

# State formation and 'famine policy' in early colonial south India

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## Introduction

The experience of dearth turning into famine, of crises of subsistence turning into crises of mortality, had shaped social and cultural practices in South Asia long before British domination.<sup>1</sup> Nor did famines disappear under colonial capitalism. Transformations and higher levels of integration of the subcontinent's political, economic and social structure merely changed the *causes* of famine. While malnutrition continued to be or even became endemic among the lower classes of many regions, hundreds of thousands and sometimes millions of Indians died in major famines between 1769–70 and 1943.<sup>2</sup> Yet famines not only extinguished

This article is based on subchapters 6.7. and 6.8. of my *Die Erzeugung kolonialer Staatlichkeit und das Problem der Arbeit. Eine Studie zur Sozialgeschichte der Stadt Madras und ihres Hinterlandes zwischen 1750 und 1800* (Beiträge zur Südasiensforschung 183), Stuttgart: Franz-Steiner-Verlag, 1999. This English version presents the relevant sources more briefly while the argument has been further developed and partly revised. Several colleagues have facilitated the latter task by their critical comments, namely the participants of a panel 'Regulating Labour and Commodity Markets in the Colony (1650–1850)' at the 4th European Social Science History Conference in The Hague in February 2002 and this journal's anonymous referee.

<sup>1</sup> For popular and official responses to famine in Mughal India see: Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India, 1556–1707* (2nd revised edn), Delhi, OUP, 1999, pp. 112–22. An interesting discussion of merchant responses to famine (and the popular perception of such responses) can be found in David Hardiman, *Feeding the Baniya. Peasants and Usurers in Western India*, Delhi, OUP, 1996, pp. 154–70. On famines in mediaeval South India and rulers' attitude towards them see, Angadipuram Appadorai, *Economic Conditions in Southern India, 1000–1500 A.D.* (K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, ed., Madras University Historical Series 12), Madras, 1936, Vol. 2, pp. 748–50.

<sup>2</sup> See the useful compilation of data in Leela Visaria and Pravin Visaria, 'Population (1757–1947)', in Dharma Kumar, ed., *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, Vol. II: c.1757–c.1970 (hereafter *CEHI2*), pp. 528–31.

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human life, cattle and material resources, but also strained, subverted and broke up bonds of community, class relations and structures of political authority. The long-term effects on the structure of social relationships should, however, not be exaggerated. As David Arnold has argued:

A crisis like that constituted by a famine throws into sharper relief [. . .] loyalties, identities and conflicts obscured by the dust of daily existence. A crisis is a time of testing—of religious beliefs, of social relations and of institutions. Crises heighten social realities: they rarely negate them.<sup>3</sup>

While the nightmare of social anomie that haunted the minds of British administrators was thus often a transitory phenomenon, the challenge that famines constituted to the legitimacy of the colonial state was more lasting. Sanjay Sharma has recently argued that in the face of this double threat to the stability and legitimacy of colonial rule, a limited obligation to famine prevention was accepted by the colonial state and a codified 'famine policy' was, therefore, created in India from the 1830s onwards.<sup>4</sup> From this time, famine became a more prominent subject of government deliberations and reports, as well as of public debate in Britain and India. Correspondingly, most historical studies of famine in South Asia have focused on the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries, while the famines of the first century of British rule are still rather under- or even unresearched.<sup>5</sup>

Of the eighteenth century crises of subsistence, only the famine of 1770 that is held to have killed a third of the population of Bengal (about 10 million people) and was famously attributed by Adam Smith to the extractive economic policy of the East India Company, has received some attention in recent historiography.<sup>6</sup> While the economic and demographic consequences of starvation in the early 1780s, namely of the famine in South India's Tamil region in 1781–83 and of the North Indian 'Chalisa' (1783–84), seem to have been of an order comparable to that of the Great Bengal Famine, their impact on contemporary public opinion in Britain appears to have been considerably less. It is possibly for this reason that

<sup>3</sup> David Arnold, 'Famine in Peasant Consciousness and Peasant Action: Madras, 1876–8', in Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies III. Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Delhi, 1994 (1st edn 1984), p. 64.

<sup>4</sup> Sanjay Sharma, *Famine, Philanthropy and the Colonial State. North India in the Early Nineteenth Century* (in SOAS Studies on South Asia). Delhi, OUP, 2001, pp. 135–60, 229–33 and *passim*.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> For the consequences of the Great Bengal Famine see Visaria and Visaria, 'Population (1757–1947)', p. 528, and Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, 'Regional Economy (1757–1857: Eastern India', in *CEH2*, pp. 299–301. For a recent discussion of this and other subsistence crises in that region see Rajat Datta, 'Subsistence Crises, Markets and Merchants in Late Eighteenth Century Bengal', in *Studies in History* (new series) 10.1 (1994), pp. 81–104. For Adam Smith's assessment see *The Wealth of Nations. Books I–III* (with an introduction by Andrew Skinner), London, Penguin, 1986 (reprint of 1970 edn), pp. 175–76.

the severity of these famines has so far rarely been acknowledged by historians.<sup>7</sup> In the South Indian case, disregard for this and other subsistence crises of the second half of the eighteenth century have recently resulted in exaggerated and untenable representations of the living standards of artisans and labourers by some scholars.<sup>8</sup>

The present essay seeks to reduce this historiographical gap by presenting new archival evidence concerning dearth and famine in the city and hinterland of South India's emerging colonial capital Madras (today's Chennai) in the latter half of the eighteenth century. This evidence could be interesting on two counts: First, it can be shown that the frequent occurrence of dearth and famine was related to changes in the region's political economy during the early colonial period. These periodical subsistence crises induced, in turn, the colonial state, even in the period of its formation, to develop a 'famine policy', i.e. a set of more or less consistent administrative tools for intervening in local society on the occasion of subsistence crises; second, this famine policy was informed by two contradictory attitudes towards market regulation on the part of the ruling colonial block: (a) its keenness to keep the incipient labour market supplied in a period when labour power was generally scarce; and (b) a certain reluctance to 'interfere' with the grain market for various political and economic reasons. The tension between these attitudes accounts for considerable differences in approach as compared to later famine policies in colonial South Asia.

The second section of this essay turns to socio-economic and political preconditions and ideological premises that shaped early colonial 'famine policy'. Sections III and IV discuss in some detail the actual policies adopted by the 'Governor-in-Council of Fort St George', i.e. the colonial administration of Madras, before and during the Great Famine of 1781–83. In conclusion, we will return to some more general questions (section V).

<sup>7</sup> The French demographer Roland Lardinois estimates for the Tamil region a population downturn of between 15 and 20 per cent during the last one and half decades of the eighteenth century. Famine was among the major factors of this development. Roland Lardinois, 'Deserted Villages and Depopulation in Rural Tamil Nadu c. 1780–c. 1830', in Tim Dyson, ed., *India's Historical Demography. Studies in Famine, Disease and Society* (= Collected Papers on South Asia 8), London, Curzon Press, 1989, pp. 16–48, especially pp. 32–33. See also Ahuja, *Die Erzeugung kolonialer Staatlichkeit*, pp. 136–45. For the 'Chalisa' famine see C.A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars. North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion 1770–1870*, Delhi, OUP, 1992 (1st Indian edn), pp. 88–92 and *passim*; Sharma, *Famines, Philanthropy and the Colonial State*, pp. 30–35 and *passim*.

<sup>8</sup> See especially Prasannan Parthasarathi, 'Rethinking Wages and Competitiveness in the Eighteenth Century: Britain and South India', *Past and Present* 158 (1998), pp. 79–109. For an alternative view, see the present author's 'Labour Relations in an Early Colonial Context: Madras, c. 1750–1800', in *Modern Asian Studies* Vol. 36(4), 2002, pp. 793–826. Here it is argued that a long-term trend of rising real wages was repeatedly punctured by sharp short-term fluctuations that implied severe subsistence risks for large sections of South India's society in the latter half of the eighteenth century.

