

# Criticising a Despotic Colonial Government: How Much Is Too Much?

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## Abstract

In the last half of the 19th century in the Bombay Deccan, Indian professionals and merchants began to openly challenge some practices of the colonial government. A major vehicle for this forthright criticism was the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha. Through its quarterly journal, the Sabha's interactions with government gave rise to a competition of ideas and identities, between government and its Indian critics. This competition embraced many topics, but the denouement concerned government policies during two outbursts, some twenty years apart, of famine in the Deccan. Each side was convinced that its approach was right, with the government comfortable doing what it had always done, and the critics increasingly finding fault because of the failures of the government's famine policy. The question was, which was more important, clinging to Utilitarian doctrine, or implementing a "newer" doctrine that emphasized saving human life? The Sabha not only accepted a "newer" doctrine, but also chose to hold the government accountable for not implementing it. More important, when the government failed to implement needed action, the Sabha took action to right the wrong. Eventually, government reacted to this criticism by acting to crush the Sabha. The eventual outcome is visible even today.

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## I Introduction

In the Bombay Deccan during the late nineteenth century, the relationship between the colonial government and an increasingly political group of Indian professionals and merchants morphed. The old image of the rulers as morally superior, benefactors who brought Western education, a legal system, and a peaceful calm that promised better days to come, gave way over time, as the government too often failed to live up to this image. There was a basic test: did the colonial government act in the very best interests of the people it ruled? As time passed, a series of events put the basic test to a trial.

This essay traces how the relation between citizens and government changed as elements of Deccan society adopted a less accepting, more stridently militant attitude toward the foreign ruling class. The Poona Sarvajanik Sabha in Pune, the intellectual and political centre of the Bombay Deccan, became one vehicle of the political change. Two severe famines provided major proving grounds for this change, as the Sabha became a leading force in attempts to urge, and then force the rulers to rectify their failures, save lives, and mitigate the misery that the famines brought to the people of the presidency. The Sabha's quarterly journal provided a step-by-step record of this political awakening.

Much scholarly output has focused on the origins of government policy and the role of top administrators in developing and adapting policy to create a famine relief strategy. The aim here is not to duplicate that discussion, but rather to examine the development of criticism of that policy by Indians, and the results stemming from two famines, that of 1874-1877, and 1895-1897. The leaders of the Sabha, through the quarterly journal, spoke for themselves. The main question here is how far the Sabha could go in its criticism before the despotic (a term that the Sabha used) colonial regime took action to stop them.

The self-image of British administrators was as members of an aristocracy, in the sense of the Greek word for the regime in pre-democratic Athens, *ἀριστοκρατία*, (aristocracy – rule by society's best, rule by an elite). British administrators were men who *ruled* as the successors to the Mughals and previous regimes. The eventual self-image of their critics was as the people to whom government must be accountable.

The Sabha arose in the early 1870s, from the aftermath of a dispute over the management of the Parvati Temple in Pune. Membership was open to people who could prove they represented a section of the Pune populace and funding largely came from patronage by members of the Indian gentry. Its managing committee, mainly lawyers, spanned a wide segment of society. The Sabha began as, and remained, an active organization that served a dual role. On the one hand, it communicated information about government activities to the people at large. On the other, it funnelled information to government about the attitudes of the populace on these same activities and issues. It reported its activities through its English language quarterly journal.

In providing such information to government, the Sabha navigated a fine line between open candour and possible embarrassment to the government. The language the Sabha initially used might have been polite, but increasingly in such communications, they used language that pulled no punches. There was a marked contrast between the way the Sabha's journal portrayed the widespread death and disease, the social and economic misery that famine brought to affected districts, and the

seeming confidence of government that they were doing the right thing by stolidly following orders and claiming that things were really not that bad.

## II Theoretical Basis of Government Famine Policy

Government famine policy varied, depending on the best estimate of rainfall, the locale of a food shortage, and information about the condition of the local people. There were some changes in famine policy over time and famine seemed endemic in British India. At the top level, the Secretary of State for India stated that the government's goal in combatting famine was: "the protection of the people of India from the effects of the uncertainty of the seasons."<sup>1</sup> He stressed collecting "with utmost care all information which may assist...administrators in the task of limiting the range or mitigating the intensity" of famines. This betrayed that officials in India had only a loose grasp of local conditions that left them too often unable to know when to take action, much less, what action to take

Open issues about relief works included the amount of compensation for workers, and the quantity of food needed for the health and strength of the workers. The well-known tenets of political economy at the time insisted that the government follow a laissez faire policy, trusting the free market to send food where it was scarce and there were hungry people to buy it. The quantity of food that these workers needed became a hotly contested issue in the Bombay Deccan.

Notions of political economy (together with English experience with the Poor Laws) shaped official famine policy in India. Political economy was a required subject at Haileybury College. After 1858, when the civil service was open to competition via written examination, a paper on political economy was still required. Tenets included "the commonly accepted necessity for applying tests of some kind before giving relief."<sup>2</sup> This would prevent lazy people from cheating the system by using the government dole instead of working. In a Minute of August 12th, 1877, the viceroy elaborated on the testing idea, calling for "relief employment, at a subsistent rate of wages" for relief projects. Laissez faire ideology also questioned "the proper extent and limitation of the duty of Government in respect to the supply, importation, and distribution of food required for districts suffering from famine."<sup>3</sup>

Another major issue was money. This shaded attitudes toward which part of the government would pay for famine relief projects. It also appeared in decisions about gratuitous relief for those who could not work, in the topic of suspension and remission of land revenue; and in bureaucratic questions at the district level about organizing and supervising relief.<sup>4</sup> Gratuitous relief by government was an anathema under the political economy doctrine; so rulers chose to adhere to hallowed principles, providing the barest means of survival to famine-stricken people who were

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in *Report of the Indian Famine Commission* (hereafter *IFC [1880]*), Part 1, para 1, for both quotes in this paragraph

<sup>2</sup> From the Secretary of State's Despatch, p. 6, para 6, in *IFC [1880]*.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p 2, para 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, para 11.

unable to work. As regards land revenue, the topic was a sanctum sanctorum for British administrators. After over a half century of muddling through various systems of revenue administration, there hung a figurative “DO NOT TOUCH!” sign on the duty of landowners and other agriculturists to pay the revenue demand, even in times of scarcity or famine.

