

GRAIN CONSUMPTION AND FAMINE CONDITIONS IN LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY CEYLON

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"One thousand and forty eight villagers.....died of starvation about within the sight of the sanatorium where our governors and high officials resort for health and lawn tennis. This is only one instance. There are others equally awful spread over the interior of the Island and it will be seen that all this has been going on for years and years"¹

If the startling disclosures on the subject of Ceylon which appeared in the *Manchester Guardian* in 1889, failed to arouse public opinion, it was possibly because the British were only too familiar with descriptions of famines which occurred with embarrassing frequency in India. At the end of the nineteenth century, and certainly by 1906, further evidence of economic distress and starvation in parts of the Central Province in Ceylon attracted no small attention; in India, what with Famine Commissions, Famine Codes and even a Famine Insurance Fund, famine administration had become part and parcel of regular government.

Above all the subject of Indian famines had provided grist to the mill of Indian nationalist critics of British rule in India. William Digby, a prolific propagandist whose mission was to educate his countrymen that Indians should be allowed to rule themselves, Dadabhai Naoroji, who contended that the poverty of India was simply a reflex of British rule, and above all, Romesh Chander Dutt, pioneered the thesis that famines in India were the result of the exploitive economic policies of the British rather than the proverbial unreasonableness of the climate, the growth of population, or the improvidence and folly of the Indian peasant. Dutt in particular, who may be regarded as the Father of the Nationalist school of Indian economic historians, wrote the pioneering work *The Economic History of India* with the avowed purpose of expounding the causes of what he called "this intense poverty and repeated famines" of India.²

One is of course made aware that in relation to the intimidating background of Indian famines it would be extravagant to refer to 'famines' in Ceylon much less to attempt comparisons. The very magnitude of the Indian problem discourages comparison although in terms of objective credibility it would not be possible to

1. Reproduced in *Sessional Paper* no. XXIX of 1889.

2. Dutt's economic history of India appeared in two parts. The first was *The Economic History of India under Early British Rule*. (1901), and *the Economic History of India in the Victorian Age*. (1903). Earlier Dutt who had been among the first Indians to enter the I.C.S., was also the author of the famous "Open Letters" to Lord Curzon.

entirely agree with Digby who wrote in 1885 that, under British rule, forty million Indians were year in and year out in a state of chronic starvation, or with Dutt who declared that as a result of five major famines, which had occurred between 1887 and 1900, "a population equal to half of that of England had perished in India within a period which men and women still in middle age can remember"³.

Nevertheless in documents concerning the last quarter of the nineteenth century in Ceylon, especially in the reports of the provincial agents of government, there are startling references to famines, conditions of near famine, chronic rural poverty, destitution and above all to starvation.

Was it possible that an element of sensationalism had crept into the ordinarily staid and carefully documented reports of the provincial agents? Or that some agents of government, like the controversial C. J. R. Le Mesurier who were opposed to the Grain Tax in the belief that it was a crippling impost, were exaggerating the economic hardships of the Sinhalese peasants? Or was it simply that the agents of government were factually describing a condition of things which at any rate in parts of Ceylon had become a part of the order of the day during the last decades of the nineteenth century?

II

However, it may be contended that the testimony of the provincial agents would not necessarily be conclusive. If so how may we determine the question whether the food resources of the people were adequate or whether they were in a state of virtual starvation?

In contemporary documents the food resources of the island are classified as having been derived from paddy cultivation, *chena* cultivation, garden products—a variety of sundry products like jak, and breadfruit, which were usually grown around the homes of peasants—and finally the food imported to Ceylon for consumption.

For purposes of this article however food consumption is taken in a more limited and manageable sense to mean principally the consumption of grain. Neither the consumption of fish which was by and large confined to the coastal areas, nor that of beef was universal. Grains of one sort or another were unquestionably everywhere the staple food of the people, and afford a uniform and obviously convenient basis for comparisons. For the same reason one may exclude from consideration the so-called garden products although it is possible that these items were, more than either fish or meat, an important factor in daily diets.

Next, with regard specifically to the question of the *per capita* consumption of grain—the logical direction of our investigations—the evidence presents formidable difficulties. On the one hand there are the *Blue Books* of the period which certainly give details regarding the various crops grown in different parts of the island, the extent of land involved in their production, details of annual yields and population

3. Digby, William. *Indian for the Indians—and for England*, (London, 1885).
Dutt, Romesh Chunder. *The Economic History of India*. Volume I. see Preface.

figures. Ordinarily the *Blue Books* should have been—as they were clearly intended to be—a reasonably reliable source of the agricultural statistics of the period. However the provincial agents who were theoretically responsible for the basic material which went with the *Blue Books*, were themselves frankly sceptical about the accuracy of the published statistics. Doubts, which were expressed from time to time, came to a climax in 1877 when the Government has compelled to exclude the usual agricultural statistics from the *Blue Book* published in that year. It was freely acknowledged that the agricultural statistics were “defective” and that steps would be taken to ensure the “greater accuracy of future returns”.

Independently of the *Blue Books* one may find in the annual reports of the provincial agents, details with regard to the extent of land under paddy cultivation and probable yields, derived in the first instance from the reports of the headmen of the district, and subsequently from the Grain Tax registers. But the difficulty was that the Grain Tax registers were themselves not comprehensive. Invariably in a given district there were fields which were exempted from the payment of the Grain Tax, as well as areas in which the payment of the Grain Tax had been commuted. So that, in general, the total extent of land sown with paddy was presumably a good deal more than what the Grain Tax registers had recorded. Moreover matters were made manifestly more difficult for purposes of calculation, when, in 1892 the Grain Tax was done away with altogether. Reporting on the Southern Province in 1894, R. W. Ievers complained that although the Grain Tax registers were an “inefficient check” on the headmen’s returns, he could not henceforth vouch for the relative accuracy of agricultural statistics.⁴ More trenchantly Herbert Walce, the Government Agent of the Sabaragamuva Province referred to “the helpless condition of our agricultural statistics” adding that on account of the abolition of the Grain Tax the various kachcheries simply had “no means whatever in future of annually assessing the land sown with paddy”.⁵

However either in relation to the Grain Tax registers or otherwise, once an estimate was made of the extent of land sown with paddy, it was possible to calculate the possible yield of paddy available for consumption in a given year. Generally in most paddy growing areas two crops were obtained for the year. Particular yield however varied. The documents refer to areas in which a yield of fivefold was normally obtained, to other areas of ninefold yields, and even to areas in which a yield of fifteenfold was not unusual. Allowances were also made for extraneous factors like the lack of rain, floods, and droughts, which appreciably affected ultimate yields.

But at best the assessments were necessarily hypothetical. For example H. P. Baumgartner estimated that the extent of land that had been cultivated in the Matara District in 1889 to be 43,460 acres. “Taking into account the extent cultivated for two harvests during the year,” he reasoned, “the probable yield may be computed twelvefold or 1,043,040 bushels of paddy or half that quantity of rice.” Baumgartner added that the figures were based “on estimates framed by the Mudaliyars, tested

4. *Report on the Southern Province. Administration. Report*, 1894 p.E.2.

5. *Report on the Sabaragamuva Province. A.R.* 1891. p.J.2.

by comparison with the grain registers . . . ”⁶ Similarly R. W. Moir estimated the probable yield of paddy in the Kandy District in 1888 taking as his starting point the Grain Tax registers which gave the extent of paddy land in the district as 17,984 amunums. “Taking five bushels to the amunum” he reckoned

“this gives a total extent of 89,920 bushels which at fifteenfold—by no means too high an average in this District, where two crops a year are the rule—gives a total of 1,348,800 bushels of paddy or (say) 675,000 bushels of rice”.⁷

However in spite of acknowledged imperfections, there was certainly a rudimentary basis for estimating the *per capita* consumption of rice in different parts of Ceylon. Population figures too were readily available and were comparatively more reliable because from 1871 ten year censuses were regularly taken. For the intervening years approximate estimates of population growth were worked out in the different kachcheris.

Thus in Table A, which has been worked out on details in the annual reports of the provincial agents of government, we have the *per capita* consumption of rice in selected districts of the Island for the period 1887-1895. Care has also been taken to exclude the “bad years”—years in which on account of extraneous factors like severe weather complications, there were sharp differences in average output levels. It may be added that collateral evidence suggests that rice production for the period 1870-1900 did not materially differ from the levels indicated in the table presumably on account of the sameness of inhibiting factors like poor technology and the lack of adequate irrigation facilities.

