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NOTES ON THE DISTRESS AMONGST THE HAND-WEAVERS IN THE
BOMBAY PRESIDENCY DURING THE FAMINE OF 1896-97.

I.

THE great famine of 1770 which desolated parts of Lower Bengal may be said to have first given rise to a special inquiry, and to plans for the alleviation of similar future disasters. "In the famines of 1782, 1792 and 1807 in Madras, 1784 in Bengal, and 1792 and 1803 in Bombay, the Government, following the opinions commonly held at the time, appears to have acted on the belief that the proper remedies were to be found in prohibitions of the export of grain, penalties on merchants who hoarded it or enhanced its price, and other interferences with the course of trade. It was not till the famines of 1812 in Bombay, and of 1824 in Madras, that the Government adopted the principle of non-interference with trade as a cardinal rule of policy."

In their report on the great famine of 1877-78, the Commissioners appointed by Government in 1878 to inquire into Indian Famines state that "a main cause of the disastrous consequences of Indian famines, and one of the greatest difficulties in the way of providing relief in an effectual shape, is to be found in the fact that the great mass of the population directly depends on agriculture, and that there is no other industry from which any considerable part of the community derives its support." Thus failure of the usual rain not only produced a scarcity of food stuffs, but deprived the bulk of the population of their occupation. The Commissioners therefore held that one of the best remedies against the recurrence of famine was to develop industries other than agriculture, and not dependent on the seasons.

Now, in the Bombay Presidency, the only industry outside agriculture which gave employment to any considerable number of people was that of hand-weaving. The census returns for 1891 give the weaving population of the Bombay Presidency as 440,342, of which 104,391 were in the Deccan districts. This class of artisans habitually require relief in time of famine. They are, as a class, very improvident, and are almost always in debt to their "sowcars" (money-lenders), or local masters, who not only advance them the yarns employed in their looms, but also money for the support of themselves and their families during the process of weaving. The "sowcars" then take their webs and dispose of them and pay the weavers any balance that may be due. When the advent of a famine causes general distress amongst the surrounding population, the demand for cloth falls off, and in the case of such fabrics as silks ceases altogether, as every one is forced to economise. The "sowcar," unable to dispose of his goods, refuses to advance any more materials or funds, and the weaver and his family are deprived of their sole means of subsistence.

Bearing these facts in mind, the Commissioners recommended that in time of famine an effort should be made by Government or local bodies to give relief to weavers by affording them

opportunities of working at their own trade. They appear to have been led to make this somewhat dangerous recommendation for fear of breaking up the whole organisation of the weaving communities, and thus destroying the only industry, which, apart from agriculture, gave employment to any large number of people in the Presidency. Moreover, a person accustomed to weaving silk, for instance, would ill be able to stand the hard manual labour of breaking road metal or of similar customary relief works. The competition of machine-made goods from local mills was then a negligible quantity.

The recommendation of the Commissioners was embodied in the Indian Famine Code, under which the various systems of relief for the present famine are conducted. The provisions relating to weavers ran as follows (the italics are my own):—

§ 151 (*a*) Where weavers are congregated together in considerable numbers, either in the same village or town, or in a group of continuous villages, semi-gratuitous relief, by employment in their own craft, *shall* be given to those in need of it; and they *shall* be made, as far as possible, to weave coarse cloths which can be used in poor-houses, and coarse woollen fabrics which can be used as blankets or horse-clothing.

(*b*) Except in municipal towns, where the matter should be dealt with under section 55 above, the Circle Inspectors *shall* prepare lists of such weavers, village by village or group by group; and the Special Relief Officer *shall* cause advances of money to be made for the work that is to be done, and for the support of the weavers while doing it.

(*c*) As regards placing the women and children of such persons on gratuitous relief, the Special Relief Officer shall use his discretion, being guided by the size of the family and the condition of the working members of it.

(*d*) Under the general control of the Subdivisional Officer, the Special Relief Officer *shall* purchase at a liberal rate the work that is turned out.

(*e*) The cloths and blankets thus purchased shall be carefully stored for use, when needed, in poor-houses and hospitals, and for eventual sale of any unused balance.

(*f*) Where weavers and the like are not numerous, semi-gratuitous relief may be given in the manner laid down in the preceding section.

Circumstances have, however, changed since the above rules were first drafted, and other principles as to non-interference with trade or the bolstering up of declining industries have prevailed. Among the changes wrought since the last great famine, there is a great development of the mill-industry.