### III Famine Policy in Action

#### The Good and the Bad

Failure of the 1873 monsoon in northern Bengal/Bihar led to the total failure of the winter rice crop that inevitably created widespread famine risk in the affected area. In response, the government of Bengal prepared for relief measures “on a scale and with a thoroughness which had never been equalled [*sic*] before. The principals [*sic*] adopted by the Government were very different from those accepted on any former similar occasion.”<sup>5</sup> The government accepted responsibility for feeding the populace of the affected districts with all the food necessary and the Bengal government (with approval from the Government of India) imported 480,000 tons of rice, mostly from Burma. Government officers distributed the food. Those who could not work received free relief and for those who could work there were relief projects with “normal” rations provided by the government. There were no tests to identify cheaters. Instead, the government sought to keep everybody adequately fed. In other words, the government abandoned Utilitarian notions of laissez faire trade and political economy notions about how to treat those *prima facie* in need. Leadership in the Bihar famine campaign fell to Bengal Lieutenant-Governor, Sir Richard Temple, whom we shall encounter later.

In official circles a post-famine shock emerged over “errors” in the government’s policy. For example, of the 480,000 tons of rice imported, over 100,000 tons remained undistributed after the famine. The government had bought the rice at emergency prices and the leftover rice had to be sold “at a great loss.”<sup>6</sup> The upshot of the very expensive program was that no one wanted to be blamed for spending so generously, so when government undertook famine relief in the future, there would be no blank check such as Sir Richard Temple had enjoyed.

Then came the worst famine in nearly a century, the Great Famine of 1876-78. The large area, the size of the affected population, and its duration and intensity dwarfed previous famines and scarcities that formed the basis of the government’s famine policy. The famine covered all the Deccan districts of the Bombay Presidency, and throughout India it affected some 36 million persons. Scarcities abounded in 1876 and in 1877, grain prices rose sharply throughout India. This price increase followed the poor harvest of 1876, and also reflected the ongoing export of food from India to Europe.

If the Bihar famine exemplified what government could do for the victims, the Great Famine was its opposite. In January 1877, the imperial government made Sir Richard Temple the Famine Delegate, to inspect the affected districts in Madras. He was to evaluate proposed relief measures that would be appropriate. His mandate was to have government do everything possible “to save the population of the distressed districts from starvation, or from an extremity of suffering dangerous to

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15, para 57.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16, para 57.

life.” However, his remit was *not* to prevent “all suffering and giving general relief to the poorer classes.” The imperial government recognized “the evils of indiscriminate private charity, but [deemed] indiscriminate charity of a government...far worse.” Calcutta now insisted that “the task of saving life, irrespective of the cost, is one which it is beyond [the capability of government] to undertake.”<sup>7</sup> The Secretary of State for India concurred in this, emphasizing that the Government of India should do what it could, but *not* permit the funding of famine relief to drain government coffers.

The government of Bombay had a plan should the monsoon of 1876 fail (which it did). The plan reflected the ideas of political economy. The primary aim was to relieve distress through large public works projects under the management of professional engineers. Daily pay was set at a level only adequate to support the worker. The goal was to extract as much useful work as possible, but pay and conditions were not to be attractive, simply to provide enough food to sustain bare survival. This would prevent cheating by a class anxious to live on the dole.

Since cost was a dividing line between an acceptable programme and an unacceptable effort, how much did all this effort cost for two years? The government *estimated* the loss of life in the affected Bombay districts at 800,000 over the “normal” death rate, or some 8%. Gratuitous relief cost ten lakhs, while the total cost of famine administration came to one crore fourteen lakhs. Rs 2.25 lakhs of land revenue were remitted and about Rs 30 lakhs were suspended. Of the latter, some Rs 16 lakhs were collected after the famine, leaving about Rs 14 lakhs unpaid (and uncollectable) at the end of 1879.

The Bombay government justified its famine relief efforts as the best that could be expected, since India was an inherently dangerous place. This placed the blame for death on the victims, the poor, by pointing to their living conditions that left them prime targets for disease. While an epidemic might kill tens of thousands, this was simply a condition of “normal” life in India. Famine, on the other hand, accelerated susceptibility to such diseases and attracted more attention from government, which asserted that famine-related diseases could only be wiped out through economic and social progress. “[T]he hope that any human endeavours will...prevent an increase of mortality during a severe famine is untenable.”<sup>8</sup> Government could not thwart high prices, job loss, or food scarcity. It asserted there would always be suffering and death. In sum, the official view avoided a *mea culpa*. There was hope that famine relief measures would become more efficient, improved transport would facilitate relief and internal trade, and increased prosperity “thanks to a settled and civilized Government”<sup>9</sup> would make famine disappear. The official view was that the Great Famine was less harmful to the general prosperity of India than previous famines, even though the Great Famine was the worst famine in long-term memory.