TABLE A

Year	District or Province	Population as given in Agents report	Estimated Gross yield of Rice in bushels	Per Capita consumption of Rice in bushels
1887	Southern Province	450,000	940,000	2.1
1887	Kägalla	103,000	225,075	2.1
1888	Valapané	8,400	35,000	4.2
1888	Kandy	150,000	675,000	4.5
1889	Kotmale	11,000	40,250	3.7
1889	Uda Hevahäta	15,000	60,000	4.0
1890	Nuvarakalāviya	70,000	201,530	2.9
1892	Vavuniya	8,159	26,389	3.2
1894	Kägalla	130,000	209,402	1.6
1895	North Western Province	167,000	496,825	2.9

It is however possible that the amount of rice consumed was even less than the levels indicated in the above table. To begin with allowance must be made for the seed paddy which the cultivator customarily put aside and which has been estimated at a tenth of the gross paddy yield. Secondly a percentage of the crop was necessarily used for purposes of paying various taxes, notably two—the Grain Tax and the Road Ordinance commutation tax. The anxiety to do so was in fact greater in those

6. *Report on the Matara District. A.R.1890, p.E.12.*

7. *Report on the Kandy District. A.R.1888, p.73A.*

areas which were intrinsically poor in paddy production, and where correspondingly the fears of government penalties in default of payment, were greater. For example in parts of the Nuvara Eliya district like Valapanè and Uda Hevahāta, where conditions were in fact adverse for paddy cultivation—poor irrigation facilities and frequent failures of rainfall—the peasants customarily sold their paddy immediately after a harvest, although it was not the best time of the year to do so, to raise money for taxes.⁸ Thirdly it was also the custom of peasants to leave a certain portion of the paddy for sale or barter not because there was a disposable surplus of grain, but because grain was the means—often the sole means—of obtaining certain other commodities. The practice was particularly common in the Lower Divisions in the Ūva Province where it was said there was “more poverty and disease than in any other part of Ceylon.”⁹ Local produce was invariably bartered for fish, salt, textiles and tobacco to the itinerant *tavalam* dealers who were the sole means of economic contact with the outside world¹⁰

In the district of Nuvarakalāviya too which lay directly in the path of the traditional trade route from Jaffna to Mātalē, rice was either bartered for essentials like salt, fish, textiles and coconuts, or was sold outright. The peasants used the money to buy small pieces of crown lands near the irrigation tanks. R. W. Ievers, who had a considerable knowledge of the area, reported that in 1887 alone as much a thousand acres of crown land had been purchased in small lots by the peasants who although they produced both paddy and kurakkan preferred as a rule to eat the latter. Consequently although the Nuvarakalāviya district was not by contemporary standards a prolific paddy producing area, a considerable proportion of the rice produced was not used for purposes of consumption.¹¹

In other words comparatively poor rice yields together with subsequent reductions—for whatever reason—in the gross rice available for consumption would suggest that in at least those districts which have been specified in the above table, the amount of rice actually consumed in a given year was probably inadequate. More specific evidence on this point is admittedly scanty. There are a few abbreviated statements in the reports of the provincial agents of government, made very much *en passant*, which give some indication of a norm of adequacy. It was for example maintained that 6 bushels of rice per head was about the quantity of rice required annually for an adult, or that 4½ bushels of rice per head was “the average throughout Ceylon.”¹²

More useful comparisons have been made with certain specific contemporary classes or groups. For example unconvicted persons in gaols in Ceylon during this period evidently consumed between 6½ to 8 bushels of rice per head annually. Le Mesurier, a controversial Assistant Government Agent who was more sensitive to the economic difficulties of Sinhalese peasants than many of his contemporaries

8. *Report on the Nuvara Eliya District. A.R.1883, p.39A.*

9. *Report on the Ūva Province. A.R.1888, p.223A.*

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Report on the North Central Province. A.R.1887, p.197A.*

12. *Report on the Vavuniya District. A.R.1892. p.D.22.*

Report on the Kāgallā District. A.R.1895, p.J.8.

quoted the Medical Officer of Health in the Nuvara Eliya district who had observed that much of the sickness of prisoners which occurred when they were first admitted to a jail was due to the "change from their meagre village meals to the generous diet of the prisoner".¹³ Aelian King a contemporary of Le Mesurier, who in his own right had acquired considerable insight into the food problems of the Sinhalese peasant, contrasted the 6.43 bushels which he claimed a prisoner annually received, with 3.3 bushels which was the amount of rice available for consumption for a person living in the North Western Province in 1895.¹⁴

Prison reports show that neither Le Mesurier nor Aelian King had really exaggerated. Interestingly William Digby, who was of course familiar with developments in Ceylon, compared the food which an able bodied labourer received on relief works—when famine occurred in the Cuddapah and Bellary districts in the Madras Presidency in 1877—and the food which was given to convicted prisoners in Ceylon. What the Indian labourer received amounted to only 16 ounces of rice and a cash allowance of 1½ pence a day. On the other hand the Ceylonese prisoner was given 20 ounces of rice, 4 ounces of bread, 5 ounces of meat or fish, 4 ounces of vegetables and about 7½ ounces of sundry currustuffs.¹⁵

Above all in contemporary documents there are references to the Indian immigrant labourers working on estates in Ceylon and the Sinhalese peasants. Many agents of government believed—Le Mesurier's views on the subject were tinged with great bitterness—that in the matter of food consumption at any rate the lot of the average Indian immigrant labourer was certainly better than that of the Sinhalese peasant. In reporting on the poor food resources in the Ūva Province, F. C. Fisher observed that the immigrant coolies are well fed, well housed and have their medical wants well attended to. The physical condition of the Tamils is in consequence very superior to that of the natives of the soil, and they have practically nothing to complain of." The fact was that the Indian immigrant was well supplied with imported rice—a factor which induced him to come over to Ceylon in the first instance. Evidently it was the practice of individual estates to obtain imported rice in bulk thereby not only guaranteeing regular supplies but also retailing the rice to the immigrant labourer at a price which was cheaper than the ordinary bazaar price of a measure of rice. Indeed although there were differences from one district to another it was widely believed that an immigrant labourer was able to consume anything between 6½ to 9½ bushels of rice per annum—well above what the Sinhalese had, and possibly more than what the immigrant labourer himself required. Not surprisingly these are references to Indian immigrant labourers selling excess rice in nearby bazaars for other commodities like coconuts, dried fish and sundry currustuffs.¹⁶

13. *Report on the Nuvara Eliya District. A.R.1889, p.C.26.*

14. *Report on the North Western Province. A.R.1895. p.G.2.*

15. Digby, *op. cit.*

16. *Report on the Ūva Province. A.R.1887. p.212A.*

Report on the Kāgalla District. A.R.1887. p.46A.

Report on the Nuvara Eliya District. A.R.1889. p.C.25.

Report on the Badulla District. A.R.1884. p.57A.

Apart from a *de facto* norm a few provincial agents of government like Aelian King believed that ideally an adult Sinhalese villager required at least $2\frac{3}{4}$ bushels of rice per month. "Few natives will admit" added Aelian King "that it is possible for an adult to keep up his strength on less."¹⁷ Assuming as Aelian King did that an average family was composed of $4\frac{1}{2}$ units, it follows therefore that ideally a family would have required about 40.5 bushels per year.

It becomes clear however that this figure was well above the levels of *per capita* consumption of rice in several parts of the island.

III

However apart from rice, there were the grains grown in *chenas* like kurakkan, mun and meneri.