### Preconditions of Early Colonial 'Famine Policy'

Though colonial administrators of the nineteenth century were brought up in the spirit of 'improvement'<sup>9</sup> and sought to legitimise their rule in India by 'famine protection works' and institutionalised 'philanthropy', the colonial regime never went so far as to commit itself to the eradication of poverty.<sup>10</sup> In 1877, Viceroy Lord Lytton even deprecated a "'life at any price" policy' bluntly as hysterical and unaffordable.<sup>11</sup> Yet in the early colonial period, British officials were even less prepared to accept any responsibility for the welfare of their Indian subjects. It would be anachronistic to believe that they perceived themselves or were expected to behave by their employers as 'civil servants' of a legitimate government. They were rather entrepreneurial agents of an armed monopolistic trading concern who had to secure attractive dividends to the 'Honourable Company's' shareholders while rendering their offices profitable to themselves. 'Charitable' works such as hospitals or orphan asylums were thus, as can be shown for late eighteenth century Madras, made available almost exclusively to 'poor Europeans', to so-called 'Eurasians' (mainly descendants of British soldiers and Indian low-caste females), to *sepoys* (Indian soldiers) and one or two occupational groups of strategic importance.<sup>12</sup>

We cannot conclude from this, however, that crises of subsistence created fewer or less considerable problems for the early colonial regime. When large crowds of starving villagers assembled in the streets, before the grain stores and near the port facilities of the colonial metropolis of Madras, they clearly did so expecting 'charity' and aid from the prosperous and powerful. Crises of subsistence thus put the legitimacy of urban wealth and authority on trial, no matter whether the city's British oligarchy wished to accept any responsibility for the survival of the famished or not. More importantly, whether a government succeeded in establishing its legitimacy in times of famine or failed to do so was, in this period, not merely an issue of facilitating administration in the long run but often a question of immediate political survival. In politically fragmented South India several Indian and European powers competed for a larger share in the region's resources and especially for labour, which was scarce not only in respect of services and artisan production, but also of agriculture. This competition for material resources conferred a certain urgency to the rival regime's competition for legitimacy. Gaining the reputation of a 'charitable' government thus became an objective of strategic and vital importance. Excluding famine protection from the political agenda implied, as in later periods, the danger of various types of deviant popular practices

<sup>9</sup> On the concept of 'improvement' in nineteenth century colonial discourse see Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (= New Cambridge History of India III. 4), Delhi, Foundation Books, 1995 (1st Indian edn), pp. 15–27.

<sup>10</sup> Sharma, *Famine, Philanthropy and the Colonial State*, pp. 169–70, 230–31.

<sup>11</sup> S. Ambirajan, *Classical Political Economy and British Policy in India* (= Cambridge South Asian Studies 21), Cambridge, CUP, 1978, pp. 93–94.

<sup>12</sup> Ravi Ahuja, *Die Erzeugung kolonialer Staatlichkeit*, pp. 297–99.

such as famine crime or mutiny of armed forces. Yet the tendency inherent in subsistence crises to strain and break up labour relations and other social bonds was then an even greater concern to the colonial government than in the nineteenth century, when *pax Britannica* appeared more safely established over much of the subcontinent. For in eighteenth century South India, this tendency towards anomie implied the risk of sudden shifts in the precarious regional balance of power, of a dangerous reduction of the colonial regime's scarce economic and military resources not merely by way of excess mortality but also of emigration to a rival state's sphere of influence, for instance to the territory of the powerful sultanate of Mysore.<sup>13</sup> Eighteenth-century processes of state formation thus exerted a direct and inexorable pressure on the British to develop some sort of 'famine policy'.

In their attempt to establish control over South Indian society, the Company regime had to tune its 'famine policy' to indigenous social practices of dealing with crises of subsistence—practices which included the policies of the powerful as well as the survival strategies of the famished. As for the former aspect, however, no clear-cut 'famine policy' appears to be perceivable in pre-colonial South India on the basis of the available evidence, though pre-colonial authorities clearly recognised famines as times when their legitimacy was put to the acid test. Charitable works such as the distribution of food to the 'poor' appear to have been their most common response.<sup>14</sup> Even by the end of the pre-colonial period, the Nawab of Arcot, formerly the Company's most powerful ally in the South and now their dependent, reportedly 'never fail[ed] to feed some hundreds of poor People when provisions are dear in many parts of the Country' and had *choultries* erected for the distribution of alms.<sup>15</sup>

Yet we do not presently have any proof for the type of rudimentary 'famine policy' practised in Mughal North India that relied on the prohibition of food exports from famine-stricken areas and on the regulation of food prices in urban markets.<sup>16</sup> Nor is there much indication for popular pressure on the Governor-in-

<sup>13</sup> Some of the above mentioned political and social implications are reported for early colonial Madras in B.V. Narayanswami Naidu, 'Famines in the City of Madras', in *Madras Tercentenary Commemoration Volume*, London et al., 1939, pp. 73–87. For economic consequences see Lardinois, 'Deserted Villages and Depopulation', *passim* and Ahuja, *Die Erzeugung kolonialer Staatlichkeit*, subchapter 4.2. Further evidence is presented below.

<sup>14</sup> Appadorai, *Economic Conditions in Southern India*, Vol. 2, pp. 748–50. See also Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Symbols of Substance. Court and State in Nayaka Period Tamil Nadu*, Delhi: OUP, 1992, pp. 67–72, 112.

<sup>15</sup> Oriental and India Office Collections, British Library, (hereafter OIOC), *Paterson Diaries*, Vol. 8, 30 May 1774, p. 115. There is also evidence that the Nawab established facilities for the distribution of food to the 'poor' in the town of Arcot in 1773; see N.S. Ramaswami, *Political History of the Carnatic Under the Nawabs*, Delhi, 1984, pp. 337–38. See also Ambirajan, *Classical Political Economy and British Policy*, p. 63; C.A. Bayly and Susan Bayly, 'Eighteenth-century State Forms and the Economy', in Clive Dewey, ed., *Arrested Development in India. The Historical Dimension*, New Delhi, 1988, pp. 69–70.

<sup>16</sup> For 'Mughal famine policy', see Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*, pp. 112–22 and David L. Curley, 'Fair Grain Markets and Mughal Famine Policy in Late Eighteenth-Century Bengal', *Calcutta Historical Journal* 2, 1 (1977), pp. 1–26.

Council of Fort St George to impose such regulations on grounds of custom. Moreover, while Nawab Asaf ud-Daula reportedly gave employment to 40,000 people on construction sites in Lucknow during the 'Chalisa' famine,<sup>17</sup> no evidence is available for the establishment of similar 'famine works' by pre-colonial rulers in South India. Systems of patronage and clientage on the village level were probably more important instruments of coping with subsistence crises. Yet if famine went beyond a certain degree, community strategies failed and the social bonds that constituted the village tended to break down: Dominant peasants stopped the support given to agricultural labourers with food and dismissed them.<sup>18</sup> Relations of clientage were thus at least temporarily relinquished and the 'poor' were forced to fall back on other subsistence strategies.

For the eighteenth-century Tamil region, stray references can be found to incidents of 'famine crime' and food riots, though these forms of deviance appear to have been less prevalent than in contemporary North India.<sup>19</sup> However, the two most common responses to severe famines seem to have been the same as in other parts of pre- and early colonial South Asia.<sup>20</sup> The first was large-scale emigration to areas that were not affected by famine. Though mortality was excessive in the so-called 'Company's Jagir' (i.e. the district surrounding Madras) during the 1781–83 famine, much of its loss in population was accounted for by emigration. As late as in 1795 it was reckoned that the 'Jagir's' population amounted only to about 50 per cent of what it had been in 1780.<sup>21</sup> As in later South Indian famines, the region of Mysore had been a major destination of emigrants from the famished and war-stricken Tamil plains. However, a large number of destitute villagers also sought relief in the city of Madras on several occasions—a strong indication of an agricultural crisis that had rendered food less available and/or more expensive in the countryside than in the town, where there were considerable grain stores that could also be replenished by imports from Bengal and Orissa.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars*, p. 102.

<sup>18</sup> Little evidence is available for such village-level strategies of surviving a famine for eighteenth century South India. However, David Arnold's study of the severe South Indian famine of 1876–78 gives some indication of which techniques of coping with crises of subsistence were available a century earlier: Arnold, 'Famine in Peasant Consciousness and Peasant Action', pp. 75–81, 85–103. For the dissolution of relations of patronage and clientage during famines in the period under review, see Tamil Nadu State Archives (hereafter TNSA), Jaghire Records, Vol. 2, 16 July 1783, p. 57 ('The Humble Representation of the Head Tenants of the Honble Company's Jaghire to the Gentlemen of the Committee of Revenue'); OIOC, Board's Collection, Vol. 111 (F/4/111), Lionel Place, Report on Jagir 1799, § 79. See also Ravi Ahuja, 'Labour Unsettled: Mobility and Protest in the Madras Region, 1750–1800', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 35(4), 1998, p. 392.

<sup>19</sup> G.A. Freylinghausen, ed., *Neuere Geschichte der Evangelischen Missions-Anstalten zu Bekehrung der Heiden in Ostindien*, Halle: Waisenhaus, 1776–94, 25. Stück, p. 61 (C.W. Gericke's Cuddalore diary, 12 February 1781); see also Naidu, 'Famines in the City of Madras', p. 78.

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*, pp. 112–22; Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars*, pp. 88–90.

<sup>21</sup> OIOC, Board's Collection, Vol. 31 (F/4/31), Lionel Place, Report on the Jagir, 6 October 1795, § 24.

<sup>22</sup> See below. More detailed evidence is presented in my *Die Erzeugung kolonialer Staatlichkeit*, pp. 136–45.