Nowhere was this positive view trumpeted more than in the Bombay presidency. The Bombay government asserted that notwithstanding “the worst famine in modern times,” there had been a large increase in arable land on the revenue rolls and land revenue had increased by Rs 4.5 lakhs over the average of the past decade. The Secretary of State for India boasted about the “remarkable

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<sup>7</sup> All quotations in this paragraph are from *IFC [1880]*, p. 17, para. 61.

<sup>8</sup> *IFC [1880]*, p. 29, paras 82-83.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

development of the power of the agricultural classes to resist and recover from the effects of unfavourable seasons.”<sup>10</sup>

The government’s bureaucracy-reliant policy was pledged to free market laissez faire principles (underpinned by) suspicion that people who wanted government help were undeserving. This contrasted strongly with the Sabha’s view. The Sabha assessed government policy in the Bombay presidency and became increasingly outraged and detailed, as they received local information from the famine districts. Eventually, in the face of the government failing to act or acting incorrectly, the Sabha took action on its own.

### **The Sabha Reacts to the Great Famine**

The first public response appeared in the first issue of its quarterly journal, in July 1878. By that time the Great Famine had largely abated and the government was in the process of establishing a Famine Commission to review anti-famine procedures so as to improve famine policy. In “A letter to the Government of India Making Some suggestions Regarding the Famine Commission,”<sup>11</sup> the Sabha published its opinion. One of the first issues it tackled was how many people in the presidency had died because of the famine. The government of India glossed over the issue observing that Bombay was “distinguished by the almost total absence of deaths from want and starvation.”<sup>12</sup> The Sabha hotly disagreed, arguing that success or failure of combatting famine lay in how many deaths famine relief measures prevented. The Bombay government apparently did not have presidency-wide figures, but provided some data, but only from the least affected districts. Information the Sabha had received from its agents portrayed a very different situation reflecting some of the worst-affected talukas. As a solution the Sabha urged the Famine Commission to call for a full-scale census to provide figures comparable to the general census of 1872, as a way to clarify the effectiveness of government famine relief measures.

The Sabha also supported the government’s idea of an annual budgetary set-aside of £1.5 million as a “famine insurance policy,” for famine prevention and relief. It would accumulate over the non-famine years to render famine relief no threat to Indian finances. However, the fund required an increase that nearly marginal agriculturists would pay in future indirect taxes. Moreover, the funds would require the government to honour a promise not to use the money for any purpose other than famine prevention or relief.

The Sabha harboured strong doubts as to the need for tests and other requirements to prevent cheaters from using public assistance without needing it.<sup>13</sup> Official procedures failed to accommodate a variety of local situations.

There were deep problems with the administration of large relief projects. These projects were located far from the workers’ villages. Those who walked to the projects during the scarcity stage, largely withstood the rigours of the travel (little food and water, often with very young children and aged dependents) and arrived not yet starving, but in deteriorated condition. Late comers frequently

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<sup>10</sup> Cited in *ibid.* p. 30, para 85.

<sup>11</sup> The Sabha’s No. 162 of 1878, 1 April 1878, to S.C. Bailey, in *QJPSS* 1:1:1-7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2, para 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:1, p. 4, para 6.

arrived in various stages of starvation, poor physical condition, progressively less able with each passing day to perform the full day's required hard labour. These tended to typify those who most often sought relief in the projects.

Once in the camp, migrants had to survive needs testing and not all were allowed to stay. Sanitary conditions were rudimentary at best and usually there had been no effort to accommodate individuals and families at the camps. They literally slept in the open regardless of the weather. Then the work began. Most of the projects had workers breaking rocks into ballast and underlay for roads. This strenuous labour required different strengths and aptitudes than agricultural work. Often the Public Works engineer in charge required each worker to produce as much broken rock as a completely able-bodied, well-fed professional produced. This level of production was rare. When a worker failed to meet the daily quota he (or she) suffered a reduction of pay for that day's work.

There was also a question about compensation. A female worker received about 25% less than a male and children over the age of seven received even less. Those younger than seven and the infirm elderly received nothing unless they qualified for gratuitous food under certain conditions. Otherwise, workers had to divide their food in order to feed the elderly and youngest. The compensation normally suffered deductions. Since rations were scant to begin with, the reductions and need to share usually led to increased hunger and diminished ability to work, which was a repeating cycle of increasingly meagre allotments<sup>14</sup> for those who worked. Over time, this became a slow path to death by starvation.

By 1877, information from the Sabha's agents in famine districts clarified the picture and the Sabha's criticisms became even more focused. The additional facts were unsettling.

Shivaram Hari Sathe, who later replaced Gopal Krishna Gokhale as the Sabha's Secretary, exploded a myth that there had been an organized campaign by project workers who left the projects in early 1877. The government complained of a conspiracy among workers to strike for higher wages and to resist its "economizing policy." Sathe listed the "true" reasons. Selection of migrants to work a camp frequently involved "boxes and blows given to the chest and anyone who complained was sent away. Starving workers who had survived for five months could not possibly earn a full wage. Payment came but once in eight days and was proportional to the fraction of work completed, which further degraded a worker's ability to work. Workers had to bring their own equipment, while weekly payments forced workers to borrow money from grain merchants, using their implements as collateral. Wages were insufficient to repay the loans and the merchants kept the collateral until they were repaid in full. Those workers lacking tools, lost the right to work, and those who had not died or left the camp remained permanently unable to do their full quota of work.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Worst—Starvation by Government**

In the early stages of the Great Famine, the Sabha's criticisms had been general. As local information reached the Sabha and the true nature of local problems became evident, the Sabha began

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<sup>14</sup> Letter from the Sabha to Chief Secretary to Government, 23 November 1876, in "Famine Narrative No. II in *QJPSS* 1:1:18-19.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 68-70.

to name individuals whom the Sabha considered responsible for needless death, starvation, and suffering.