In general the consumption of these grains was more evident in areas where conditions—primarily the lack of adequate irrigation facilities—did not altogether suit the cultivation of paddy. In these areas clearly the *chena* grains were almost a substitute for rice. For example in certain divisions in the Mātālē district where there were people "who" we are told "never ate any rice at all", in the Vanni, Devamedī, and Katugampōla divisions of the North Western Province, in the Kandaboda, Wellaboda, and Hindum divisions in the Southern Province, in Bin'anna, and above all in the Lower Divisions of the Badulla district, especially in Vellasse, extensive *chena* cultivation was the order of the day. Particularly in parts of the Badulla district droughts were of such frequent occurrence that sometimes not a single crop of paddy could be sown for six or even nine years.¹⁸

Although the policy of the government was to discourage *chena* cultivation, in these areas at any rate individual Government Agents felt that but for *chenas* the people would have to starve. Indeed referring to parts of the Sabaragamva district F. R. Saunders observed that it would have been "positively cruel" to forbid the peasants from cultivating *chenas*.¹⁹ Lionel Lee reported that in the Kāgalle district the prohibition of *chena* cultivation was likely to lead to "dire distress" especially in the Three Korales "where paddy fields were few and not productive". In a more positive sense Lee thought that peasants should be encouraged to grow new grains on *chenas* like Indian corn over and above the traditional *el vi*, kurakkan and amu so that they would be able to supplement limited food resources.²⁰ Meanwhile P. W. Braybrooke, who was the Government Agent in the Central Province, in referring specifically to the Lower Divisions of the Ūva District remarked in 1867 that it was better to permit the cultivation of *chenas* on crown lands under licence than that the peasants should be driven to infringe the law or starve.²¹ More aptly the general view of the provincial agents of government was summed up by Thomas

17. *Report on the North Western Province. A.R.1895. p.G.2.*

18. *Report on the Badulla District. A.R.1867. p.31.*

19. *Report on the Sabaragamva District. A.R.1868. p.18.*

20. *Report on the Kāgalla District. A.R.1869. p.32.*

Report on the Kāgalla District. A.R.1871. p.29 ff.

21. *Report on the Central Province. A.R.1867. p.25.*

Steel who in referring to certain areas in the Hambantota district observed that after all *chena* cultivation ensured "an abundance of food—not of the best quality, but vastly better than none at all".²²

But other than in what may be described as the traditional enclaves of *chena* cultivation to what extent were *chena* grains grown elsewhere in Ceylon? It would be rather difficult to arrive at estimates of both the acreage as well as the yields of *chena* products. Basically *chena* cultivation was resorted to illicitly on encroachment of crown lands a practice which the provincial agents were determined to stamp out. Moreover a considerable amount of *chena* cultivation took place on private lands. Because *chena* cultivation on these lands was not subject to tax the possibilities of assessing *chena* acreages in any given area were further reduced. It was only in areas where *chenas* were permitted on crown lands as a humanitarian concession on a system of licences—generally at 1 shilling per acre—was there a reasonable basis for arriving at acreage estimates.

Notwithstanding these problems the *Blue Books* of the period give details of *chena* cultivation in different parts of the Island in terms both of acreage and yields. It is evident that there was (see Figure I) hardly a province in Ceylon in which *chena* cultivation did not take place. This fact alone would suggest that the consumption of *chena* grains was widespread.

Contemporary opinion on the question was however significantly divided. There were government officials who believed that no Sinhalese peasant would resort to *chenas* if he had the option of cultivating paddy, and presumably that no Sinhalese would consume *chena* grains like kurakkan if he had enough rice.²³ There was besides a recurring belief that kurakkan was not as wholesome as paddy and that its continued consumption was injurious to health.²⁴ It was said that certain diseases were demonstrably endemic in areas of heavy kurakkan eating. The weight of evidence however suggests that this view was substantially confined to Europeans—especially the provincial agents of government—and was not shared by the Sinhalese peasant who on the contrary believed that kurakkan was in no way inferior to rice. Aelian King observed that there was widespread belief in the Vanni district that two measures of kurakkan were the equal of three measures of rice "in sustaining power".²⁵ Lionel Lee too remarked that although kurakkan was in his personal opinion "anything but nutritious" he had noted that those who habitually ate kurakkan as the principal item in their diet could "do a very good days work upon it alone," in spite of the fact that meat too was a negligible element in their food.²⁶ Indeed not a few provincial agents believed that both the cultivation and consumption of kurakkan and other *chena* products were more widespread than was generally conceded in official circles

22. *Report on the Hambantota District. A.R.1868. p.209.*

23. *Report on the Southern Province. A.R.1869. p.61.*

24. *Report on the Western Province. A.R.1885. p.135A.*

25. *Report on the North Western Province. A.R.1895. p.G.2.*

26. *Report on the Kāgalle District. A.R.1869. p.32.*

Significantly in spite of their censorious attitudes to *chena* cultivation, the provincial agents were as a rule quick to see the importance of *chena* products in bolstering over-all food resources especially in circumstances in which the *per capita* rice consumption levels were admittedly low. But was this in fact so? If the *Blue Book* figures, on which Figure I has been based, are any indication, it is evident that at least in the Western Province and in the Central Province there was a striking disparity between the amount of paddy produced on the one hand and the *chena* products on the other hand. Generally in both provinces the *chena* grains amounted to only about a fourteenth of the paddy produced. Consequently at best the *chena* grains could have only marginally increased over-all per capita grain consumption levels.

Apart from *Blue Book* sources an examination of the reports of the provincial agents shows much the same thing. For example it would appear that in 1889 in the Kotmale division over-all grain consumption levels rose to 3 5/6 bushels, in the Uda Hevahāta division to 4 2/5 bushels and to 5 2/3 bushels in Valapané—in general averaging an increase of about a bushel of grain only—even after kurakkan and other grains had been added on to the rice.²⁷ Similarly in the Hambantota district in 1885 there were 56,164 bushels of rice for a population of approximately 60,892 giving each person less than a bushel of rice. The addition of 58,373 bushels of *chena* grain produced in that year merely raised the over-all per capita grain consumption level to about 1 3/4 bushels. In 1888 in the North Western Province too which included traditionally grain producing areas like the Devamādi, Katugampola and Hiriyāla divisions, there were 742,613 bushels of rice for a population of 216,918 persons giving a per capita rice consumption level of 3 1/2 bushels. 198,759 bushels of *chena* grain implied a marginal increase in the level of grain consumption to 4 1/2 bushels per person. One may add that the details concerning the Southern and North Western provinces are particularly noteworthy because according to Figure 1 in both provinces the gap between paddy and *chena* production was not so great and one would have assumed that in the circumstances the *chena* grains would have played a major role in prevailing food consumption patterns.

IV

Given these circumstances the importation of rice from abroad, mainly from India, was inevitable. It was evident that as late as 1890 after virtually three decades of a policy of developing irrigation facilities as well as the efforts that had been made from time to time to improve the traditional technology involved in paddy cultivation, there was hardly a district in Ceylon much less a province that was spared the necessity.

It was found that in the North Western Province generally a fourth of the rice consumed had to be imported from India. In the district of Kurunāgala in particular, it was estimated that a third of the rice consumed in the divisions of Weudavili, Dambadeniya and Katugampola was imported, whilst in the Dewamādi division a fourth of the rice,

²⁷ Report on the Nuvara Eliya District. A.R.1889. p.C.26.

and in the Vanni and Hiriyāla divisions a tenth of the rice was regularly imported. In the neighbouring district of Chilaw as much as half the rice consumed was imported. Finally it was said of the Puttalam district that imported rice was used "almost exclusively".²⁸

The dependence on imported rice was comparatively greater in the Western Province. Although a considerable quantity of paddy was produced, possibly much more than in any other single province in Ceylon, neither this paddy nor the paddy that found its way to the district of Colombo from other districts, was sufficient to meet the demands of what was in fact the most thickly populated province in the island. The gap between rice locally produced and consumption needs was most evident in the district of Colombo where by the end of the 1880's about 200,000 bushels of rice were being annually produced for a population—excluding those who lived within the Municipal limits—numbering 300,000.²⁹ In no division in the district of Colombo was more than half the requirements of rice, locally grown. So pronounced was the dependence on imported rice that sometimes fears were expressed that if on account of a major famine in Southern India the usual quantities of rice could not be imported, both the Western Province and the Colombo District in particular would find it extremely hard to fall back on local resources.³⁰

In some ways the position of the Southern Province was paradoxical. Annually a certain quantity of rice produced in the province was sent to other districts in the island. It would seem therefore that the production of paddy was generally over and above the needs of the population. Indeed parts of the Southern Province especially the Mātara district were reputedly rather prolific paddy growing areas. But in the province as a whole the export of paddy merely increased the dependence on imported rice. *Per capita* calculations reveal that even if all the paddy produced in the province was not despatched elsewhere but was consumed locally, there was not enough paddy to go round. Apart from shortages caused in this manner, there was a demand for imported rice from Tamil immigrant labourers in the estates in the Mātara and Galle districts. Among this class there was the characteristic preference for imported rice *vis-a-vis* the locally grown country rice. Secondly in the coastal areas and in the towns there was also a preference for imported rice possibly because imported rice, being plentiful in supply, was cheaper, and possibly due to a belief that imported rice could feed "twice the number that country will".³¹

