued the whole- sale decimation of the

migrate people, on their way and the scourge of epidemic among these migrants exposed to the sun & cold created fear in the minds of the people. In many public work centers, the sabha pointed out the miserable conditions of living & epidemics like cholera, small-pox, etc. were responsible for the low attendance of workers or their withdrawal.

6) Finally the inhuman conditions of selection of workers added to this list of reasons for the relatively low and declining attendance at the large public work centers.

The sabha thus marshaled facts & arguments to show the various circumstances that affected attendance at the relief works. On the basis of the available evidence the sabha argued it could not be contended that the famine affected people were basically unwilling to migrate long distances. At the same time by detailing the reasons that led to the low attendance at the public works centres the sabha showed under what conditions the gravity of distress was not to be judged from the figures of attendance at such centres. The Narratives of the sabha show two distinct aspects of its work-

1) The evolution of a famine policy was in an experimental stage at that time. Governments in different provinces were trying out various measures for estimating the onset & incidence of famine as well as of relief. In the absence of a clear frame in this regard, there was considerable change of policy, sometime even during the course of a single famine. The sabha rendered a very valuable service in this direction through its detailed critical & balanced appraisal of the situation. It reiterated its basic approach to famine relief policy the saving of life of people at all costs. It pointed out in course of its communications, the evidence that had to be sought to establish the onset & extent of famine & the circumstances that required different forms of relief works. Its advocacy for the preservation of cattle the location of relief works the suspension of land revenue etc., showed clear appreciation of some of the basic features of the Indian rural economy. That the lines of reasoning were basically right & highly useful can be seen from the fact that the famine code proposed by the famine commission of 1878-80 a detailed frame of reference for relief policy included many of the points made by the sabha earlier.

2) The other important contribution of the sabha was the : initiation of the empirical investigation & analysis of such data in matters of economic & public policy. The sabha sent out investigators, with questionnaires to make detailed enquiries into some particular aspects of family & villages life during the famine. The data were properly sifted & the limitations of the findings & judging policy measures were not novel at the time in that the governments in the department of revenue had been doing this for quite some years. However, the initiation of this in public debate by public bodies & the level of such analysis certainly opened up new vistas for study of questions of public. In this sense the sabha did pioneering work.

Indeed another interesting example of this type of study by the sabha is its representation to the famine commission (1878) to ignore the view of the secretary of states that it was not necessary for the commission to ascertain the extent of mortality in different provinces during the previous famine.

The sabha argued that the mortality rate during famines was the touchstone of the adequacy or otherwise of the policies of relief pursued by the government. To show the inaccuracy of the Bombay Government's information about mortality during the 1876-78 famine in that presidency, the sabha sent out its investigators to 145 villages in four talukas of four districts affected by famine, & collected information about:- 1) population in July 1876; 2) births in July 1876 & 77; 3) immigrants; 4) famine deaths; 5) deaths from other causes; 6) emigrants with whereabouts known; 7) emigrants with whereabouts unknown & 8) population in July 1878. The data about the births were obtained from villages records; the rest were ascertained after individual interviews. The famine deaths were calculated after deducting notional normal deaths for the population of the size based on the death rates for previous years. This showed high death rates even when the untraced emigrants were not considered as death.

The sabha criticized the figures put out by the Government by showing that the villages & talukas chosen were such that they included some which were not famine affected. The average mortality rate therefore appeared lower than what it was. The sabha rightly pointed out that only those villages & talukas which were famine affected, should have been considered in calculating the mortality rate. In this connection the sabha pointed out the limitations of its own survey, by saying that the

selected villages might have been, on an average, affected more than what the overall average indicated. But it held that the smallest estimate of mortality by its survey was much higher than the Government estimates.

### STATISTICS OF FAMINE MORTALITY

The following is a summary as given by the Khandeish and Deccan famine relief fund committee bearing on mortality in the famine districts. On the 21<sup>st</sup> march he visited the village of sidewadi in the punderpur Taluka and went from house-to-house. The population before and after the famine or when it was officially supposed to be over was-

Sidewadi	30 <sup>th</sup> July 1876	Man	Women	Children
		216	215	246
Sidewadi	30 <sup>th</sup> July 1877	120	129	158

out of 137 houses in the villages 52 were utterly deserted and he has forwarded a least of the late owners who have entirely disappeared. He then made a house to house in inspection of 21<sup>st</sup> different houses the inhabitation of about one half were living on grass seeds and husks the grass seeds giving them a peculiar swollen appearance in the body though the rest of the person was emaciated. We may hope that these 21 houses were a bad sample, but at all events will not touch on what he says as to the struggle of the inhabitation of the other houses to meet the assessment. In a neighboring little village out of a total of 15 houses standing 8 were deserted. Dozen of village are given but we can only of course pick out a few indiscriminately here and there. On the 25<sup>th</sup> march the agent visited Vudval, 10 Miles from Sholapur. Out of 55 houses 25 were deserted. Five Miles further on he came to Nani, the comparative population were as follows-

31 <sup>st</sup> July 1876	Man	Women	Children
	153	152	97
31 <sup>st</sup> July 1877	Man	Women	Children
	57	56	12

Out of 72 houses 38 are now roofless and crumbling to dust. List of the deserted houses in this and two neighboring villages are in the hands of the committee, the agent describes the people as mainly living on grass seeds. At Hulgunik in the Indi taluka the comparative population were-

31 <sup>st</sup> July 1876	Man	Women	Children
	151	129	122
31 <sup>st</sup> July 1877	Man	Women	Children
	77	71	73