The first named was Sir Richard Temple. While Temple earned admiration for his role in the Bihar famine and as Famine Delegate in Madras, admiration for him as Governor of Bombay shrivelled, as shown in a letter from Shivaram Hari Sathe, to Major General Sir M. K. Kennedy<sup>16</sup> stating that famine relief officers were unnecessarily enforcing a ration of one pound of food, labelling it sufficient to sustain life. The error stemmed from one of Temple's minutes of the previous January,<sup>17</sup> in which Temple authoritatively stated that one pound (half a *sher*) per day was a local proverb identifying that amount as all that was needed for a person to survive. Sathe rebutted, writing, "the proverbial measure for bare subsistence is not half a *sher* but full [*sic*] *sher* that is 2lbs. of staple food with a margin for vegetables and condiments and ample experience has now shown that a pound of food does not suffice to sustain life." He continued, insisting that, "[t]he large number of deaths on the Relief works erroneously ascribed to cholera but which the Government of India itself now acknowledges to be the result of slow starvation contradicts the so-called experience"<sup>18</sup> in Temple's minute.

There was no mistaking where the blame lay: high up in the government pyramid, not at the base. Sathe recognized that lower grade officers in some districts recognized the blunder and tried on their own to counteract it. He cited the case of an assistant collector, who decided "practically to disobey" government orders by making up the extra pound of food from "his own pocket or from private [charity] funds placed at his disposal." Sathe concluded that government should not follow a policy when subordinate officers found it contrary to the dictates of their conscience.

If the Sabha found Temple to be mistakenly responsible for slow starvation in the camps, there were even harsher words for Lord Lytton, the viceroy. In a petition to the House of Commons resulting from a public meeting the Sabha convened at Pune, the Sabha all but called Lytton an incompetent and a liar. The petition listed 25 grievances against Lytton. Seven directly related to Lytton's famine policy inequities: raising the salt tax 40% while Bombay and Madras were in the midst of a three-year famine; zero land revenue remissions (remissions were a normal practice during pre-Lytton famines, but now land revenue was collected "with rigour and stringency, which led to disastrous results"); violating political economy principles by levying the financial burden on the truly poor and those suffering from the famine, at a rate completely out of the range of their ability to pay, while excusing high-salaried officials and other rich people from paying; emptying the "famine insurance fund" to help fund a war in Afghanistan (the British lost); the Lytton regime instituted "arbitrary principles" then in favour in Calcutta causing many problems for agriculturists; land revenue rates were increased "to an extent which an official Committee [later] appointed by the Government of India" deemed unjust and excessive, but which had not been reduced."<sup>19</sup>

Nulkar evaluated the supreme and provincial governments as follows. "[L]ike all despotic forms of governance ours has its faults, traceable chiefly to individual failings. These arise first from ignorance

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<sup>16</sup> No. 85 of 1877, "Proceedings of the Sabha," *QIPSS* 1:4:67-73 April 1879

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 67-68.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p. 68.

<sup>19</sup> "Petition to the House of Commons with the Proceedings of the Public Meeting at Which It Was Adopted," *QIPSS* 3:1. Petition, pp 1-10, Proceedings, pp 10-16, p. 6 for the quote.

or indifference, secondly from prostitution of power to ministerial or party objects, and thirdly, from pride and partiality toward races or class-interests.”<sup>20</sup>

The Sabha also produced a 42-page article assessing Lytton’s four years as viceroy. “The four years of Lord Lytton’s administration have proved disastrous beyond all precedent to the true interests of the millions committed to his fostering care. The besetting sin of his administration has been that it was eminently untruthful, repressive and reactionary at home...and disastrous to the safety of our finances and material prosperity.”<sup>21</sup> Lytton surrounded himself with yes-men who praised his famine policy saying, “in nothing has Lord Lytton been so conspicuously successful as ‘in his treatment of the difficult problems concerned with the management and relief of famine.’”<sup>22</sup> The Sabha disagreed, recalling that during Lytton’s viceroyalty, famine in the Bombay and Madras presidencies and the North West provinces, the number of famine deaths totalled almost nine million persons. The article also stressed that so many fatalities “is sufficient to seal the doom of any administration that could be held responsible for it,” but despite suffering, misery, and death in India, “Lord Lytton was seriously engaged in arranging for,” the gaudy, expensive ceremony in Delhi celebrating the elevation of Queen Victoria to be Empress of India, “just as if nothing had occurred...to distract the mind of the principal actors in that Assemblage.”<sup>23</sup>

#### IV Two Competing Ideas

The Sabha (like other critics of Lytton’s famine policy) clung to its own set of ideologies. We have already noted the political-economy-laissez-faire framework that underlay Utilitarian ideas about how government might properly deal with famines in India. Indian critics, horrified by the widespread suffering and death that resulted from these policies, attached themselves to a very different policy approach. What was that approach and where did it come from?