In general in the Southern Province as a whole at least a third of the rice annually consumed was imported. In 1888 for example—an admittedly normal year uncomplicated by weather considerations—the rice produced in the entire province was

28. *Report on the Chilaw District. A.R.1892. p.G.12.*
Report on the North Western Province. A.R.1895. p.G.2.
29. *Report on the Western Province. A.R.1885. p.135A.*
Report on the Western Province. A.R.1898, p.B.7.
Report on the Western Province. A.R.1887. p.8A.
30. *Report on the Western Province. A.R.1885. p.135A.*
31. *Report on the Mātara District. A.R.1898, p.E.14.*
Report on the Southern Province. A.R.1898, p.E.2.

estimated at 1,000,000 bushels, the share of the Mātara district alone being 500,000 bushels. In spite of this, as many as 713,373 bushels of rice were imported mostly through the ports of Galle and Hambantota. The necessity was ascribed partly to a greater influx of Tamil immigrant labourers to estates in the province, but chiefly to an increase in the number of those who earned their livelihood other than by paddy cultivation and who were therefore able to afford to eat more rice.³²

The North Central Province too was not wholly typical. Imported rice was brought to the province but was primarily intended for the consumption of Indian immigrant labourers who were extensively employed on public works. The rice produced within the district which according to strict *per capita* calculations should have been consumed locally, was on the other hand sent to other districts—the inhabitants subsisting mainly on *chena* products because of a desire to get cash resources. The high proportion of *chena* products in relation to paddy—generally about half the quantity of paddy produced in conspicuous contrast to say either the Western Province or the Central Province—suggests that *chena* grains rather than either locally produced rice or imported rice were the principal feature in the food consumption structure of the province.

As elsewhere in Ceylon in the Central Province too the locally grown rice did not match consumption requirements. Rice imports to the province have been variously estimated to have been between a third to as much as a half of the consumer requirements. This did not necessarily imply that the mass of the people consumed imported rice. It would appear that the bulk of the imported rice was consumed by immigrant Indian labourers—the majority of estates being situated in this region—rather than by the Sinhalese peasants, who it was said often did not have the means of buying rice and instead had to rely on kurakkan and the so-called garden products. In the Valapane and Uda Hevāhā divisions in the Nuvara Eliya district and in the Lower Division of the Ūva Province in particular the functional role of *chena* cultivation—as a means of supplementing a meagre rice diet and as a means of obtaining money to buy other commodities including rice—has been noted in contemporary documents.

In the island as a whole it is evident that [See Figure] in any given year the imports of rice and paddy exceeded the amount of locally produced rice. Local production did not appreciably increase in the period 1869-1900. Consequently with a rising population the amount of rice and paddy imported to Ceylon continually increased.

Imports were of course not unrelated to the price of rice in local markets. Here again the scantiness of the material becomes evident. As a general rule, in the documents concerned with the period prices have been mentioned merely in passing. Other than in some Sinhalese newspapers there is no consistent detailing of prices, with regard to towns or the rural areas.

32. *Report on the Southern Province. A.R.1888. p.138A.*

However, as an initial hypothesis we may assume that given the conditions of grain scarcities and the inability of the island to produce sufficient rice, the price of rice steadily rose, and that by 1890, it had reached a level which strikingly contrasted with the prices that prevailed, say, at the beginning of the 1870's.

It is however possible that this was not necessarily so. The prices of rice and paddy in the Pettah market in Colombo in the period 1875-1880 other than in one particular respect, were not exceptional and may reasonably be regarded as being typical of the last quarter of the nineteenth century. A particularly noteworthy feature which the figures show is that in spite of a presumed increase in demand, there was only a negligible rise in prices. The rather sharp increases in prices in 1877 was clearly exceptional and was in fact due to the famine in South India which affected the imports of rice temporarily. By 1880 however prices were clearly settling down to the normative levels of 1875.

Two factors probably account for the negligible degree of fluctuation. There was to begin with the flow of imported rice from India, and secondly—confirming to the tendency for agricultural commodities to find their way to towns—the movement of rice from the country to the Colombo markets. What was true of Colombo was as true of the markets in the other towns, particularly in the bazaar towns in the plantation districts which were ordinarily well stocked with rice.

On the other hand what was the position in the rural areas? It would seem that imported rice was more expensive than locally produced rice—partly due no doubt to the costs of transport. For example in the Kāgalle district, the price of locally produced rice in years selected at random, was as follows:— 1887 (Rs. 2.50 to Rs. 3.50); 1894 (Rs. 3.50 to Rs. 4.00) and 1895 (Rs. 3.50 to Rs. 4.00). The price of imported rice in Kāgalle during these years ranged between Rs. 3.50 to Rs. 4.00, from Rs. 4.00 to Rs. 5.00, and Rs. 3.50 to Rs. 4.50 respectively. Similarly in 1887 when the price of a locally produced bushel of rice in Sabaragamuwa was Rs. 3.00, imported varieties ranged between Rs. 3.50 to Rs. 4.00 per bushel. In Hambantota in 1894, by way of a further example, local rice was sold for Rs. 3.50 to Rs. 4.00 a bushel and the selling price of imported rice was between Rs. 4.00 and Rs. 5.00.

It is also evident that in the rural areas the price of rice in general—imported or locally produced—was not comparatively speaking cheap in spite of the fact that it was precisely in these areas that rice was being grown. For example in the period 1887-1890, a bushel of rice in the Kotmalé, Uda Hewakāta and Valaparé divisions in the Nuvara Eliya district cost Rs. 4.00, Rs. 3.75 and Rs. 3.50 respectively. In the Mārale district a bushel of rice for the period 1885-1890 was between Rs. 4.00 and Rs. 5.00. In Hambantota—admittedly a poor region for rice cultivation but all the same one to which much rice was imported by sea—a bushel of rice cost Rs. 4.00 in 1895. It is of course possible to multiply such examples.

The comparatively high prices of rice in the rural areas was caused by a variety of circumstances. To begin with it is possible that the amount of rice which was produced was insufficient for consumption purposes. Secondly scarcities were no doubt increased by the predilection of the villager to sell his rice because rice was in

the final analysis the principle marketable commodity that he produced. Thirdly although the influx of imported rice may have helped to prevent further increases in the price of rice, the cost of transporting rice from distant parts like Colombo, Galle and Hambantota to rather isolated regions in the interior, did not make imported rice *per se* as cheap as it was in the towns.

Theoretically the producers of rice should have benefited from scarcities and high prices—granted we may speak of producers loosely as an undifferentiated group. In fact however the average villager whose principal occupation was paddy cultivation, sold his rice under terms and conditions that clearly precluded him from exploiting the situation. The evidence shows how often the villager was exploited by itinerant traders and how easily the villager who produced rice was metamorphosed to the position of a consumer, at one time—usually after the harvest—selling his rice when there was plenty of rice in the market, and at another time, being faced with the necessity of even purchasing his seed paddy.

In sum then, although one should by no means overdo the distinction between towns and the rural areas, it was evident that in the towns the price of rice was remarkably stable and was likely to benefit a variety of salaried and wage earning elements with regular incomes. Small wonder therefore that there were no complaints about the lack of rice in the towns much less reports of urban economic hardship.

V

What were the official attitudes to these problems? In India within the last quarter of the nineteenth century, famines had been dramatically politicised. To nationalists like Naoroji who incidentally toured England addressing public meetings—convened under the auspices of societies like the East Manchester Liberal Society and the metropolitan Radical Federation—to collect subscriptions for famine victims, famines symbolised the exploitive nature of British rule in India.³³

The establishment in turn had ably countered the arguments of the nationalists. At a more popular level, Naoroji's own hearers in London had asked him whether it was not true that British rule had brought at least some benefits to India, and whether, British public charity had not responded to the plight of India's famine victims.³⁴ The first salvoes, so to speak, had been thus fired in a debate that was to outlast British rule in India.³⁵

By contrast in Ceylon in the absence of both a comparable political climate and leadership, the role of pointing the accusing finger at the establishment—the Government of Ceylon—ironically devolved on the Colonial Office and on a handful of liberal English Civil Servants.

33. Naoroji, Dadabhai. *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India*, (London, 1901). p. 643 ff.

34. *Ibid.*

35. See, Dharma Kumar. *The Indian Economy in the nineteenth century. A symposium.* (Delhi, 1969), in particular the contributions of Morris D. Morris and T. Raychaudhuri.