It appears that the number of cotton mills in Bombay itself has more than doubled since the last famine, whilst in the rest of the Presidency the number of mills has trebled. The provision for weavers dates from before the growth of the mill-industry, and was, as above stated, framed with a view to prevent the entire destruction of the industry. To what extent the competition of the mills is the cause of the distress of the weavers is hard to determine exactly, but that they have felt the effect of the competition for some time is undoubted. Thus we find that one of the chief centres of distress amongst the

weavers is Sholapore, where there is already a large cotton mill, and another is building. The Sholapore mill further depends principally on its local market for disposal of its produce, and not, as is the case with many of the Bombay mills, on the markets of the Far East. Again, from the Nasik district we learn that by far the largest number of those seeking relief belong to the weaver class. Again, in Ahmednugger, large numbers of weavers applied for relief. Under the first Cotton Duty Act, with its countervailing excise, the imports were levied on yarns; under the more recent act the imports are levied on finished cloth. The excise on cloth is only levied from the mills, the hand weavers who usually employ local machine-made or imported yarns have therefore a small advantage of $3\frac{1}{2}$ ps. under the act. To judge from the fact that the weavers were amongst the first to seek relief, we may, however, conclude that in many parts of the Presidency their trade had already become precarious, so that the slightest check would bring distress upon them. There was, therefore, some danger of the Government of Bombay repeating the blunder made by the charitable in England, when they endeavoured to bolster up the obsolete craft of hand weaving, long after this trade had ceased to be profitable, owing to the competition of machinery and steam-power.

When the present famine began the Indian Famine Code, as quoted above, declared that Government *shall* employ the distressed weavers in their own trade. The three chief centres of distress amongst this class were Yeola in the Nasik district, Ahmednugger, and Sholapore. (1) The weavers of Yeola work in silk, and the product of their looms is chiefly employed for holiday wear and festivities. In short their wares come under the heading of luxuries. The prevailing scarcity, with its general impoverishment of the agricultural population, at once led to a decrease in the demand for silks. The employers had, before the famine began, a larger stock than they could profitably dispose of, and so they stopped further production by refusing any further advances to the weavers. To meet the consequent distress, the Yeola Municipality applied for a loan of Rs. 50,000 to relieve these weavers by employing them in their own trade. Most of the weavers, however, went off to the ordinary Government relief works—earth works, breaking of rock, metal, etc.—and so only Rs. 25,000 were required. This form of relief is still going on, though not to any very large extent. The returns for the week ending April 17th show 318 weavers receiving relief in this way at Yeola. The Municipality undertook the work as Government did not see their way to undertaking, as directed by the Famine Code, a general relief in their own trade of all the thousands of weavers in the Nasik district, owing to the large capital required, the difficulty of testing whether the work done was up to sample, the difficulty of storing the goods made for which there was at present no market, and, finally, the derangement of trade for some time to come, owing to the sale of this large stock of goods. The records of the last famine of 1877, however, showed that little or no loss had accrued when

this form of relief was tried on a small scale, and managed by a local body.

(2). The next centre was at Ahmednugger. Here the district officer reported that to employ the distressed weavers there would require a very large capital. He pointed out that the price of a cheap *sári* (a woman's garment) amounting to Rs. 4 was made up of the following items.

			Rs.	annas	pies
1.	Price of cotton thread	...	1	8	0
2.	„ „ silk for border	...	1	2	0
3.	Cost of Labour	...	1	0	0
4.	Size, etc.	...	0	4	0
5.	Profit to shopkeeper	...	0	2	0
			4	0	0

if, therefore, even 2,000 weavers were employed under Section 151 of the Famine Code, a capital of at least five lakhs of rupees (500,000) would be required. Hence he had hesitated to apply the section. He also gave the arguments employed at Nesik as to difficulty of storage and ultimate sale of goods made, etc.

(3). A similar and greater difficulty was felt at Sholapore.

The Deccan Sabher at once memorialised Government as to why the Famine Code was not being carried out as regards the distressed weavers. The result of this and the reports of the various district officers was that the Government of Bombay applied to the Government of India, and the Famine Code was amended so as to read *may* in place of *shall*, as regards weavers and other trades. The results are as follows: (1) At Yeola the Municipality only supports 300 or 350 weavers. (2) At Ahmednugger all the weavers have gone into the ordinary relief works. (3) At Sholapore the Assistant Collector, Mr. Weir, has organised an extensive system of relief to weavers running the enterprise and business concern, and obtaining orders for his goods by appealing to the charitable to buy cloth through the medium of the press. Occasionally lists appear in the press, stating that Mr. so-and-so has bought 1000 yds, the Chief of so-and-so 1,500 yds, etc. For the week ending April 17th, two hundred and thirty-five weavers were receiving relief in this way, without any outlay except to the purchasers of the cloth. Is this latter not a repetition of the mistake which we made in England?

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LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

THE so-called Referendum has aroused more interest in foreign countries than almost any other political institution in Switzerland. But none has proved more puzzling to the Swiss people themselves. It is difficult to judge, even approximately, from the vote of the people