Early during the Great Famine, the suggestions the Sabha gave to government supported many government famine efforts. This support began to wither as many of those government efforts failed because they were inappropriate. As the Sabha received first-hand data from its agents in famine districts, the Sabha reshaped its suggestions to government to become ever more critical of what the government was (or was not) doing. Certainly, there was no wish to see a repeat of the Great Famine mistakes in the future. However, a new famine policy did not fall from the sky, nor had the Sabha itself created an opposing ideology. Rather, the Sabha borrowed from the Bihar policy of the government of India. More important, the Sabha began to apply a policy that was home-grown, a more direct form of action, one that the Sabha considered was proper in famine-struck India. Lord Northbrook, Lytton’s predecessor, announced that the obligation of the state was to save famine-stricken Indians from starvation and cost was to be no object. The success of this policy in the Bihar famine contrasted sharply with Lytton’s policy that resulted in the death by starvation of nearly nine

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<sup>20</sup> “Proceedings of the Sabha” *QJPSS* 3:1:11 July 1880.

<sup>21</sup> “The Viceroyalty of Lord Lytton,” *QJPSS* 3:1:34 July 1880.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>23</sup> Refers to the gaudy celebration of Queen Victoria’s becoming Empress of India, *ibid.*, p. 54.

million Indians.<sup>24</sup> The Sabha considered the Northbrook policy as the statement of an obligation by the governments of Britain and India to the people of India: Government was accountable for success or failure. Thus, as long as it failed to succour the starving, the colonial regime lost a significant part of its claim to be in India for the protection of the voiceless masses.

A recurring Sabha request to the government after the Great Famine was for increasingly detailed information. In speaking for the populace, the Sabha felt “it to be its duty” that government provide fuller information on topics worrying the agricultural public. The government already published weekly data at the district level. The Sabha wanted more detailed information at the taluka level (data that the government was already receiving, but not publishing), so that the public could plan ahead, quell some of their fears, and forestall the kind of panic that prompted grain and fodder dealers to raise prices.<sup>25</sup> This kind of appeal was one to which government simply replied that the information it was already providing was sufficient for the present. By the 1890s, however, communications from the Sabha about famine were based not only on local information, but also on black letter law and official reports.

## V Famine Again

Famine returned in 1896. By that time the Sabha was better prepared to use tools that were not available twenty years earlier. The report of the Indian Famine Commission of 1880 proposed some major steps that the supreme government enacted into law and that applied to all levels of government. Each province had to promulgate a famine relief code establishing procedures and processes, unique to its territory, to meet emergency conditions that could result in famine. The Bombay presidency had its own code, approved by the Government of India.

A major issue in Bombay—the size of the ration for workers on large famine projects—had never been resolved during the Great Famine. The Temple ration—one pound per day—was still the guideline in the Bombay presidency and the Bombay Famine Relief Code still advocated it. For many workers this was a one-way ticket to slow death by starvation.<sup>26</sup>

The Bombay code detailed provisions for organizing large and small relief works and poor houses, for the classification of different categories of people needing relief, and for the regulation of wages and rations. It also specified conditions for suspension or remission of land revenue, and instructed officers of the medical, police, engineering and revenue departments about duties and required reports. However, the code was not perfect, and the Sabha urged changes to guide the Government’s ongoing code review that was taking place out of public view. The Sabha had “a few suggestions” about methods of relief and implementation of code provisions. The Sabha hoped that the government would avoid repeating the errors of relief activities during 1876-1877, and thereby to

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Letter 275, 23 July 1891, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Honorary Secretary PSS, to Secretary to Govt of Bombay, Revenue Department, “Proceedings of the Sabha,” *QJPSS* 14:4:6-7, July 1891.

<sup>26</sup> One scholar recently calculated that the one pound ration provided less nutrition than the daily ration at Buchenwald, the infamous Nazi concentration camp. See Mike Davis. *Late Victorian Holocausts*, London: Verso, p. 39.

avoid needless death and misery. The government's response to the Sabha's fifteen-page list of "requests" was succinct and politely negative. As we shall see, three issues that the Sabha identified—the need to disseminate better information to villages, special assistance for neglected groups, and revenue remissions and suspensions—would play a major role in future relations between the Sabha and the government.<sup>27</sup>

The Sabha identified saving people's lives as a major duty of the government. The Sabha repeated this frequently.<sup>28</sup> Thanks to the Famine Fund, the Sabha held government "specially bound" to help people. The Sabha also noted that the Bombay Famine Code required special relief to weavers by having them do work specific to their craft. This was the same for other presidencies, but Bombay convinced the Supreme Government to allow Bombay to provide such relief only if the Bombay government believed it was "necessary." (The Sabha opposed letting a local government set its own relief principles.) Similarly, the issue of suspension and remission of land revenue seemed in practice to depend on not harming the fiscal integrity of the local government. The Sabha argued<sup>29</sup> that the government would not suffer any financial loss other than the interest that suspended revenue might earn, for though suspensions of land revenue temporarily diminished the amount of land revenue on hand, it should be of little concern because the Famine Relief Fund was created for exactly such a purpose. Denying a cultivator this kind of relief would likely drive him to leave his village and join a relief project, where the government was obliged to pay him. That would hike the overall cost of losing the revenue.

## VI Denouement in Four Steps

### *Step One, the Tilak Plan—the Sabha Steps in*

Following its assessment of the Bombay Famine Code (there was no printed reply from government), beginning in late 1896, the Sabha's journal carried information about only two famine relief issues. The first was a proposal aimed at providing special relief for weavers, in what might be called the "Tilak Plan," for Bal Gangadhar Tilak—by then, a member of the Sabha's Managing Committee for some time—was a major proponent of the plan. The plan called for a commercial arrangement in which the government would be a major investor in a proposal for famine relief for the weavers of Sholapur. After changes to accommodate several difficulties that the government identified, the plan called for wealthy fabric merchants to buy yarn and other materials for weavers to produce inexpensive cloth for commercial sale after the famine ended. The government would pay Rs 2.5 lakhs for food. In the long term, government would save money, since the upkeep would cost less than long term support for weavers on large famine relief works. The cloth would go on sale after the famine ended and if there were a loss, the government would absorb the first ten percent. After that,

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<sup>27</sup> For this paragraph see J. Monteath, Acting Chief Secretary to Chairman and Secretaries, Poona Sarvajanik Sabha, *QJPSS* "Proceedings of the Sabha" 19:1&2 July & October 1896, paras 1-8.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, "Note on the General Policy of the Government in respect to scarcity prevailing in a part of the Bombay Presidency," 1877, in "Famine Administration," *QJPSS* 1:1 1878, p. 4; "Famine Narratives No III," *QJPSS* 1:1 1878, para 10.