To begin with, the attitudes of the local officials were to some extent characterised by a degree of complacency. As a rule the provincial agents of government were not unduly perturbed by the low levels of rice consumption. Notwithstanding their rather academic speculations on *chena* cultivation, they believed that the mass of the people especially in the rural areas consumed considerable quantities of *chena* grains, certainly very much more than was suggested in the *Blue Books*.³⁶ Moreover, although there was no official record of garden produce, it was not unreasonable to assume that the mass of the people in rural areas consumed great quantities of this type of food. Finally, defying the possibilities of rational calculation but clearly relied on as an ultimate possibility, were the resources of food that were available in jungles. "If then we consider the quantity of fruits and roots," wrote Aelian King typically, "and the extent to which in the wilder parts of the country at least, the people supplement their food from the spoils of the chase, there can be no doubt that there is in an ordinary year an ample supply of food for the population."³⁷ Above all, there was also the belief that as a general rule the mass of the people could "manage to exist on very little."³⁸ The logical corollary was the view that real famines were not likely to occur in Ceylon. Aelian King observed in 1885 that after all the people of Ceylon had advantages over the Indians "in the greater food producing capabilities of their soil and climate", and that for this reason the occurrence of famines in Ceylon was "impossible."³⁹

The optimism however was hardly justified by the frequent breakdowns in the food resources of several districts. It often took only a single prolonged drought to bring about a situation which was potentially a famine but rarely assumed the true proportions of a famine because of government intervention. In 1879 there were total crop failures in the Eastern Province caused by a major flood, the like of which it was said had not been witnessed in the region for almost a half century, followed by a prolonged drought of unusual severity. The Government Agent reported that "means had to be devised to avoid what really might have become though it never actually did a state of famine generally." Rice was distributed to over 15,000 women and children for five months at a cost of Rs. 19,877. Relief employment was provided for about 4,400 able bodied men in road repairs and cost the government as much as Rs. 34,822, and finally, in spite of its cherished principles the government was compelled to issue licences for *chena* cultivation on an extensive scale.⁴⁰

The North Western Province in particular was notably susceptible to frequent crop failures. In the Vanni division, where there had been crop failures for years, the peasants had been compelled to barter their belongings as well as their cattle and had by 1872 had exhausted all means of buying food.⁴¹ Timely government relief assisted by private charity had been reasonably effective and the government

36. *Report on the Kāgalla District. A.R.1890. p.J.23.*
- Report on the Vavuniya District. A.R.1892, p.D.22.*
37. *Report on the Ūva Province. A.R.1887. p.212A.*
38. *Report on the Mullaitivu District. A.R.1873. p.196.*
39. *Report on the Badulla District. A.R.1884. p.58A.*
40. *Report on the Eastern Province. A.R.1879, p.143 ff.*
41. *Report on the North Western Province. A.R.1873. p.59.*

Agent reported that "not a single life was lost from starvation though thousands were literally on the verge of it."⁴² In 1874 too it was reported that "scarcity of food... which assumed the proportions of an actual famine" had occurred once again in the Vanni and in parts of the Chilaw district on account of poor paddy and *chena* crops.⁴³ By 1875, not only the Vanni, but most of the province and in particular the districts of Chilaw and Puttalam, was in the grip of a severe drought. "The destitution of the inhabitants" it was reported "had reached such a pitch that Government was called in to prevent men dying of starvation."⁴⁴ In all over Rs. 10,000 was spent on relief which involved mainly the restoration of certain roads which had been in a state of disuse since the time of the Dutch.

In the entire North Western Province however possibly the worst affected area was the Demala Hatpattu where in the period 1872-1875, droughts had been of such frequent occurrence that the people had ceased to complain about the lack of food and were "perfectly indifferent" to their plight.⁴⁵ In 1879 too the Government Agent reported that the Demala Hatpattu was "afflicted with famine" and that but for government aid "many deaths from starvation must have occurred".⁴⁶

The situation in the Northern Province especially in the districts of Mannār and Mullaitivu, was not dissimilar. Especially in 1874 there were fears that owing to extensive crop failures famine might occur. The Government Agent reported that in these districts even though there was "no actual famine there was always a good deal of scarcity."⁴⁷ On this occasion famine was ultimately averted principally on account of the intervention of government, and the importation of considerable quantities of rice from Southern India which helped to reduce the price of rice.⁴⁷

Meanwhile the inadequacies of food resources on account of which the government had perforce to intervene was a characteristic feature in the districts of Nuvara-Eliya, Badulla and in the lower divisions of the Ūva Province. In 1878 the failure of *chenas* caused a famine in Bintāna.⁴⁸ By 1879 not only was the condition of Bintāna unchanged but famine conditions were reported in many parts of lower Ūva especially in Kongala, Pandikulam, Vallavāya and in Beṭṭala.⁴⁹ In these areas the tanks which might have made paddy cultivation possible were very few and on account of poor rainfall were virtually in a state of permanent disuse. Consequently ordinarily the food resources of the people were wholly dependent on the *chenas*. But when *chenas* failed as they did in these years "the occurrence of famine was inevitable". Neither did the situation materially change over the years. In 1888 for example it was reported that the scarcity of food was so great that the peasants had to live on jungle produce

42. *Ibid.*

43. *Report on the North Western Province. A.R.1874. p.122.*

44. *Report on the Puttalam District. A.R.1875. p.85.*

45. *Ibid.*

46. *Report on the North Western Province. A.R.1879.*

47. *Report on the Mullaitivu District. A.R.1874. p.87.*

Report on the Northern Province. A.R.1874. p.62.

48. *Report on the Badulla District. A.R.1878. p.37.*

49. *Report on the Badulla District. A.R.1879. p.57 ff.*

Sickness too prevailed—attributed to the lack of sufficient food—and it was reported that the death rate was “one of the highest on record.”⁵⁰ In his administration report on conditions in Lower Ūva, F. C. Fisher observed that “serious famine” was only averted because certain irrigation tanks in Vallavāya, Bibilē, Buttala and Alutnuvara had been repaired. Consequently it had been just possible for the people to “struggle through the year until . . . the *chena* crops gradually mitigated distress.”⁵¹

Conditions in Upper Ūva were only marginally better. In this region too when *chenas* failed there were widespread scarcities of food. Fisher observed that really there was simply no part of Ūva where there was enough food to maintain a healthy population.⁵² He wrote feelingly about conditions in villages in Ūva especially in the Danibagalla plateau where people who were “wretchedly poor” surrounded him on his tours with complaints about the lack of food. The men had long since deserted the villages presumably in search of prospects elsewhere leaving the women and children to starve or make do with what they could find in the jungles.

In the Nuvara Eliya district in particular poor rainfall and inadequate irrigation facilities did not favour paddy cultivation, and, as in Ūva, there was a significant dependence on *chenas*. Scarcities of food were of frequent occurrence. “I visited the villages in question” wrote G. A. Baumgartner describing the conditions in the Maturata division in 1885, “at the time the distress was greatest and found abundant proof of the want of food in the uncultivated farms of the people especially the women and the children.”⁵³ As revealing were Le Mesurier’s description of conditions in Valapanē division in 1889. “It is really pitiable to see the poor half starved people, principally women and children and fever stricken men with scarcely a rag on their bodies feeble and emaciated,” who had come forward to avail themselves of the relief work which the Government was constrained to organise.⁵⁴

Significantly among the victims of the Valapanē famine were those who had lands but who lacked the means of cultivating the land. This class of peasant had neither seed paddy nor buffaloes and was deeply in debt. There were also peasants who had small patches of relatively poor lands about which they could do little in the best of circumstances, and finally a great many peasants who were too feeble either to work or to leave the area in the hope of finding work elsewhere.⁵⁵

Le Mesurier declared that but for timely government assistance many would have died of starvation in the course of the Valapanē famine. “No pains have been spared no expense grudged to allieviate their hard lot” he wrote gratefully.⁵⁶ In the Uda-Hevahata, Udukinda and Yatikinda divisions too the picture that emerges is one of a poor, shiftless, enervated peasantry with little hope of change or remission in their rather harsh circumstances.