The second common response to famine on the part of the lower classes was to 'sell' their children or even themselves into lifelong relationships of agrestic slavery or inheritable debt bondage. There is plenty of evidence for this practice for late-eighteenth century Madras, suggesting that labourers did not approve of the subordinate status implicit in such relations but appreciated that an 'owner/creditor' was more likely to support them in times of famine than a mere 'employer'.<sup>23</sup> Both of these practices—large-scale emigration and the retreat into bondage—had the effect of reducing the incipient, limited and highly segmented regional labour market even further. In order to keep up this labour market, which was inadequate for the requirements of the colonial state even in periods of prosperity, British administrators were compelled to adopt a policy which was quite at variance with their refusal to accept any responsibility for the welfare of their Indian subjects.

The chronic scarcity of labour, which disappeared from most parts of the subcontinent in the early decades of the nineteenth century, was one of the reasons for the most striking difference between the 'famine policy' of colonial officials in early colonial Madras and that of their successors: The readiness of the former to regulate the grain market, S. Ambirajan has argued that a 'non-interventionist' policy predominantly relying on the 'invisible hand' in dealing with crises of subsistence became effective only after the South Indian famine of 1806–7, and Sanjay Sharma has suggested an even later beginning of a (never uncontroversial) rule of *laissez faire*.<sup>24</sup> The reason for this 'delay' is not the unawareness of earlier colonial administrators of Adam Smith's famous 'Digression Concerning the Corn Trade' that was to become a sacred text for colonial famine policy makers in the subsequent century.<sup>25</sup> As we will see below, the theory that 'interference' with the grain market would rather aggravate than alleviate a famine was influential in government circles even in the early 1780s, though older 'paternalistic' views were still far from being marginalised.<sup>26</sup> If *laissez faire* theory was not put into practice in eighteenth century Madras despite its currency, this was to a high extent due to the fact that 'non-interference' with the grain market would have implied the breakdown of the labour market. This could not be risked since non-availability of labour power would not merely have meant a loss in commercial profit and land revenue, but in all likelihood also defeat in the long-drawn struggle for supremacy in South India. The British in Fort St George were as much aware of this as their French rivals in Pondicherry and their most dangerous enemy in

<sup>23</sup> This practice is discussed in my 'Labour Relations in an Early Colonial Context'.

<sup>24</sup> Ambirajan, *Classical Political Economy and British Policy*, pp. 65–70; Sharma, *Famine, Philanthropy and the Colonial State*, pp. 53–58.

<sup>25</sup> R.H. Campbell and A.S. Skinner, eds, *The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith*, Vol. 2(1), Oxford, OUP, 1979, pp. 524–43. On the reception of this text by colonial officials see Ambirajan, *Classical Political Economy and British Policy*, pp. 60–61, 66–80 and Edward P. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, London, Penguin, 1993, pp. 276–82.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 199–200, 269–70; Ambirajan, *Classical Political Economy and British Policy*, pp. 61–63.

Mysore.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, there were at least three other structural conditions that rendered a *laissez faire* approach towards the grain market impracticable.

To begin with, tax collection and grain trade were inextricably intertwined in the Tamil region from about the seventeenth century until the 1790s. State finance and private business were practically indistinguishable in what David Ludden has convincingly characterised as a system of 'tributary commercialism':

Land revenue, even when collected in kind, was made liquid and useful as state revenue through markets in agrarian commodities, including crops but also myriad village products [. . .]. In these markets major revenue collectors were major actors, but from village headman to zamindar and king their power survived in proportion to their ability to capture commercial capital in various revenue forms.<sup>28</sup>

The state existed through the grain market and vice versa or, in Ludden's words: 'The paddy market [. . .] transformed grain into government revenue. Speculating in the market became a key to official power at all levels of the state.'<sup>29</sup> For only those who controlled the storehouses with the government's share of the harvest could accumulate sufficient capital to maintain their position in the system of revenue collection—stores that could be sold profitably when the grain prices rose in the 'lean season'. All ranks of revenue officials (and of 'state' functionaries in general) were, therefore, involved in the grain trade: agrarian magnates (*nattavar*), revenue collectors and tax farmers, *sahukars* and other types of financial operators, garrison commanders and local authorities (such as zamindars and *palaiyakkarar*).<sup>30</sup> This situation was not only recognised but also defended as

<sup>27</sup> The phenomenon of chronic labour scarcity in early colonial India has been noticed by many historians, but its implications for society and state were (for the South Indian case) first discussed in the following important essay, David Washbrook, 'Land and Labour in Late Eighteenth-Century South India: The Golden Age of the Pariah?', in P. Robb, ed., *Dalit Movements and the Meanings of Labour in India*, Delhi, OUP, 1993, pp. 68–86. I have attempted to qualify and further develop this argument in my articles 'Labour Unsettled: Mobility and Protest' and 'Labour Relations in an Early Colonial Context'.

<sup>28</sup> David Ludden, 'World Economy and Village India, 1600–1900: Exploring Agrarian History of Capitalism', in S. Bose, ed., *South Asia and World Capitalism*, Delhi, OUP, 1990, p. 166.

<sup>29</sup> *Idem.*, *Peasant History in South India*, Delhi, OUP, 1989 (1st edn 1985), p. 79. See also *ibid.*, pp. 77–81.

<sup>30</sup> For the role of agrarian magnates in the grain trade see Tsukasa Mizushima, *Nattar and the Socio-Economic Change in South India in the 18th–19th Centuries*, Tokyo: Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, 1986, pp. 269–71, 336–37. See also David Ludden, 'Agrarian Commercialism in Eighteenth Century South India: Evidence from the 1823 Tirunelveli Census', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 25(4), 1988, p. 506. In the face of the militarisation of the regional economy that is observable for the second half of the century, the control of local authorities like garrison commanders and *palaiyakkarar* over markets and grain stores must have been considerable, but has to be researched more thoroughly. For the respective activities of British garrison commanders and of *amildars* (revenue collectors) of the Nawab see, e.g., OIOC, Paterson Diaries, Vol. 3, 26 August 1772, p. 214; *ibid.*, 27 July 1772, pp. 220–23; *ibid.*

necessary by the colonial administration. Charles Oakeley, who superintended the collection of taxes in the so-called 'Company's Jagir', thus argued in 1786:

The Renters [i.e. tax farmers, RA] must always in a great Degree regulate the Markets from the superior Quantity that falls to their Share, and as they pay high rents to Government, it does not seem reasonable to restrict them unless in very extraordinary Cases [. . .].<sup>31</sup>

Among the political agencies that controlled the grain trade, the Nawab of Arcot held the most prominent position. George Paterson, who served this dependent prince as a consultant for a while, entered the following note in his diary in May 1774:

The Nabob is the great rice and Paddy Merchant of all his Country. He constantly buys up every grain at the lowest price and keeps it for a Higher Market; by which he makes immense [sic!] profits in all the times of the greatest Scarcity [. . .].<sup>32</sup>

Under such conditions, strict non-interference of the state with the grain market would have implied the end of the type of state that prevailed in late pre-colonial South India. Moreover, the East India Company's administration in Madras increasingly involved itself with the collection of land revenue from the 1760s. The British progressively appropriated the established revenue system to their own purposes, to the needs of an expansive military power. This appropriation implied a massive diversion of resources into military channels, declining investment in agriculture and, consequently, chronic agrarian crisis.<sup>33</sup> Yet it did not involve a major transformation of the mode of revenue realisation before the 1790s. Numerous Company servants, officers of the armed forces and European merchants became creditors of the Nawab and local tax farmers in the process and, thereby, integrated in the established system of 'tributary commercialism'.<sup>34</sup> Even as late

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4 August 1772, p. 231. The German missionary Benjamin Schultze included the following account of a fictitious 'Prince of the Town' in his 'dialogues' (originally written for language teaching in contemporary Madras): 'He that is next after our King, buys for himself all Sort[s] of Grain, put[s] all in his Granaries and locks them up. [. . .] we had a plentiful Harvest, and though the Husbandmen would come to this Town to sell them, our Prince won't give any Body Leave to do so. [. . .] If he would give Leave, immediately the Grains would be sold at low Price, but when he gives no Leave, the Inhabitants will needs [sic!] be forced to buy from his own Hands at a very high Rate.' [Benjamin Schultze], *The large and reknowned town of the English Nation in the East-Indies upon the coast of Coromandel, Madras* [. . .], Halle, Waisenhaus, 1750, 25th dialogue, p. 59.

<sup>31</sup> TNSA, Jaghire Records, Vol. 6, 3 June 1786, p. 361.

<sup>32</sup> OIOC, Paterson Diaries, Vol. 8, 30 May 1774, p. 115. See also *ibid.*, 12 June 1774, p. 142.

<sup>33</sup> See Ahuja, 'Labour Unsettled: Mobility and Protest in the Madras Region', p. 386. See also below.