<sup>29</sup> See *QJPSS*, "The Famine Codes," XIX:3&4:11-13 1897.

the next ten percent would be the responsibility of the merchants, and if the loss exceeded twenty percent, a single wealthy merchant would have to volunteer to cover the rest. The merchants would be responsible for managing the production and sale of the cloth, while the finances would come under the total control of the government. All of this would be the kind of special relief for weavers as mandated in the Bombay Famine Relief Code.<sup>30</sup>

Government was leery of the plan for four reasons. (1) There would have to be a large government investment that was subject to possible loss (reminiscent of the financial loss of the Bihar famine). (2) The government had neither the available personnel nor the technical and commercial skills needed to make the plan succeed. (3) Bookkeeping and trading in garments were complex. (4) Recruiting qualified people to manage the plan, to examine the raw ingredients and garments produced, and to carefully store those garments until they could be sold—all were beyond government capabilities.

The government's final reply came in five days and was no surprise. The decision makers in government were of the governing class responsible for steering the lives of the people; they were not merchants anxious to score a profit by hawking inexpensive cotton garments. The official refusal came on 4 January 1897, in a note containing a single sentence, polite but final. "I am directed to inform you that Government are unable to modify the conclusion already arrived at in this matter."<sup>31</sup>

### *Step Two – Asking Government to Help the Sabha*

The next incidents potentially brought the Sabha into direct government-like action and were almost contemporary with the discussion of the Tilak Plan. In late November 1896, the Sabha printed a brief pamphlet in Marathi summarizing provisions of the Bombay Famine Relief Code, along with some government decisions and descriptions of issues regarding famine relief. The Sabha had already distributed some 6,000 copies in the famine-affected districts of the Deccan, and now solicited government help in distributing the rest of the pamphlets. According to the Sabha, the aim of the pamphlets was to inform people in those areas of what the government was doing to help them. The Sabha requested government permission for district officials to assist in distributing the pamphlets without any requirement for them to attest to the accuracy of content of the documents. The Sabha asked only for help in distributing the material. The Sabha also wished the government to provide copies of all government resolutions on famine matters, except for confidential documents. The Sabha claimed that this would improve government efforts in the battle against famine.<sup>32</sup> Again, the reply was polite, succinct, and negative: "Government are unable to take any part in the distribution of a private pamphlet...and any orders regarding famine which Government desire to publish in full..." [government itself will decide what to make public].<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Letter No. 2307, Sarvajanic Sabha to Secretary to Government, Bombay, Revenue Department (Famine) 17 November 1896, *QJPSS* "Proceedings of the Sabha. Memorials. Famine—1. Special Relief to Weaves" 19:3&4:23-26 1897, Signed by V. R. Patwardhan, Chairman of the Sabha and K. B. Mande, Assistant Secretary.

<sup>31</sup> J. Monteath, Acting Chief Secretary to Government, No. 8 Famine of 1897, Revenue Department (Famine), 4 January 1897, *QJPSS* 19:3&4:37 January & April 1897.

<sup>32</sup> Letter, K. B. Mande, Assistant Secretary Sarvajanic Sabha, Poona, to Secretary to Government of Bombay, Revenue Department (Famine), 15 November 1896, *QJPSS* 19:3&4:37-38 1897.

<sup>33</sup> Monteath to Sabha, No 9759 of 1896, *QJPSS* 19:3&4:39.

### *Step Three, Land Revenue Issues—Invading the Sanctum Sanctorum*

In late 1896, an exchange began between the Sabha and the Bombay government, regarding suspension and remission of land revenue. The official reply to its memorial of 8 November 1896, elicited a note that the Sabha's input would receive full attention "at the proper time." Two months later, the Sabha sent a note to the government suggesting that action on this issue was afoot within government circles without the Sabha's knowledge. "The Sabha now learns that Government has approved certain instructions issued by the Collector of Poona to his assistants...and that the same course is directed to be followed in other Districts."<sup>34</sup> It seemed to government that the Sabha had obtained a copy of the government order and described its contents in detail. (1) A distinction will be made between agriculturist and non-agriculturist land owners. (2) All non-agriculturist land owners should pay the full revenue demand, whether they were rich or poor and without regard to the quality of the harvest. (3) For agriculturists who occupied the land, officials should grant suspensions only for those who (a) were not only "well-to-do" but *also* (b) had lost at least 75% of their crop.