50. *Report on the Badulla District. A.R.1878. p.37.*

51. *Report on the Uva Province. A.R.1888. p.223A.*

52. *Ibid.*

53. *Report on the Nuvara Eliya District. A.R.1885. p.42A.*

54. *Report on the Nuvara Eliya District. A.R.1889. p.C33.*

55. *Ibid.*

56. *Report on the Nuvara Eliya District. A.R.1889. p.C.29.*

But notwithstanding evidence of economic hardship in several districts, and the feeling that if the lives of many were saved it was because of government intervention, the majority of Le Mesurier's contemporaries were critical about the whole question of famine relief, and did not assume as easily he did that the role of a kind of *deus ex machina* devolved on what Le Mesurier assumed was a "paternal" government.⁵⁷

In one sense it was not surprising that the question should have been in Ceylon an issue of debate. English officers serving in India were schooled in the notion that widespread poverty and recurring famines were part and parcel of the land they were ruling. The need to provide relief during famine, the limits of such relief, and the methods to be adopted, were all matters of settled public policy particularly after the Orissa Famine of 1869 which Sir John Strachey described as "the turning point in the history of Indian famines."⁵⁸

By contrast what was the position in Ceylon? The evidence suggests that in Ceylon too, where of course famines were regularly reported and evolved often sententious comment, there was to some extent what may be described as a "famine awareness." Civil Servants like Sir John Dickson went over to India to study famine administration and claimed to have put the knowledge to practical use locally.⁵⁹ Moreover, one feels that the fact that during the last quarter of the nineteenth century the provincial agents of government were required to report on food resources in their respective provinces may not have been entirely fortuitous. Above all, at a much less academic level, famines in Southern India caused numerous problems to the Government of Ceylon.

But there one feels the parallel ends. There was no question in Ceylon of taking famines for granted. More than one provincial agent of government took pains to stress that one may not reasonably speak of famines in India and in Ceylon in the same breath. Consequently the reaction of the run of the mill civil servant in Ceylon to the spectacle of rural poverty and acute food scarcities would have been presumably governed by English notions of Poor Law Relief, rather than by Indian famines. In other words that if poverty in society must be reduced by state action, it should be on carefully regulated principles whose primary object was not to encourage poverty in any way. It is therefore not surprising to read the statements repeatedly made in the reports of the provincial agents that eleemosinary assistance was objectionable on principle and was not likely in the long run to benefit those for whom help was intended.

Beginning with this premise there developed in Ceylon, among the European officials, a theory of aid in which the role of the government was broadly defined. To begin with, if government aid in the form of distributing free rice and providing relief employment was unavoidable, it was essential to make certain that in any given instance the step was really necessary. Invariably therefore the government agents

57. *Report on the Nuvara Eliya District. A.R.1889. p.C.29.*

58. Strachey, John. *India. Its administration and Progress.* (London, 1911). p. 245.

59. See, *S.P.* 1889. no. XXIX.

toured the areas where distress was reported to satisfy themselves about conditions at first hand. They took pains moreover to assure the government that only the deserving received free rice, and some of them went to the extent of presumably distributing rice.⁶⁰

Secondly assistance had necessarily to be on a selective basis. Free rice may be distributed to women and children as well as to the sick the old or the infirm, but not to the able bodied who were expected to earn their rice by working on various projects which came under the description of relief employment. Relief employment—the very term was objected to on the grounds that it suggested “charity without sufficient returns”—also safeguarded the essential principle that people earned what was given to them. The observation that people were paid in food “but none was given where they were capable of work and refused to work” was typical.⁶¹

In a more positive sense, relief employment implied that the government undertook projects which would be of ultimate economic benefit to the peasants such as the construction and upkeep of roads—which would mitigate rural isolation—and the restoration of small irrigation works. Such work cost the government much less than what it would have cost if the work was done on a formal basis of payment for labour. This was no doubt an important incidental consideration.

But an unexpected difficulty for which official pragmatism could make little provision, was the oft repeated unwillingness of the able bodied poor to work. They were known either to abandon the village in large numbers leaving their women and children and other dependents to fend for themselves, or they were content to live with their families on jungle produce—“the berries and leaves which the jungle spontaneously afforded”—quite oblivious to the possibility that they could earn proper food if only they offered themselves for relief employment. In his report of the Badulla district Aelian King complained that it was “difficult to understand such apathy among starving multitudes”. He added that the recalcitrant able-bodied might be abandoned to their fate but for the consideration that upon them “depended the fate of helpless children and aged relatives incapable of finding their way to relief camps”.⁶²

Given the problem some provincial agents of government like Aelian King himself advocated special legislation. Either the able bodied poor who refused to work on relief projects were to be regarded as prisoners and be compelled to work, or that they should be treated as vagrants thereby at least preventing the arbitrary desertion of villages in times of crisis. Either way the enactment was to cover “persons

60. *Report on the Negombo District. A.R. 1887. p. 94 ff.*

61. *Report on the Mullaitivu District. A.R. 1874. p. 87.*

Report on the Nuvara Eliya District. A.R. 1892. p.C.12.

62. *Report on the Badulla District. A.R.1879. p.57 ff.*

having families dependent on them and living in times of famine in famine districts" and who were unable to prove that they were earning a satisfactory livelihood in other districts.⁶³

There was also the idea that peasants in famine stricken districts should be put on their feet more by their own exertions and with a modicum of extraneous help, government assistance was therefore confined to the distribution of seed paddy which the peasant had to repay at harvest time. The rule was rigidly adhered to although it was often evident that a peasant who could not afford to buy seed paddy had invariably been so far economically impoverished that he had sold all his movable property, agricultural tools, and above all his cattle. Moreover requests for paddy over and above the seed paddy—like the paddy which a farmer had to provide the labourers working under him and without which the latter could not be hired—were turned down.⁶⁴ A Government Agent explained in this context that although the issue of extra paddy was likely to put a greater number of people "out of the general suffering" in times of acute scarcities, nevertheless such assistance was likely to have "an evil moral effect." Characteristically Le Mesurier pleaded in vain for an extension of the principle so that government assistance would cover not only the issue of seed paddy but of rice for consumption and buffaloes as well.⁶⁵

Above all there was the belief that if the rural masses were truly "self reliant" they could manage without government assistance even in times of crisis. Several Government Agents maintained that the Sinhalese peasant could, if he cared to, find work on neighbouring estates, or as in places like the North Central Province, on public works where ordinarily Tamil immigrant labourers were employed. As a result they had little patience with the implied attitudes of mind that evidently held the villager back such as an ingrained belief that manual labour, other than in paddy cultivation, was degrading. The unyielding nature of this prejudice was well illustrated in relation to developments concerning the Road Ordinance. According to the Ordinance villagers were required to work on roads for a specific number of days in the year or commute the obligation by a money payment. In times of extreme economic hardship it soon became evident that many did not have the money to do so. But instead of reconciling themselves to the situation, unprecedented numbers risked prosecutions—and were in fact prosecuted—rather than do the stint on the roads.⁶⁶ Secondly there was also the complaint that as a rule the Sinhalese peasant was tied down to his village and disliked leaving the place in search of employment. Finally,

63. *Report on the Badulla District. A.R.1885. p.71A. ff.*

Report on the Badulla District. A.R.1879. p.57 ff.

64. *Report on the Eastern Province. A.R.1879. p.143 ff.*

65. *Report on the Central Province. A.R.1879. p.52.*

Report on the Nuvara Eliya District. A.R.1895. p.C.18.

Report on the Eastern Province. A.R.1879. p.143 ff.

Report on the Nuvara Eliya District. A.R.1889. p.C.33.

66. *Report on the Badulla District. A.R.1884. p.60A.*

several provincial agents made the point with remarkable consistency that, when all was said and done the Sinhalese villager was lazy and went a step further to generalise the trait in terms of "national habits of indolence and improvidence."⁶⁷

Correspondingly there was considerable enthusiasm among officials when Sinhalese peasants began to leave their villages to look for employment in increasing numbers on neighbouring estates and on public works. The change was attributed to the forcing effects of the recurring food crises. Lionel Lee observed for example that "the want of food was the best cure" to bring about a change in attitudes in the Sinhalese although admittedly the cure was a "severe one."⁶⁸ In much the same vein Hay Cameron reported that even "the conservative villager" in the North Central Province was leaving his village in search of employment elsewhere. "If the lack of food at home has been the means of inducing him to see something of the world.... it must not be counted all for loss," he observed.⁶⁹

Over-all within the rather rigid framework of official theories no allowance was made for the probability that in the event of a prolonged and acute food crisis the first casualties would be those who ordinarily depended on the charity of their neighbours—the village too had its own eleemosinary traditions—as well as those who were, especially in Uva where the population was scattered, beyond the reach of succour. Just a few provincial agents thought that in these circumstances at least the government was obliged to give assistance over and above the aid that was ordinarily permissible, such as the suggestion that the government should establish "relief kitchens," in every hamlet. But the overriding principle was the need to avoid at all costs, "the danger of indiscriminate charity"⁷⁰

VI

For its part the Colonial Office had no quarrel with the theory of famine relief. But more than the government of Ceylon, the authorities in London were impressed by the contrast between the much vaunted economic prosperity of the island and the evidence of rural distress.