<sup>34</sup> The most important study of this is still J.D. Gurney, *The Debts of the Nawab of Arcot, 1763–78*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Oxford University, 1968. See especially pp. 44–46, 59–60.

as in 1807, when British dominance had been firmly established for many years, the collector of the highly productive Thanjavur district observed:

[T]he grain market has never been free for many years. The Sircar [government, RA] has always had grain of its own in the store and constrained the market.<sup>35</sup>

There were no doubt, as we shall see below, Indian and European merchants in Madras who protested against the fixing of grain prices on the occasion of dearth or famine. But it appears that they could not establish themselves as an autonomous and powerful interest to the same extent as in Bengal, where, as Rajat Datta has argued, a regulation of the grain market could be resisted with considerable success.<sup>36</sup>

However, the impossibility of a strict separation of 'state' and 'market' was not only due to ongoing processes of state formation within South Asia. The 'interventionism' of early colonial 'famine policy' was also conditioned by structural features of the East India Company itself—features that had been shaped in the context of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England. Restricting the market, the exclusion of competitors by means of state power was a core operating principle of this monopolistic joint stock company. Its practices in the textile trade are too well known to be repeated here. The Company's features as a quasi-state became even more pronounced when it extended its activities to the appropriation of agricultural surplus and, consequently, to the commodity markets where agricultural crops were sold. If, as Sinnappah Arasaratnam puts it, the 'regulatory approach was a familiar one to the Company which operated controls over many sectors of the economy', this was bound to have a bearing on the early colonial regime's 'famine policy'.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, the East India Company's 'covenant servants' did not merely act in the double function of commercial agents and state officials, but did also perceive their offices as 'sinecures' up to the last decade of the century. Their salaries were comparatively small as they were expected to make private commercial use of their offices.<sup>38</sup> The large stores of grain that the garrison storekeeper of Fort St George (who was always a member of the government) controlled offered considerable opportunity for market manipulations that could generate handsome profits for this office bearer, and also for the Company's shareholders. The Governor-in-Council thus temporarily banned the sale of grain

<sup>35</sup> Quoted from Ambirajan, *Classical Political Economy and British Policy*, p. 67.

<sup>36</sup> Datta, 'Subsistence Crises, Markets and Merchants'.

<sup>37</sup> Sinnappah Arasaratnam, *Maritime Commerce and English Power. Southeast India 1750–1800* (= Asian Studies Association of Australia, ed., South Asian Publications Series 11). New Delhi, Sterling, 1996, p. 117. See also *ibid.*, Chapters 5 and 6.

<sup>38</sup> Evidence for such 'sinecurist practices' is abundant. For an interesting case concerning the 'master attendant' (port captain) that occurred as late as in 1796, see subchapter 3.7 of my *Die Erzeugung kolonialer Staatlichkeit*. However, the East India Company's servants were transformed into well-paid bureaucrats in the same decade under the governorship of Lord Cornwallis. See Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*, pp. 21–22.

in Madras on various occasions to force up the prices for paddy and rice. Half of the resulting extra profit went into the Company's coffers, the other half into the garrison storekeeper's purse.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, there was much agreement among the British notables of Madras well into the nineteenth century that the regulation of prices of commodities that were bought to a large extent by Europeans (such as meat, poultry, fish, bread, butter, vegetables, fruit or bricks), was not only permissible but also indispensable.<sup>40</sup> Political domination again implied the right to regulate prices: State and market were inseparable not only in the hinterland but also in the colonial city of Madras.

Finally, another structural precondition for 'famine policy' in late eighteenth century Madras consisted in the almost permanent state of war in this period. Ongoing warfare between various regional powers including the British, the French and the new sultanate of Mysore, jeopardised the channels of trade. Whether they could be kept open or collapsed altogether was to a considerable degree a military question. State intervention in the form of armed protection thus became a principal precondition for trade. Moreover, rice and other food grains were not merely goods of consumption and commodities in these times of war; they were also a core factor of military logistics. Only those regional powers who possessed sufficient quantities of paddy as well as adequate storing and transport facilities had military striking power.<sup>41</sup> General Eyre Coote was unable to solve this problem during the Second Mysore War (1780–84) and the British defeat was, to a considerable extent, a result of this failure.<sup>42</sup> The imperatives of war thus rendered the regulation of the grain market inadvertent if, like in this case, military crisis coincided with a major crisis of subsistence.

### Subsistence Crises and Colonial Policy before the Great Famine

Famines had been a cause of concern for the East India Company's administrators in Madras long before the rise of classical political economy. Prior to the period under review, serious crises of subsistence are recorded for 1647, 1658–59, 1686–87, 1718–19, 1728–36 and 1747.<sup>43</sup> There is also some early evidence for measures

<sup>39</sup> An 'insider report' on these practices can be found in OIOC, Paterson Diaries, Vol. 4, 17 February 1773, p. 188.

<sup>40</sup> The regulation of prices of such commodities is, for instance, recorded in TNSA, Public Department Sundries (hereafter PS), Vol. 16 (Board of Police, 1770–71), pp. 61–64, 90f; OIOC, Madras Public Proceedings (hereafter MPP), P/240/66, 9 February 1787, pp. 161–82; TNSA, PS, Vol. 61 (Police Committee 1797–98), pp. 27–31; TNSA, PS, Vol. 64 (price and wage regulations 1798), pp. 1–29; TNSA, Military Department Sundries, Vol. 139 (1811), 'Police Regulation, No. 6. A Regulation for Markets'.

<sup>41</sup> This is clearly stated in a letter of Governor Macartney and his Council to Bengal: OIOC, MPP, P/240/53, 29 July 1781, pp. 656–57. See also OIOC, Letters to England, E/4/309, 30 October 1781, § 7.

<sup>42</sup> Henry Dodwell, 'Transport and the Second Mysore War', *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* 3, 1924, pp. 266–72, see especially p. 267.

<sup>43</sup> Henry Davison Love, *Vestiges of Old Madras* (Indian Records Series), New York, AMS, 1968 (reprint of 1913 edn), Vol. 3, p. 558; Naidu, 'Famines in the City of Madras', pp. 73–78, *Bericht*

on the part of the British government to alleviate dearth and famine. Hence in 1686, when mortality rose along the Coromandel Coast on account of famine and epidemics and about 2,000 inhabitants of Madras were considered to be on the brink of starvation, cooked rice was daily distributed to the needy. This was financed from Company funds as well as from private donations and supervised by the 'head dubashes', i.e. the principal Indian agents of the British government. In 1718 food was again distributed to the famished by Company servants, possibly from their own means.<sup>44</sup>

The earliest reference to direct interventions in the grain market is available for 1729, when the retail price for cereals was fixed. Grain traders who refused to comply with this regulation risked the requisition of their stores (against payment of the fixed rate), as did persons who possessed supplies exceeding 'normal' annual consumption. These measures were repealed before the subsequent harvest as a reduction of imports was apprehended. However, in the following year a 'grain committee' was established with the task to regulate retail prices and hours of grain sales. The committee was also ordered to confiscate all stores of rice and paddy exceeding five *garce* (one *garce* is equivalent to about 4.2 metric tons).<sup>45</sup> The objective of the Governors-in-Council's policy was apparently, on this occasion, to reduce bottlenecks of food supply during the 'lean seasons' between the paddy harvests.

The second half of the eighteenth century commenced with a series of subsistence crises that reached the level of a famine in at least one case. The consequences of these crises were, however, less severe. They were, therefore, only briefly mentioned in administrative records and altogether ignored in later publications. In summer 1750, the Governor-in-Council were, for instance, apprehensive of a severe food shortage and issued an order to increase the Company's grain stocks and to directly supply rice to European and Indian soldiers, to so-called 'Coffreys' (i.e. African slave labourers) and to 'boat men'. Moreover, they instructed the storekeeper to sell one *garce* of rice on the bazaar every day 'for the sustenance of the poor'.<sup>46</sup> This amounted, according to contemporary calculations, to between 6,500 and 11,000 daily rations.<sup>47</sup> When the rice-exporting region of Bengal was

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*der Königlich-Dänischen Missionarien in Ostindien* [hereafter *Hallische Berichte*], 67–72 cont., Halle, Waisenhaus, 1750–52, p. 1227 (Madras diary, 15 April 1747); *ibid.*, 91–97 cont., Halle, Waisenhaus, 1762–64, p. 897 (mission report 1759–60); Gustav Friderich Gerbett, *Ost-Indische Natur-Geschichte. Sitten und Alterthümer insonderheit bei den Malabaren, so aus den Berichten der Königl. Dänischen Mission zusammen getragen*, Halle, Waisenhaus, 1752, p. 77. See also, *Hallische Berichte*, 37–43 cont., Halle, Waisenhaus, 1735–38, p. 446 (Madras diary, 9 September 1734) and *ibid.*, p. 447–48 (Madras diary, 2 October 1734).

<sup>44</sup> Naidu, 'Famines in the City of Madras', pp. 76–78.

<sup>45</sup> R.A. Dalyell, *Memorandum on the Madras Famine of 1866. Printed for the Information of the Madras Central Famine Relief Committee*, Madras, 1867, pp. 10–12. See also Naidu, 'Famines in the City of Madras', p. 78.