The Sabha found fault with this because the Poona Collector's orders failed instruct about suspensions or remissions in cases of crop failure between 25% and 50%, nor did it lay down rules for land owners who took rent from sub-tenants. This violated the principles announced during the Great Famine, the recommendations of the Famine Commission, and Clause 2, Section 140 of the Bombay Famine Code. While the Sabha recognized the principle that grants of remission or suspension should not result in unnecessary loss of revenue, the Sabha insisted that rules protecting the government must equally protect the ryot. Since these issues had been settled between the Bombay government and the Government of India during the Great Famine, the validity of the Poona Collector's directive merited scrutiny. Also, the Sabha urged that the rules recommended by the Government of India, then by the Famine Commission should be the ones used.<sup>35</sup>

The government's reply to this letter was very different from previous replies to the Sabha. In a single sentence it declared, "Gentlemen, – I am directed to inform you that before replying to your letter...Government would be glad to know from whom the Sarvajanic Sabha obtained information of the instructions issued by the Collector of Poona to his assistants regarding the collection of the land revenue, of the approval of them by Government, and the direction that the same course should be followed in other districts."<sup>36</sup>

The government's reply smacked of an accusation of criminal activity. In any case, the Sabha was not anxious to reveal its sources and pointed out that the government itself had leaked the information in a number of ways and places. Its reply to Monteath's letter reminded the government that the collectors of Poona, Thana, Kolaba and other districts had informed taluka and village officers of the proposal and that those officials in turn had explained the contents to *hundreds* of agriculturists in those districts. Others who had already applied for suspension or remission were also informed orally or in writing and a summary of the official Government Resolution was published in many

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<sup>34</sup> V. R. Patvardhan, Chairman, Sarvajanic Sabha, to Secretary to the Government of Bombay, No 160 of 1897, 25 January 1897, *QJPSS* 19:3&4:45-46.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51.

<sup>36</sup> Monteath to Chairman and Honorary Secretaries, Sarvajanic Sabha, Revenue Department (Famine), No 355 (Famine) of 1897, in "Proceedings of the Sabha" *QJPSS* XIX:3&4:55 January & April 1897.

newspapers. So the information had been published in a variety of ways and places “and there is no reason to doubt the accuracy of the information so published. But if the information be not accurate...the Sabha would be glad to know what the real orders on the subject are.”<sup>37</sup> The Sabha’s letter ended with almost six printed pages of added commentary, facts, and arguments submitted for government consideration. In a sense the Sabha had not only bested the government on its own grounds, it had also figuratively rubbed the government’s nose in its blatant mistake. This would have ended Step Three, but there was one more, deeper Sabha plunge into suspensions and remissions of land revenue.

*Step Four: the Hammer Drops: पूर्णं सर्वजनिक सभेची हकालपट्टी*<sup>38</sup>

Government could not have been pleased with the Sabha’s obtaining information that, when published, was embarrassing. The result was letter No. 432 (Fam), Revenue Department, 8 February 1897, carrying a government resolution that contained a letter from the collector of Poona (No. 6, of 29 January 1897) denying responsibility for the leak and accusing that “the Sabha cannot have got a copy of the [communication about revision and suspension] in any authorized manner.”<sup>39</sup> There was also a resolution ordering Monteath to inform the Sabha that publication of the Poona collector’s correspondence was not authorized, and any summary of such published in a newspaper could only have happened because rules regarding the conduct of public servants had been violated. Moreover, collectors were aware that untimely levy of the assessment should cause no distress, but any person who can pay what is due from him “will be exceedingly ill-advised if...he withholds payment.”<sup>40</sup>

This formal warning came in response to a pamphlet circulated in Dharwar district by Anantrao Joshi Eksambekar, an agent sent into the field by the Sabha to glean information about local circumstances. In its reaction to this (and to other recent Sabha activities) the government put in motion a set of conditions to determine the future fate of the Poona Sarvajanic Sabha. First, an official letter<sup>41</sup> about Eksambekar demanded that the Sabha state for the record if Eksambekar was a Sabha agent, if the Sabha accepted responsibility for statements he made in the Sabha’s name and if the Sabha accepted liability for the statements in his pamphlet. There followed an official English translation of the handbill. Then, after a pause, another letter from Monteath to the Sabha, “I am directed to inform you that unless a reply to my letter No. 281 dated 2<sup>nd</sup> ultimo is received within a week from this date government will then proceed to dispose of this matter.”<sup>42</sup>

The Sabha replied stating that the Managing Committee had deputed Eksambekar to collect information about conditions in Bijapur and Dharwar and insisted that the notices mentioned in letter 281 were only to advertise meetings he would hold to explain the Famine Code to the people

<sup>37</sup> Honorary Secretaries, Sarvajanic Sabha, to Monteath, No. 165 of 1897, 3 February 1897, *QJPSSXIX:3&4:55*.

<sup>38</sup> The English “Poona Sarvajanic Sabha you no longer belong here” comes close to this Marathi expression.

<sup>39</sup> Telegram, Collector of Poona to Government of Bombay, No 6, 2 February 1897, in “Proceedings of the Sabha” *QJPSSXIX:3&4:62* 1897.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>41</sup> Monteath to Chairman and Secretaries, Sarvajanic Sabha, No 381 Fam. Of 1897, 2 February 1897, “Proceedings of the Sabha,” *QJPSSXIX:3&4:62* 1897.