Out of 70 houses 32 were deserted. At Agasnal the population stood-

31 <sup>st</sup> July 1876	Man	Women	Children
	101	97	157
31 <sup>st</sup> July 1877	Man	Women	Children
	71	52	86

Since July 1877 there had been 58 deaths while only one child was born, and this child had subsequently died. The first visit of Kaladgi yielded better returns. At **Jumnal** in the Bijapur taluka the population stood-

31 <sup>st</sup> July 1876	Man	Women	Children
	368	410	542
31 <sup>st</sup> July 1877	Man	Women	Children
	305	336	404

Out of 249 houses only 22 were deserted. But there had only been 2 Birth to 142 deaths in the subsequent Eight months. This comparative immunity was due to its situation on the done River. Very much more disastrous returns are given for scores of villages. For instance at Balgadi in the Bagulkote taluka:-

31 <sup>st</sup> July 1876	Man	Women	Children
	117	125	124
31 <sup>st</sup> July 1877	Man	Women	Children
	54	40	38

With 1 birth to 5 death since last July. At Belgi-

31 <sup>st</sup> July 1876	Man	Women	Childrens
	1363	1505	922
31 <sup>st</sup> July 1877	Man	Women	Children
	1107	1190	470

With 30 births & 375 deaths since July.

But this extraordinary contrast between the birth-rate & death-rate, supposing always these statistics to be accurate and we devoutly trust they can be contradicted is clearly shown in the following table referring to the Mudebehal taluka (151 Villages):-

31 <sup>st</sup> July 1876	Man	Women	Children
	25679	26863	31209
31 <sup>st</sup> July 1877	Man	Women	Children
	20053	21143	22426

Showing a loss of 20129 persons out 83751 it twelve months or 24 persons out of every hundred.

Year and months	Deaths	Births
August-1877	793	50
September-1877	876	51
October-1877	763	42
November-1877	929	24
December-1877	444	36
January-1878	239	30
February-1878	73	14

The average annual birth rate in this taluka one to every 16.7 of population and the birth rate should, of course slightly predominate over the birth rate. The following table are rather a table of which this is a Summery was let before the Committee:-



Date of Visit-1878	Name of the Village	Population on the 31 <sup>st</sup> July-1876	Population on the 31 <sup>st</sup> July-1877	Loss of Population in 12Months	Deaths since 31 <sup>st</sup> of July-1877	Birth of since 31 <sup>st</sup> of July-1877
March 16 <sup>th</sup>	Sidewadi	677	407	39.9	29	2
	Ghurniki	358	288	19.5	-	-
March 18 <sup>th</sup>	Tavasi	1694	933	44.9	60	8
	Manapur	475	346	27	28	1
March 25 <sup>th</sup>	Wadagbal	313	212	32.3	45	2
	Nani	402	125	68.9	7	0
	Takli	832	682	18	57	2
March 26 <sup>th</sup>	Hulgunki	402	221	45	44	0
	Agasnal	355	209	41.1	58	1
March 30 <sup>th</sup>	Jumnal	1320	1045	20.8	142	2
April 01 <sup>st</sup>	Bhlgadi	366	132	63.9	5	0
	Bilgi	4554	3481	23.5	375	30
	Kontikal	-	-	-	35	0
	Sidapur	1503	1002	33.3	106	5

The following table shows the mortality according to this registration in each of the distressed district during the year 1877 upto the end of September as compared with that of the average in corresponding months of the preceding five year and of the year 1876.

Districts	Population according to census of 1872 plus an assumed average increment of the 1% per annum	Total deaths from 1 <sup>st</sup> January to 30 <sup>th</sup> 1877	Percentage (%) on population	Average total deaths in corresponding months of five preceding years	Percentage on population	Total death from 1 <sup>st</sup> January to 30 <sup>th</sup> September 1876	Percentage on population
Khandeish	1,081,113	21482	2.0	15828	1.5	13790	1.3
Nashik	771847	19511	2.6	11955	1.8	12046	1.6
Ahmednagar	813417	22819	2.8	13571	1.7	15206	1.9
Poona	953513	23225	2.4	15225	1.6	14684	1.5
Sholapur	754661	24018	3.2	10845	1.5	13709	1.8
Satara	1115125	39418	3.5	18065	1.7	18757	1.7
Belgaum	986637	55618	5.6	17427	1.8	23380	2.3
Kaladgi	857663	55409	6.5	12255	1.5	16055	1.9
Dharwar	1038437	61339	5.9	19363	1.9	23932	2.4
Total	8372413	322839	3.9	134534	1.6	151559	1.8

Besides the death-rate, it laid great stress on the very low birth rate during the famine years to illustrate the severity of the famine & the lack of successful relief policy. The adoption of the famine code by the various provincial Governments after 1880 led to a change of approach on the part of the sabha, during subsequent famines. The sabha henceforth interested itself in bringing to the notice the Government the lapses in the full implementation of the code measures as well as in telling the people

what the provisions of the code were so that the people could demand their rights from the Government.

Of course, the sabha in the light of its experience, made a few suggestions for changes in the code provisions. But in the main while sending out volunteers and reporters to famine affected areas as in earlier years it emphasized the need for the full & proper implementation of the code. Both the famines of 1892 & 1896-7 saw the renewal of the sabhas activities in this field. Indeed the effort of the sabha to educate the people about their rights as laid down in the code so enraged the Government of the day that on a rather minor and flimsy pretext they withdrew their recognition of sabha during the famine of 1897. Constituted as the sabha was & the political situation of the country at that time being what it was it was not surprising to find the sabha slowly recede into unimportance. By then however it had paved the way for factual investigation & logical reasoning in public & economic matters which in no small measure helped create intelligent public opinion & discussion of public questions in Maharashtra.

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