<sup>46</sup> Records of Fort St George (printed in Madras, 1930–53) [hereafter RFSG], Diary and Consultation Books (Public Department) [hereafter DCB], 13 August 1750, p. 151.

<sup>47</sup> For these calculations, see Ahuja, *Die Erzeugung kolonialer Staatlichkeit*, p. 228, footnote 296.

affected by dearth two years later, the Madras Council reacted immediately and prohibited any export of grain 'to prevent as much as in us lies, the Calamity here'.<sup>48</sup> In 1760, German Protestant missionaries in Madras reported a subsistence crisis to their headquarters in Halle (Saxony) that had 'almost equalled a famine in this whole region' for about six months.<sup>49</sup> The Governor-in-Council reacted by temporarily repealing import duties on paddy and rice.<sup>50</sup>

A more serious subsistence crisis occurred in 1763 when the missionaries observed that 'some poor people and especially foreigners from the countryside' had died in the streets of Madras from starvation and disease. The daily distribution of cooked food to thousands by the British administration, by a prominent English entrepreneur (and former Governor) and some Indian merchants is the only measure referred to in the missionaries' diary. As for the immediate causes of the famine, the failure of both the monsoon rains and of the imports from overseas is mentioned.<sup>51</sup> The reference to destitute rural people seeking refuge in the city indicates that rural grain reserves were at a low level and village strategies of coping with dearth were breaking down. This was possibly due to the exacerbating agrarian crisis in the Tamil region that rendered the rural population more vulnerable to the periodical failure of the rains.<sup>52</sup>

A scarcity of grain in 1769 appears to have been a passing episode confined to the city of Madras, but the respective sources still contain interesting information concerning the measures adopted by the colonial administration. This was the time of the First Mysore War, when Haider Ali's horsemen cut off the grain supplies from the hinterland and the British depended mainly on imports from Bengal and other northern regions. On this occasion, the Company regime not only fixed the retail price but also centralised all grain sales on the beach under the supervision of the Governor's personal agent (*dubash*). The retailing facilities were apparently inadequate as several people were injured when 'many thousands' desperately tried to secure their share of grain. The supervision of grain sales through the governor's 'personal servant' was apparently deeply unpopular, and the 'poor people' are reported to have 'publicly scolded and cursed [the *dubash*] wherever they catch sight of him'.<sup>53</sup> This is one of the very few expressions of popular

<sup>48</sup> RFSG, DCB, 2 October 1752, p. 181.

<sup>49</sup> *Hallische Berichte*, 91–97 cont., Halle, Waisenhaus, 1762–64, p. 897 (brief mission report for 1 May 1759 to 31 December 1760).

<sup>50</sup> OIOC, MPP, P/240/19, 10 December 1761, pp. 58–64; RFSG, DCB, 27 October 1760, p. 312.

<sup>51</sup> Archiv der Franckeschen Stiftung, Halle (Saale) [hereafter AFS], II D 40: 4, Kurtzgefaßte Nachricht von dem Fortgang der Evangelischen Mission zu Madras im Jahr 1763 (brief report for 1763 by Johann Philipp Fabricius and Johann Christian Breithaupt), 31 December 1763; *ibid.*, I B 53:27, letter from Johann Christian Breithaupt to Pastor Breithaupt in Wernigerode, 17 February 1764. See also *Hallische Berichte*, 98–103 cont., Halle, Waisenhaus, 1765–68, pp. 385–88, 391–92.

<sup>52</sup> A drastic reduction of agricultural productivity in the 'Jagir', i.e. the district surrounding Madras, is, for instance, mentioned a few years later in OIOC, Paterson Diaries, Vol. 7, 22 December 1773, pp. 135–36.

<sup>53</sup> *Neuere Geschichte der Evangelischen Missions-Anstalten zu Bekehrung der Heiden in Ostindien*, Vol. 1, p. 349 (letter from J.C. Breithaupt to D. Franke, 22 January 1770).

anger against the authorities on the occasion of famine that the present writer has been able to trace from this period. The rarity of such references stands in marked contrast to the high frequency of food riots that David Arnold has stated for Madras bazaars during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>54</sup> An explanation for this discrepancy is difficult. Such disturbances may simply not have been recorded when the actual implementation of 'famine policy' was delegated to *dubashes* or rather informal committees in the eighteenth century. Alternatively, it is also possible that 'food riot' as a form of collective action became only an attractive option when localised strategies of coping with famine were less likely to be successful and the colonial state had started to derive its legitimacy more systematically from 'famine protection'.<sup>55</sup>

Much better documented is a crisis of subsistence that occurred in the early 1770s. Late in 1773, the Governor-in-Council of Fort St George reported to Calcutta that a scarcity of rice was impending since rains had been delayed and insufficient throughout the Tamil region. They requested the Bengal government to send rice to Madras on the Company's account and also to encourage merchants to export grain to the South.<sup>56</sup> However, the Calcutta authorities prohibited rice exports, arguing that dearth was also to be expected for Bengal.<sup>57</sup> By March, towards the end of the agricultural season, the situation had deteriorated, inducing the Madras government to repeal import duties on grain in the southern port town of Cuddalore.<sup>58</sup> In May it was estimated that the stocks held in Madras storehouses of both the Company and private merchants would last no longer than eight or 10 weeks. The Governor-in-Council admitted:

We feel ourselves much at a Loss to provide for the immense number of People, who live immediately under our Protection, & who can only look to us for assistance in this Emergency [. . .].<sup>59</sup>

This claim to be the only possible benefactor of the 'poor' should be taken with a pinch of salt—the Nawab is reported to have distributed more than 3,000 tons of paddy to the needy in his territories in the course of this crisis.<sup>60</sup> However, the quoted passage does indicate that colonial officials accepted some obligation for supplying the city's inhabitants with food grains. Accordingly, the following four measures were adopted: (a) the Company's grain stores were to be sold on the bazaar in fixed daily rations, (b) the retail trade was to be regulated as 'to afford the most extensive relief to the Inhabitants', (c) all custom duties and other imposts

<sup>54</sup> Arnold, 'Famine in Peasant Consciousness and Peasant Action', pp. 85–88.

<sup>55</sup> E.P. Thompson's observation that 'food riots' occurred only during a 'transitional phase' in the development of a "modern" national "free market" in various parts of the worlds may be relevant here. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, pp. 293–94; see also *ibid.*, pp. 295–303.

<sup>56</sup> OIOC, MPP, P/240/36, 3 December 1773, p. 809.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, P/240/37, 6 May 1774, p. 318.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 19 March 1774, pp. 211–12.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 6 May 1774, pp. 317–19.

<sup>60</sup> Ramaswami, *Political History of the Carnatic Under the Nawabs*, pp. 337–38.

on grain were to be repealed until the autumn harvest, and (d) as much grain as possible was to be bought up at the Company's expense.<sup>61</sup>

In order to achieve the last objective, a ship was sent to Masulipatam to acquire grain at a low price in this productive region, and contracts were given to four British merchants to supply the Company with 2,700 tons of rice. The Governor also tried to convince the Nawab to sell large quantities of rice to the Company; the Nawab declined the request at first, arguing that the inhabitants of his domains would be subjected to famine if he did so.<sup>62</sup> George Paterson, well versed with the background dealings of both the Nawab and the colonial oligarchy, noted, however, in his diary:

Great Disputes between the Governor and the Nabob About the grain business [. . .] However it is plain and Evident that it is not that the Nabob is averse to deliver the Grain; but he wants to dispose of it as a Merchant, at the Current price for the time being, with the liberty of taking every possible Advantage of the rise of the Market. Should he agree to give this Quantity of Rice to the Governor, He could not help a reasonable price being fixed, which would not only diminish his immediate profits on the quantity given, but it would greatly reduce his expected Advantages, by preventing the price of Grain from rising to such a pitch, as it otherwise must. His Highness complained of this to me, and told me he had no Objections to the Company's people going to the Country to buy as much as they pleased in the best terms they Could from the Merchant, or he wished Another to stand between him and the Company, And this he proposed to Mr. Benfield. The Nabob would sell his grain to Mr. Benfield, which he was to sell again to the Inhabitants, by which means he would reap every Advantage of the Merchant, while he Conceived such a cob web covering would save the dignity of the Prince.<sup>63</sup>

When Benfield turned down the offer, the Nawab could be induced to direct some subordinate authorities (*palaiyakkarar*) and his brother Abdul Wahab Khan, a major tax farmer, to sell one thousand tons of paddy to the Company.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, the Governor-in-Council decided to buy up even more grain in June.<sup>65</sup> These stores were sold in a special retailing facility which was fenced and guarded by *sepoys* of the Company's battalions. However, the rush was such that a contemporary observer remembered many years later that people had been squeezed to death every day.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>61</sup> OIOC, MPP, P/240/37, 6 May 1774, pp. 319–20.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 13 May 1774, pp. 326–27; *ibid.*, 16 May 1774, pp. 330–32; *ibid.*, 30 May 1774, pp. 352–54; *ibid.*, 3 June 1774, pp. 357–63. See also OIOC, Paterson Diaries, Vol. 8, 30 May 1774, p. 114.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 1 June 1774, pp. 115–16.