Apart from the reports of the various government agents, the Colonial Office was made well aware of economic hardship by the revenue despatches of the Governors. These gave details of the supplementary votes which the government had been compelled to take from time to time on account of famine relief. Not infrequently the question of famine and distress had been the principal subject of despatches

67. *Report on the North Western Province. A.R.1874. p.122.*
Report on the North Western Province. A.R.1870. p.174.
Report on the Mātale District. A.R.1883. p.32A.
Report on the Puttalam District. A.R.1876. p.90 ff.
68. *Report on the Kāgalla District. A.R.1870. p.34.*
69. *Report on the North Central Province. A.R.1895. p.H.1.*
Report on the Ūva Province. A.R.1887. p.212A.
Report on the Nuvara Eliya District. A.R.1895. p.C.18.
Report on the Kāgalla District. A.R.1870. p.34.
70. *Report on the Badulla District. A.R.1879. p.57 ff.*
Report on the Mullaitivu District. A.R.1874. p.87.

from the Governor to the Colonial Office. In 1874 for example Sir William Gregory reported to the Colonial Office that there was famine in certain parts of the Northern Province and almost throughout the North Central Province. The Colonial Office reminded Gregory, who was characteristically preoccupied with the goals of developing the infrastructure resources of the island especially in terms of their bearing on European enterprise, that there was "little use expending large sums on the break-water, harbour works, railways etc. when any considerable portion of the Island has not even got tracts cut by which food can reach a population which appears to be dying out from starvation."⁷¹

Rather more sharply, in 1890, the Colonial Office took issue with the government of Ceylon. The irrepensible Le Mesurier alleged, in his administration report on the Nuvara Eliya district for 1887, that between 1882 and 1885 there had been widespread distress in the Nuvara Eliya district which had resulted in the deaths of over a thousand villagers. Le Mesurier maintained that Sir John Dickson who was the Government Agent in the Central Province had followed a harsh policy of enforcing the payment of the Grain Tax and because many did not simply have the means of paying the tax, there had been *en masse* evictions from holdings. Starvation and death had inevitably followed.⁷²

At the time Le Mesurier's statements had been ignored but in 1889, his report provided the basis for a sharp attack on the government of Ceylon—possibly inspired by the Cobden Club—which the *Manchester Guardian* published. The contrast was drawn between the reputedly "rich" Crown Colony and the all too evident economic hardships of the mass of the people and "Free Trade England" was called upon to do away with the fiscal policies of the Government of Ceylon which "have led in the past and must lead in the future to chronic famine and starvation."

Sir John Dickson who had by 1890 left Ceylon and was the Colonial Secretary in the Straits Settlements, vehemently protested to Lord Knutsford, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, against "the sensational statements" which had been made to discredit his administration of the Central Province. Dickson denied that there was a connection between the deaths in the Valapanē division in the Nuvara Eliya district and his policies of enforcing the collection of the Grain Tax "which had fallen into a state of arrears" because of the carelessness of his predecessor and the culpable neglect of Le Mesurier himself, who was at the time the Assistant Government Agent in Nuvara Eliya. Dickson however conceded that a number of peasant holdings had been sold in default of payment of the Grain Tax but assured Lord Knustford that in every instance the holdings had been "small and worthless."

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71. C.O. 54.492. Gregory to Kimberley. no. 53 of 15 February 1874.
 C.O. 54.496. Gregory to Carnarvon. no. 56 of 25 February 1875.
 C.O. 54.500. Arthur N. Birch to Carnarvon. no. 3 of 5 January 1876.
72. *S.P. XXXIX* of 1889.

Meanwhile when called upon for explanations Le Mesurier stood his ground adding rather cryptically that his views were the "result of statistics collected for the Governor by a special officer detailed for the purpose." Le Mesurier moreover quoted additional testimony from Ratemahatmayas, District Medical Officers, and the diaries of former Assistant Government Agents in the Nuvara Eliya district in an attempt to establish that the unprecedented mortality in the area in these years was a direct consequence of the Grain Tax policies "All the time the policy was being pursued of selling up fields for default of payment of tax and the Government Agent, Mr. J. F. Dickson was continually urging the Assistant Government Agent to close his arrears and reprimanding him for his delay in doing so." Le Mesurier far from recanting, maintained that he could furnish lists of at least 981 persons who had died after their lands had been sold for defaulting Grain Tax payments.⁷³

The issues raised were clearly rather stale by 1890. Neither did the *Manchester Guardian* disclosures lead to any serious embarrassment to the Colonial Office much less to a question in Parliament. But before "putting aside" the whole affair, the Colonial Office reprimanded Sir Arthur Gordon, the Governor, for not having kept the Colonial Office informed about developments in the Nuvara Eliya district instead of waiting "until the lapse of time has made it exceedingly difficult to verify the accuracy of details." Lord Knutsford also pointed out to Sir Arthur Gordon that although the numbers of those who had died had evidently been exaggerated, and that Sir John Dickson could not be held to have been responsible for the policies of the Government of Ceylon, nevertheless it was plain that the determination to enforce the Grain Tax irrespective of circumstances of undoubted stress, "had caused considerable hardship and in some cases tended to accelerate death." The entire affair, the Colonial Office pointed out, was all the more regrettable because Sir Arthur Gordon had evidently had reservations about Dickson's policies and had admitted to Lord Knutsford that "the proceedings taken to enforce payment of arrears were very harsh." Above all Lord Knutsford took issue with the Governor for not having from a purely humanitarian point of view responded more generously to relieve distress by means of effective relief operations.⁷⁴

On other occasions too the Colonial Office felt that the government of Ceylon was not as alert as it might have been to the well-being of the mass of the people. Whenever famines broke out in Southern India, Ceylon was faced with a number of formidable problems not the least of which was the migration into Ceylon of thousands of Indians—"feeble and useless people"—from the famine districts. Their influx swelled the number of immigrants who were already in Ceylon but who were obviously reluctant to return to India at the end of the coffee season, as they usually did, because of famine in their home districts. The result was "the overstocking of the labour market" as well as the obligation to provide relief to the Indians in terms of medical facilities and relief employment—an expense on account of which successive Governors had to resort to "abnormally large" supplementary estimates. Moreover,

73. *Ibid.*

74. *S.P. XXVI* of 1890.

because the outbreak of famines in Southern India implied a diminution of the amount of rice ordinarily imported to Ceylon from India, scarcities of grain and soaring prices created conditions of distress in Ceylon too, especially in those parts of the island which were usually susceptible to food shortages. To make matters worse, in those districts which lay in the path of the immigrants, not infrequently, epidemics occurred increasing the financial burdens of the government.

Granted the difficulties one would have expected the government of Ceylon to be fully alive to implications whenever famines were reported in Southern India. In the event however it was the Colonial Office which sounded the warning. For example in 1877 when there was famine in Madras, the Colonial Office warned Ceylon about the probable influx of "Malabar emigrants" and asked the Governor to submit a report especially with regard to the likelihood of an increase in the price of rice and other foodstuffs.⁷⁵

The reply of the government of Ceylon was characteristically ambivalent. Arthur Birch, the Colonial Secretary, who was acting for Sir William Gregory, reported that the stocks of locally produced rice were sufficient other than in the North Western and Northern provinces which had been badly affected by drought. Still, even in these districts "absolute privation and hardship" was not to be anticipated. Besides in such a contingency the Public Works Department as well as the Provincial Road Committees could be depended on to provide relief employment.