<sup>42</sup> Monteath to Sabha, No. 737 of 1897, Revenue Department (Famine), 5 March 1897, “Proceedings of the Sabha” *QJPSSXIX:3&4:65*, 1897.

and to hear their grievances. The Sabha admitted that it had not approved the handbills before Eksambekar distributed them and therefore could not “vouch” for the accuracy of every word. Yet the Sabha failed to find anything in the handbills that materially violated the Sabha’s instructions to him, nor were the contents objectionable. The Sabha also stated that the government translation of the handbills was faulty. As for the suspicion around statements about remissions and suspensions being ordered only when the crops were 25% and 50%, the Sabha had asked Eksambekar to name the source of this information. His reply was that the statement was based on a report “current at the time among the people of the place.” In addition, the “unusual delay” in publishing the official government orders on suspensions and remissions had very likely sparked even more rumours. In conclusion, the Sabha wrote, “there was no reason...to attach any significance to the contents of the hand-bills.”<sup>43</sup>

The government’s “retrograde” (the Sabha’s term) attitude reflected a growing hard line approach by the Bombay government to Sabha activities in the field: “abuse and threats have been used; its agents were watched; officers were prohibited to give any information; its instigation is assumed wherever official high-handedness meets with popular opposition; and last though not the least, even the aid of the Police and the Criminal Courts was sought to crush the efforts of the Sabha.” The journal cited two cases of failed prosecutions of Sabha agents in Kolaba. In each instance the police and local judicial authorities cooperated to bring Sabha personnel to trial, but in both cases, competent jurists threw the cases out of court.<sup>44</sup>

## VII The End?

Eight days later another letter from Monteath delivered a copy of Government Resolution, No. 875-Fam. Revenue Department (Famine), 17 March 1897.<sup>45</sup> The final sentence of the resolution declared, “The Poona Sarvajanic Sabha...must therefore cease to be recognized as a body which has any claim to address Government on questions of public policy.”<sup>46</sup>

What had the Sabha done to deserve banishment? What norm did it violate? While it was possible that the government finally got fed up with the Sabha’s criticism, there may also have been a deeper answer. To this outside observer over a century later, by seeking to take an active part in decisions about land revenue matters, the Sabha had perhaps trespassed into the *sanctum sanctorum*, the exclusive preserve of the ruling aristocracy. That would have been intolerable.

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<sup>43</sup> For quotes in this paragraph, see V. K. Patvardhan, Chairman, Sarvajanic Sabha, to Monteath, No 435 of 1897, 9 March 1897, “Proceedings of the Sabha,” *QJPSSXIX:3&4:65-67* 1897.

<sup>44</sup> See “The Quarter,” *QJPSSXIX:3&4:15-16* 1897 for this paragraph including the quotation.

<sup>45</sup> The full resolution is in “Proceedings of the Sabha,” *QJPSSXIX:3&4:66-70* 1897.

<sup>46</sup> Government Resolution No 875—Fam., 17 March 1897, see “Proceedings of the Sabha,” *QJPSSXIX:3&4:67-70* 1897.

## VIII Aftermath

Why was Resolution 875 supposed to kill the Sabha? Did it? The Sabha's *Quarterly Journal* disappeared, or did it? In April 1916, a full nineteen years after it was supposed to have died, the journal reappeared and continued to appear. Now it was closely attached to the Indian independence movement, with Bal Gangadhar Tilak listed first among the Chairmen of the Sabha. This issue was identified on the masthead as "Old Series Vol. XX, No. 1" and as "New Series, Vol. 1, No. 1" which bespoke a continuity of purpose, if not of chronology. Indeed, there was an optimistic spirit about the re-emergence. "The Quarterly Journal was always meant...to be a periodical record of the kind of public work and activity to which the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha had pledged itself....studies of public questions will,...be as salient a feature of the revived Journal as it was in the past years."<sup>47</sup> Interestingly, these sentiments mirrored the Sabha's comments commemorating the journal's birth, twenty years earlier.<sup>48</sup> Also, in 1916, the link to government was not the only, nor even the main purpose of the Sabha. It also brought government policies and acts to the people. That did not stop after 1897. Moreover, the Sabha played an important provincial role in preparations for the annual session of the Indian National Congress, even as it commented on issues of national importance.

In fact, the Pune Sarvajanik Sabha has survived at least 69 years after the end of British rule in India. In 2016, the Marathi newspaper, लोकसत्ता (Loksatta) published an article,<sup>49</sup> congratulating Srimati Miratai Pavgi for becoming the first woman to be elected as the President of the Pune Sarvajanik Sabha. That is hardly an act of a defunct organization.

## IX Conclusion

Identifying the roots of change is an important task for social scientists. In the case of the government's responses to the terrible famines in the Bombay presidency and the Sabha's reactions, a great deal of "credit" belongs to the leaders of the Sabha. With literally millions of people losing their life and suffering untold misery, and the government's puny actions to alleviate the distress, it is easy to understand that Sabha leaders suffered shock because of the carnage. While the group's interactions with government in the early stages of the Great Famine reflected rather docile, very loyal sentiments regarding government's famine policies as something the Indian subjects should be thankful for, as time passed and the government's efforts or lack of efforts failed to prevent widespread misery and death. A new wave of leadership entered the Sabha. The departure of Gopal Krishna Gokhale as Secretary and the entry of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, first in the managing committee and eventually as the first-listed vice president, reflected a growing element of far less moderate orientation both in Pune intellectual circles and in the Sabha itself. Where did this change come from? One might look, for instance, to Ireland of those days for an example. However, this observer, more than a century after the events, gives overwhelming credence to the notion that the change was home-grown, not

<sup>47</sup> "Ourselves," *QJPSS* New Series 1:1:1-2 1916.

<sup>48</sup> "The Quarter," *QJPSS* XIX:1&2: 1-3.

<sup>49</sup> Also on the Internet: Loksatta, 29 March 2016. <https://www.loksatta.com/pune-news/meera-pavagi-elected-as-president-of-pune-sarvajanik-sabha-1220339>.

imported. The trauma of widespread misery and death, and the failure of government to help when help was so badly needed, may have easily helped foster such a transformation among intellectuals deeply disappointed by lack of government accountability. They were men of principle, prepared to distinguish right from wrong, and to do something about it.

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