<sup>64</sup> OIOC, MPP, P/240/37, 3 June 1774, pp. 361–62.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 6 June 1774, pp. 376–77; *ibid.*, 13 June 1774, pp. 390–91.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, P/242/9, 21 December 1798, pp. 3986–87. Anderson, a doctor, mentions the year 1773, but it is probable that he referred to the crisis of 1774.

The autumn harvest brought only limited relief as the rains had been insufficient once again. The colonial authorities deemed themselves compelled to renew their efforts at regulating the grain market and also explicated, in April 1775, the rationale of their activities:

[. . .] Every Relief in their Power should be afforded to the Inhabitants who in the present Scarcity which prevails throughout the whole Country must depend chiefly upon this Place for Subsistence[,] and if some support be not given them it is to be feared[,] many of them may perish or quit their Habitations to the great detriment of the Country and of the Company's Investment [. . .].<sup>67</sup>

The Governor-in-Council's 'famine policy' was thus clearly induced by the chronic scarcity of labour and the acute danger of permanent emigration from their sphere of influence: As they pointed out, refusal of support on the part of the government would not only have been to the 'detriment of the country' and thereby reduced land revenue, but would also have harmed the 'Company's investment', i.e. the production of export textiles.

To sum up this section, we may state that in the eighteenth century, subsistence crises were experienced by every generation of inhabitants of the city of Madras at least once. The available material is too fragmentary and circumstantial to permit any definite statement as to whether the incidence of subsistence crises was higher in the second half of the century, though there is some indication that this may be so. It is clear, however, that dearth and famine struck the city and its hinterland rather frequently: 10 subsistence crises, ranging in severity between temporary dearth and the major famine, are discernible for the five decades between 1747 and 1798:

Figure 1  
Subsistence Crises in Madras, 1740–1800<sup>68</sup>



Before the Great Famine of the early 1780s, the colonial regime's 'famine policy' appears to have been based on the acceptance of a limited obligation to support their subjects in times of subsistence crisis. Three elements of this 'policy' are discernible: 'Charity', indirect and direct regulation of the grain market.

- (a) 'Charity', and namely the distribution of cooked food to the needy, appears to have been the earliest response to dearth and starvation. Such activities

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, P/240/39, 7 April 1775, pp. 436–37.

<sup>68</sup> This diagram is based on various materials presented in this article. Considering the fragmentary character of the sources and methodical problems, I have not tried to distinguish periods of dearth from periods of famine (i.e. periods of excess mortality). However, the famine of 1781–83 clearly stands out among the century's subsistence crises in that it was the only one to cause a substantial demographic and economic downturn in the region.

were, of course, rather limited in extent and had mainly symbolic value: They legitimised prosperity and power in situations when large parts of the population found themselves confronted with impoverishment and disenfranchisement. 'Philanthropy' of this kind was afforded by the East India Company in their capacity as local government and by 'respectable' European individuals in much the same way Indian rulers and merchants had been displaying 'charity' for centuries and continued to do so even under British dominance.

- (b) Indirect methods of regulating the grain market were not confined to repealing custom duties during the 'lean season' between the harvests. They also included the massive participation of the East India Company in the grain trade. Being involved in a regional process of state formation in which revenue collection and grain trade were inextricably intertwined, the Company held great stocks of paddy and rice even in prosperous agricultural years and could increase their stocks when dearth was impending. Therefore, they were in a position to regulate the bazaar price either by locking up their 'godowns' or by throwing well-dosed quantities of grain on the market, and they made use of this position more than once.
- (c) Moreover, early colonial administrators did not hesitate to directly regulate the grain market or, in other words, to interfere with the property rights of grain traders in famine periods. Like their Mughal predecessors, they prohibited grain exports, fixed prices and quotas and supervised grain sales on urban bazaars.<sup>69</sup> They opposed stockpiling and price manipulations on the part of private traders by confiscating and forcibly selling their stocks whenever they found such measures favourable to their interests.

In marked difference to the policy of pre-colonial rulers, however, investment in agriculture and the provision of cheap loans to famished agriculturists, i.e. measures to counteract the prevailing downward trend in agricultural productivity, did not become an element of early colonial famine policy in the Madras region.

### Philanthropy, Regulation, Deportation: The Great Famine of 1781–83

The famine of 1781–83 has been dealt with in a narrative mode in several older publications<sup>70</sup> and a few recent studies have cursorily discussed its causes and

<sup>69</sup> Cf.: Curley, 'Fair Grain Markets and Mughal Famine Policy'. See also Sharma, *Famine, Philanthropy and the Colonial State*, pp. 35–37, 48–52 and *passim*.

<sup>70</sup> Valuable summaries, though written from a colonial perspective, are: Love, *Vestiges of Old Madras*, Vol. 3, pp. 229–36 and Dalyell, *Memorandum on the Madras Famine of 1866*, pp. 12–17. Naidu, 'Famines in the City of Madras', pp. 79–82, contains little additional information but several inaccuracies. Another older article is only interesting as a specimen of colonial ideology but misleading as a historical study. S.V. Chari, 'Famine Relief in Madras 150 Years Ago', *Indian Historical Records Commission Proceedings* 6, 1924, pp. 78–84.

implications.<sup>71</sup> Little material is available as yet to permit a discussion of popular responses to this terrible subsistence crisis, but the sequence of political interventions on the part of the early Company regime is documented in great detail. The following section thus exclusively attempts to reconstruct and analyse the development of the early Company regime's 'famine policy' in the course of this crisis. First indications of a severe food shortage were perceivable already in July 1780 and when the famine subsided at last in August 1783, it was found that it had been of catastrophic dimensions in terms of mortality and economic damage. This long and intense crisis can be perceived as the litmus test of early colonial 'famine policy' in South India, since almost all available instruments of contemporary 'famine policy' had been tested in the course of these three years—a period that can be divided into six stages.

#### *Stage I: July 1780 to March 1781*

Drought and bad harvests had created a dearth as early as 1779<sup>72</sup> but it was only after hostilities had been resumed with the sultanate of Mysore that the Governor-in-Council feared difficulties in the supply of the city and adopted the usual measures 'to prevent so shocking a Calamity': Import duties on grain were repealed for six months, the Company's representative in the fertile Kaveri delta was ordered to send rice to Madras and the Calcutta authorities were requested to send down additional shiploads of grain.<sup>73</sup>

#### *Stage 2: March to June 1781*

After the spring harvest it was found that grain stores in Madras would only last for 42 days as rice transports from the South had been prevented by the enemy. Moreover, the arrival of supplies from the North was believed to be uncertain. Now, for the first time, it was considered to reduce the number of eaters in Madras. The 'Superintendent of Police' was thus ordered to register all inhabitants of 'Black Town', where about half the city's Indian population lived, since all persons who did not belong to the 'family' (i.e. household) of a house owner were to be banished from the town.<sup>74</sup> This scheme was apparently not implemented at this stage. The activities of the 'Superintendent of Police' were rather directed towards less radical objectives such as the supervision of the retail trade and gathering information about the grain stocks in town.<sup>75</sup> A few weeks later a 'Grain Committee' was

<sup>71</sup> Lardinois, 'Deserted Villages and Depopulation'; Arasaratnam, *Maritime Commerce and English Power*, pp. 109–17.

<sup>72</sup> OIOC, MPP, P/240/48, 11 October 1779, p. 611; *ibid.*, P/240/50, 15 February 1780 (no page given); *ibid.*, 19 May 1780, pp. 285–87; *ibid.*, 3 June 1780, p. 334.

<sup>73</sup> OIOC, MPP, P/240/51, 28 July 1780, p. 547, *ibid.*, 29 July 1780, pp. 549–50.

<sup>74</sup> Love, *Vestiges of Old Madras*, Vol. 3, p. 229.