On the other hand the "floating immigrants" were the principal cause of anxiety. According to Birch there were already in Ceylon about seventy thousand immigrant labourers on estates "in excess of the usual strength", but because of unusually heavy crops, the planters had been able to provide this number with work on the coffee estates. A crisis was however likely to occur in April when the coffee season ended and was followed by the slack period which lasted for some months. Ordinarily in April the immigrant labourers were as a rule discharged and returned to India until a fresh Coffee season should begin in Ceylon later in the year. Birch feared that on this occasion the Indian labourers were not likely to return to India because of famine. The inevitable result was that the government would have to provide relief employment to these labourers once they had exhausted their savings, as well as to the Indians who were fleeing from the famine in South India. To make matters worse the Indians especially the immigrant labourers depended on imported rice the price of which was of course likely to rise.⁷⁶

But in spite of the problems which Birch had succinctly explained to Lord Carnarvon, the government of Ceylon was plainly unwilling to put a stop to the influx of Indians. Birch confessed that he was under the twin pressures on the one hand of extremists who urged a temporary cessation of all immigration from Southern India, and the powerful planter class, especially the Chamber of Commerce, who on the contrary pressed the Government to remove even the normal quarantine restrictions

75. C.O. 54.507. Birch to Carnarvon. no. 78 of 15 March 1877.

76. *Ibid.*

and do everything possible to encourage the inflow of Indians. The Chamber of Commerce in particular was anxious to make the best use of a situation in which labour rates were likely to fall to unprecedentedly low levels. There was also the fear that more rigidly enforced quarantine and other restrictions might have the effect of "permanently checking" immigration.

Birch resolved the dilemma. "I consider" he wrote "that Ceylon owes a debt to India for the development of her resources...and apart from the question of humanity, it would be unwise to do anything which might seriously threaten the supply of labour on which the cultivation of our main staple depends." Birch therefore suggested that the government should provide work for the immigrants from India as well as for the discharged estate workers in railway construction. He had in mind two projects—the railway extension to Mātālē and the Kalutara extension—which the government was about to carry out. In this way explained Birch, the fears of the European planter who was on the one hand unable to provide work in the slack season but was anxious to make certain that he would have an ample supply of labour for the next coffee season were being allayed.⁷⁷

The Colonial Office was plainly disappointed. It was clear that the government of Ceylon had given greater importance to the sectarian interests of the European element rather than to the threat posed to Ceylon as a whole by the Indian famine. "It is all very well to say that Ceylon owes a debt to India on account of the contiguous source of labour" minuted Robert Meade in evident exasperation, "but the argument cuts both ways, the benefit is not at all on the side of Ceylon." Meade advocated the total closure of the ports of Ceylon to Indian immigrants. Carnarvon who agreed with Meade was anxious to secure the co-operation of the India Office to restrict immigration and added that "no time should be lost in doing so."⁷⁸

But by May 1877, when Sir William Gergory had resumed the governorship of the island, Lord Salisbury had assured the Colonial Office that the Madras Government was as anxious to discourage immigration to Ceylon but that it was fairly powerless because immigrant labour "recruiters" from Ceylon were active in Southern India. Carnarvon urged Gregory to take step to put an end to recruitment presumably with the co-operation of the planters themselves.⁷⁹

By the 1880's the idea that indiscriminate charity should be extended to Indians coming over to Ceylon in times of famine gradually waned. To begin with rural distress in Ceylon, especially after the collapse of the coffee industry had become a disturbing phenomenon. It was also possible that the lean years which followed in Ceylon, and the very frequency of famines in India, made impossible the former generosity. Indeed Sir James Longdon, Gregory's successor, who was particularly

77. *Ibid.*

78. *Ibid.*

79. C.O. 54.511. Carnarvon to Gregory. no. 117 of 28 May 1877.

sensitive to these problems believed that although there was no way of preventing effectively the influx of "half famished and sickly coolies", they were frankly a financial embarrassment to the government of Ceylon.⁸⁰

More fundamentally the Colonial Office speculated on the possibility that there might be a broad connection between the hardships of the mass of the people and policies which the government of Ceylon had followed for years with regard to taxation. On the one hand it was possible to reason that the Sinhalese peasant was on the whole comparatively "lightly taxed" and that he could comfortably pay his dues to the government which were principally the controversial Grain Tax, the Road Ordinance tax and a tax levied in certain areas for the maintenance of the police.⁸¹ On the other hand there were European civil servants in Ceylon who pointed out that the sustained ability to pay taxes as distinct from paying taxes merely in years of good harvests was in fact dependent on the vagaries of paddy cultivation and on the peasant's involvement in coffee cultivation which undoubtedly gave him extra resources of cash.⁸²

By the 1880's coffee had failed and the hardships that followed were reflected in evictions and sales of peasant holdings especially in the Badulla and Nuvara Eliya districts. In 1884 it was reported that there was great difficulty in collecting taxes as well as difficulties "in recovering bids for properties sold" because of the lack of money. Aelian King complained that much of his time was taken up in holding sales in execution and that such "ignominious duties" were entirely incompatible with the image of a provincial agent of government "who ought to be regarded as the friend of the people." The Police Tax too had fallen into arrears "inspite of constant attention and no little severity." Finally no less than 1,739 persons in the Badulla district were prosecuted because of their failure to meet the obligations of the Road Tax Ordinance.⁸³ Whether the conditions which Aelian King described were universally true of coffee growing districts is uncertain although one may reasonably assume that it was so.⁸⁴

The entire situation however gave greater point and urgency to certain long standing reforms which the Colonial Office had been pressing on the Ceylon government. The Colonial Office contended that if, as successive Governors had claimed, the finances of Ceylon were so satisfactory that the years in which revenue exceeded expenditure with a considerable margin were the general rule, the mass of the people should benefit rather than the civil servants who made surplus revenue an argument for enhanced emoluments or the European planters obsessed with their sectarian interests.

80. Debates in the Legislative Council. 27 August 1879.
Also C.O. 54.512. Longden to Carnarvon. no. 33 of 10 February 1878.
81. *Report on the Badulla District. A.R.1884. p.58A.*
82. *Report on the Ūva Province. A.R.1888. p.228A.*
Report on the Nuvara Eliya District. A.R.1889. p.C.21.
Report on the Nuvara Eliya District. A.R. 1883. p.39A.
83. *Report on the Badulla District. A.R.1884. p.60A.*
84. *Report on the Sabaragamuva Province. A.R.1890. p.J.16.*
Report on the Central Province. A.R.1888. p.71A.

But how? Indian experience had demonstrated that it was hardly sound policy to effect changes in the indirect taxes which the mass of the people paid. In Ceylon the indirect taxes which impinged on the mass of the people were in the main concerned with textiles and salt. The taxes were conveniently collected, were not burdensome and were above all the only means by which taxation could be made to reach the mass of the population. On the other hand the Colonial Office particularly objected that "the food of the people" should be taxed. It had in mind the Grain Tax as well as the import duty which was levied on rice and paddy brought into Ceylon.

The Ceylon government however was understandably reluctant to lose its hold on what were virtually its principal sources of revenue. The import duty on grain whereby a tax was levied on rice and paddy was no negligible item particularly in a context in which every year the government was constrained to import greater quantities of grain. Successive Governors took up the position that surplus revenues were more apparent than real, and that if the Grain Tax and the import duty on grain were abolished the results would be financially disastrous. They also contended that the Grain Tax, was neither burdensome, nor objectionable in principle, and was in fact the only means of levying a direct tax on a reasonably wide basis. The Colonial Office was moreover warned that the abolition of the Grain Tax would seriously hamper the governments' ability to develop irrigation facilities an item on which considerable capital had already been expended with little burden to the peasant. As for the import duty on grain it was possible to argue that its abolition would help the planter and the Indian immigrant labour, who would consequently get his rice cheaper, and would not in any way relieve that class which the Colonial Office was most anxious to help—the mass of the indigenous people.⁸⁵

At bottom the differences were not merely a question of humanitarianism. Individual provincial agents as well as the government of Ceylon believed that the ultimate remedy to the problem of recurring food shortages and scarcities was to increase the capacity of the cultivator to produce more paddy. This was to be achieved almost exclusively by improving irrigation facilities. The Colonial Office had no quarrel with this approach to the problem but pinned its real hopes on the removal of the Grain Tax which was arguably a disincentive to the peasant.

Clearly the question of the abolition of the Grain Tax bulked so large by 1890 that in the clamour of debate it was easily forgotten that there were possibly other factors—totally unconnected to either irrigation or the Grain Tax—which inhibited the capacity of the peasant to produce more grain.

85. C.O. 54.434. Robinson to the Duke of Buckingham and Chandos. no 114. of 23 May 1868.

C.O. 54.415. Robinson to Carnarvon. no. 228 of 12 October 1866.

C.O. 54.457. Robinson to Kimberley. no. 184 of 17 August, 1870.

C.O. 54.512. Longden to Carnarvon. no. 34 of 10 February 1878.