<sup>75</sup> OIOC, MPP, P/240/52, 24 April 1781, p. 305; see also *ibid.*, P/240/51, 27 October 1780, p. 942.

formed with three members, all of whom were English Company servants. Thus a special administrative tool for managing the crisis was forged. One of its objectives was to restrict consumption in order to make the limited stocks last until September when the storehouses could be replenished after the harvest.<sup>76</sup> However, the Committee had to report early in June that the stocks would already be exhausted by the end of the month.<sup>77</sup> They suspected that large quantities of grain had been bought up privately in February and March, which were held back from the market.<sup>78</sup>

The Governor-in-Council now took recourse to more direct methods of regulating the grain trade: They increased the price of import rice and also the daily quota of grain from Company stocks that was to be sold in the bazaar. This quota was to be equal to 96,000 rations, i.e. it was meant to feed about half of the city's population, and for its sale the erection of a new 'banksall' (storehouse) was ordered. Moreover, every person in possession of any kind of grain stocks was required to submit a correct account. Indian traders were the main target of these regulations and, therefore, it was also directed that 'Banians' (*baniyas*, merchants) had to sign 'Penalty Bonds' compelling them to throw all their grain stocks on the market.<sup>79</sup> The Grain Committee demanded far-reaching powers in order to push these regulations through. However, the Governor-in-Council was not yet prepared to authorise the Committee to summon and interrogate grain traders, to search all houses where they suspected secret hoards and to compel private traders to sell their stocks in the Company's storehouse at the fixed price. 'The Notice, you desire to be published in the Black Town,' they argued,

would tend to create confusion and impress the Minds of the People with Suspicions that their Grain was to be forcibly taken from them, which is by no means the intention of the Board, except in case of the last necessity, when all offered for Sale has been expended, and no more can be obtained by encouragement or lenient Measures.<sup>80</sup>

Drastic measures of regulating the grain trade (and especially the operation of Indian rice merchants) were thus considered at this stage but not yet implemented.

### *Stage 3: July to September 1781*

Early in July, the 'Grain Committee' informed Governor Lord Macartney that the stores allocated for public sale would be exhausted in two days. The government order to give detailed account of private grain hoards had not resulted in any

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, P/240/52, 19 May 1781, pp. 428–29.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 9 June 1781, pp. 559–60.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 468–69.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 470–73.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 554–55; see also *ibid.*, pp. 547–53.

increased supply. They were sure that large quantities of paddy and rice were being hidden in the 'Black Town', but since they were divided up between a large number of persons it would be difficult, if not impossible, to channel them to the market except by removing all restrictions on prices and trade. Moreover, the Committee considered it necessary to throw a larger share of the Company's grain stocks upon the market. The Governor-in-Council consented to the Committee's recommendations and ordered the storekeeper to sell a quantity of grain in the bazaar every day that amounted, according to a calculation referred to above, to about 45,000 rations.<sup>81</sup> They also requested the government in Calcutta to acquire and send down large supplies of rice.<sup>82</sup> Governor-General Warren Hastings and his Council replied, however, that they had strong reservations against cutting out private grain traders by buying and shipping large supplies at the Company's cost. Arguing on the lines of the *laissez faire* argument that had gained some currency among colonial circles by now, they emphasised that they had complied with the Madras Council's request not because they were convinced of its utility, but merely to protect themselves from the charge of not having assisted them in alleviating the food shortage. Yet they were of the opinion

that the natural Springs of Trade left to their own operation will in such Instances always be found the surest and most effectual means of Relief, and that the Supplies which were sent by us have not only prevented an equal Importation by private Channels, but by lessening the hopes of Profit, may have proved a Cause of Discouragement to the Dealers in that Trade.<sup>83</sup>

For all this free trade rhetoric, the Calcutta Council roundly turned down in the same letter another request, namely to lift the ban on salt imports into Bengal.<sup>84</sup> The Madras government renewed their demand for the repeal of these restrictions, arguing that sailing to Bengal for paddy would only be profitable business for shipmasters of small coastal vessels if they also had the opportunity to load their 'doneys' with some saleable commodity on their outward journey.<sup>85</sup> However, the Calcutta authorities were obviously not interested in 'free trade' between Bengal and the Coromandel Coast in general, but exclusively in an unrestricted grain trade. So it is quite possible that it was rather the strong bargaining position of Bengal rice merchants and shippers than the brilliance of the Smithian argument that induced Hastings and his Council to take this political stance.<sup>86</sup> The colonial

<sup>81</sup> OIOC, MPP, P/240/53, 6 July 1781, pp. 634–38.

<sup>82</sup> Love, *Vestiges of Old Madras*, Vol. 3, p. 230.

<sup>83</sup> OIOC, MPP, P/240/53, 27 July 1781, pp. 651–52.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 648–51. This prohibition had been decreed five years earlier: *ibid.*, P/240/41, 17 May 1776, p. 277.

<sup>85</sup> OIOC, MPP, P/240/53, 29 July 1781, pp. 655–56.

<sup>86</sup> The influence of 'Bengal private shippers to Madras' is suspected by Arasaratnam, *Maritime Commerce and English Power*, p. 117. For the bargaining power of Bengal grain merchants see Datta, 'Subsistence Crises, Markets and Merchants'.

administration in Madras was, in any case, little inclined to rely on the 'invisible hand'. Though more drastic limitations of mercantile property rights were not being imposed yet, Company officials still regulated retail prices and the supply of the Madras bazaars by way of import policy and the sale of the Company's grain.

*Stage 4: September 1781 to September 1782*

Despite grain imports from Bengal, dearth turned into famine in Madras City by September 1781. Even the workforce that was directly employed by the Company and, therefore, possessed more secure entitlements to food, complained that they were unable to supply themselves with grain adequately in the bazaars. This applied not only to bleachers and other textile artisans who stated that some of them had died from hunger, but also to the Indian employees of the Company's hospital.<sup>87</sup> Moreover, from this month onwards, excessive mortality is referred to in the records—most victims were destitute villagers from the hinterland whose hopes to find alternative means of subsistence in Madras had betrayed them.<sup>88</sup> Early in October, a member of the Governor's Council was appointed as chairman of the Grain Committee. The Committee's standing was also enhanced by conferring on it punitive powers, namely to 'chastize any person guilty of abuses too trifling to be brought before the Council'.<sup>89</sup> There is little information about the Committee's application of these powers, but it is probable that the 'abuses' referred to were mainly implied non-compliance with bazaar regulations. A more spectacular case of this kind was recorded in June 1782 when the Governor-in-Council ruled to inflict exemplary punishment on the grain merchant Nellannah for contempt of government. Nellannah's misdemeanour was that he had dared to apply to the Mayor's Court for redress when the Grain Committee confiscated and sold his stocks for the regulated bazaar rate after he had refused to do so. For his 'audacity' Nellannah was to receive 25 lashes under the eyes of the public.<sup>90</sup> After this incident, the Council sanctioned and published fixed rates for wholesale and retail prices in July 1782.<sup>91</sup>

The escalation of dearth to famine also prompted more extensive 'philanthropic' activities on the part of European notables from the beginning of 1782. Members of the Anglican parish committed themselves to contribute 800 *Pagodas* (about

<sup>87</sup> OIOC, MPP, P/240/53, 14 September 1781, pp. 826–28; TNSA, Military Department Proceedings (hereafter MC), Vol. 76C, 28 September 1781, p. 2907.

<sup>88</sup> See especially the following mission reports: Freylinghausen, ed., *Neuere Geschichte der Evangelischen Missions-Anstalten*, 25 Stück, p. 49 (letter from J.C. Breithaupt, 13 September 1781); *ibid.*, p. 53 (letter from J.C. Breithaupt, 25 January 1782). See also *ibid.*, p. 76 (C.W. Gericke's Cuddalore diary, 3 November to 15 December 1781). Large scale influx of famine refugees into Madras City is also recorded in OIOC, Letters to England, E/4/309, 30 October 1781, § 7.

<sup>89</sup> OIOC, MPP, P/240/53, 5 October 1781, p. 922.

<sup>90</sup> OIOC, MPP, P/240/54, 14 June 1782, p. 612–13.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 12 July 1782, pp. 670–71.

£320) per month to a charitable fund for the benefit of the 'poor distressed Inhabitants of these parts' and established a 'Committee of Charity'. This Committee asked the Governor-in-Council of Madras to suggest to the Governor-General a collection of donations among the notables of Calcutta for 'the preservation of the lives of thousands who must inevitably perish without their charitable assistance'. The Calcutta government was also to be requested to buy rice from these donations, which was to be shipped to Madras as cheaply as possible. Lastly, the 'Committee of Charity' asked for construction materials as 'the Dying Objects daily met with in the Streets, require Shelter as well as Support'—another indication that many of the famished assembled in Madras were villagers from the hinterland. The Committee backed up the urgency of their demands not merely by appealing to the compassion of the Members of Council, but also by arguing that these measures would 'be attended with the greatest benefit to the Company, by the preservation of a Number of lives for the Tillage of the Land'.<sup>92</sup> Though charitable donations were collected in Calcutta and Madras subsequently,<sup>93</sup> the 'Committee for managing the subscription for the Native Poor' considered their means insufficient to feed the 4,000 people who daily attended their stalls. The Committee also complained about the paltry sum that had so far been donated by 'Black Subscribers', who included exclusively persons and occupational groups in direct employment of the Company and European entrepreneurs.<sup>94</sup> One explanation for this ostensible 'miserliness' could be that Indian notables preferred organising their own charitable activities within the institutional framework of temples and mosques to donating to the Anglican vestry.<sup>95</sup> Subsequently, however, the Council appears to have cajoled Indian notables to make more substantial contributions to the Anglican charity fund. Most of these donations came from the 'Banksall Merchants', i.e. the owners of storehouses.<sup>96</sup> For this particular group, generous charitable activities were also an investment in protection, since a reputation for benevolence could prevent their storehouses from becoming a target of collective plunder<sup>97</sup>—a form of famine crime, which was also known during this period. Hence the news that the grain stocks of the 'rich people' of Cuddalore, another

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 1 February 1782, pp. 62–64.

<sup>93</sup> Arasaratnam, *Maritime Commerce and English Power*, p. 115; Love, *Vestiges of Old Madras*, Vol. 3, p. 232.

<sup>94</sup> OIOC, MPP, P/240/54, 24 May 1782, pp. 538–42.

<sup>95</sup> That prominent merchants and other Indian notables did not engage in 'charitable' practices on this occasion is difficult to imagine, since generous donations to temples or for the distribution of food to Brahmins was central to their mode of building up a (even commercially important) good reputation. See Ahuja, *Die Erzeugung kolonialer Staatlichkeit*, p. 55. A reference to the distribution of food to the 'poor' by Indian notables in Madras can be found in V. Raghavan, ed., 'The Sarva-Deva-Vilasa. Critical Historical Study', *The Adyar Library Bulletin* 22(1–2), 1958, 110–12.

<sup>96</sup> OIOC, MPP, P/240/54, 24 May 1782, p. 542.

<sup>97</sup> This social function of 'charity' for grain traders and moneylenders has been observed for later periods in Arnold, 'Famine in Peasant Consciousness and Peasant Action', p. 99, and, for Western India, in Hardiman, *Feeding the Baniya*, pp. 154–62.

coastal town to the South, had been plundered only a few months ago was probably not lost on them.<sup>98</sup>

To sum up the developments in this stage, we can state that the grain traders were subjected to stricter regulation while 'charitable' activities were institutionalised by English notables in close collaboration with the colonial government.

#### *Stage 5: September to December 1782*

In the course of the summer, as numerous famine refugees from the South crowded into Madras City, the grain stocks proved to be insufficient once more and the inhabitants found it ever more difficult to purchase rice and other food grains in the city's bazaars.<sup>99</sup> In September, the 'Committee of Charity' worked out a scheme 'for sending these miserable objects from this Settlement as the Committee have found it utterly impracticable to procure subsistence for them any longer'.<sup>100</sup> The Governor-in-Council adopted this scheme readily and informed their representatives in the town of Masulipatam, more than 400 kilometres to the North, that about 9,000 people were to be evacuated from Madras. The scheme was to march a group comprising 1,000 persons towards the northern districts of Masulipatam, Vishakapatnam and Ganjam every three days. The first column had already been dispatched and the garrison commanders, tax farmers and zamindars had been instructed to supply them with food and ferry facilities. The evacuees were not to be abandoned by the Company's administration, but the Masulipatam Council was simultaneously instructed to keep strict parsimony and give support only as long as the deportees were unable to earn a subsistence by physical labour.<sup>101</sup> It is unknown how many of these evacuees reached the northern Coromandel Coast, but the Masulipatam Council complained of high costs a few months later and the agents in Vishakapatnam reported in July 1783 that 948 'paupers' from Madras had to be supported. Curiously, they informed the Madras authorities that 'a great Proportion of them are Bramins[,] a few or none Artizans or even Coolies so that they are likely to be a constant Burthen upon us for want of Employment'.<sup>102</sup> If this information is correct, it could indicate that the South Indian charitable practice of *annadana*, i.e., of feeding not the poor in general but rather poor Brahmins, had some impact on the way early colonial 'famine policy' was put into practice.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>98</sup> Freylinghausen, ed., *Neuere Geschichte der Evangelischen Missions-Anstalten*, 25 Stück, p. 61 (C.W. Gericke's Cuddalore diary, 12 February 1781).

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 28 Stück, p. 407 (letter from J.C. Breithaupt in Vepery, 16 July 1782); *ibid.*, p. 410 (letter from C.W. Gericke in Cuddalore, 24 July 1782); *ibid.*, 27 Stück, p. 334 (letter from C.W. Gericke in Cuddalore, 30 July 1782); OIOC, MPP, P/240/55, 6 August 1782, pp. 746–47.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 22 September 1782, pp. 905–7.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 30 September 1782, p. 943.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, P/240/57, 21 August 1783, p. 1174.

<sup>103</sup> On the increasing importance of *annadana* since the sixteenth century, see Narayana Rao, *Symbols of Substance*, pp. 67–72. For *annadana* in Madras in the period under review, see the will of the prominent merchant Chokappa Chitty in OIOC, Madras Wills, L/AG/34/29/193, 1791

Early in October 1782, the Governor-in-Council decided 'for the prevention of further public distress and for the better distribution of Provisions coming to this Settlement that Government shall take the management of the Supplies into their own hands for a certain period'. Therefore, the colonial administration resolved to buy up all imported rice during the next six months, half of which would be stored in the Company's 'banksalls' while the remaining half would be publicly sold according to the Grain Committee's directions.<sup>104</sup> When British grain importers protested, the regulation was soon modified: Three sixths were reserved for the Company, two sixths were to be sold under the Grain Committee's supervision and the remaining sixth could be traded without restriction.<sup>105</sup> The merchants were, however, not contented and organised a meeting in the Town Hall where a declaration was signed by 188 European and Armenian notables. Though some restrictions of trade were criticised, this document can hardly be read as a plea for *laissez faire*.<sup>106</sup> The necessity of regulating the grain market was not disputed as a political principle; the declaration's core demands merely referred to the level at which the wholesale price had been fixed. This rate was deemed too low by the notables, among them quite a few grain merchants. Moreover, the mode of payment was disputed since the notables insisted on bills of exchange on the Company's headquarters in London, which could be used to solve the chronic problem of transferring private fortune to England. They also demanded that no merchant should be forced to sell his stocks, though they assented to the necessity of supervising and restricting sales by government authorities.<sup>107</sup> Finally, they demanded a more draconic implementation of the policy of deportation:

That the Poor, and indeed all those Inhabitants who are not provided with Subsistence for themselves, and who are not absolutely requisite, in the present Situation of the Settlement, be immediately sent into the Northern Countries, for as here are no Provisions for them, they necessarily must perish if the[y] remain here, and would probably occasion some contagious distemper, that might destroy that part of the Inhabitants, which otherwise may have a chance of being preserved[.] That, in order to effect their removal in the Mildest, and easiest manner possible, publication be immediately made, that all the inferior Class of people, except such as belong to the public departments, or that are Servants to private Families, and are necessarily to reside here, Shall depart by a certain early day, when they will be served with Rice at the Gates to carry them to Pulicat, and at that place, with a further quantity to carry them into the Northern Countries, where they may possibly get employment and Subsistence.

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(part 2), pp. 639–40. For another reference to such practices in Madras see OIOC, Paterson Diaries, Vol. 5, 29 May 1773, p. 145.

<sup>104</sup> OIOC, MPP, P/240/55, 4 October 1782, pp. 947–49; see also *ibid.*, 5 October 1782, p. 957.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 9 October 1782, pp. 960–61.

<sup>106</sup> For another view see Arasaratnam, *Maritime Commerce and English Power*, p. 112.

<sup>107</sup> This declaration is recorded in OIOC, MPP, P/240/55, 15 November 1782, pp. 1183–95.

And that if the order be not complied with Government will be under the necessity of enforcing it.<sup>108</sup>

The deliberations of the meeting of notables were not considered by the Governor-in-Council except for this last demand. On the following day, Governor Macartney submitted a lengthy memorandum to the Council where he specified how the evacuation scheme should be accomplished. Henceforth all available funds should be used to purchase grain, which was to be 'delivered' to the 'poor', however,

on condition only of their departure from hence to Seek Subsistence elsewhere, for which purpose they should be assembled by the Charity & ca. and giving them their respective Shares of Rice, be immediately conducted under a Guard of Sepoys, at least beyond the next River to the northward, at which River a few guards properly Stationed, might prevent the return of most of them to Madras. The Centinels [sic!] placed at the Gates of the Black Town and Fort St. George, might under proper orders, likewise be an additional check for preventing the admission of useless people into either place. [ . . . ] In the present critical time there is, unhappily no alternative. The poor must leave the place or perish.<sup>109</sup>

This measure, which was unanimously adopted by the Council, turned 'charity' into an instrument of deportation and implied, moreover, that public sales of Company stocks of grain were put to a stop.

The following weeks were, according to various accounts, the most disastrous during this catastrophic crisis of subsistence. These accounts need to be read with some caution—historians of both Europe and South Asia have found that many eyewitness reports on famines have tended to inflate numbers and to overstate events as a mode of expressing a horrifying experience.<sup>110</sup> But even if we account for a certain degree of exaggeration, it seems clear that excess mortality was enormous during October and November 1782. Many thousands died from starvation and disease not only in the plains surrounding Madras but also in the city itself,<sup>111</sup> despite continuous exertions of both the colonial administration and the 'Charity Committee' to 'send off the remainder of these objects which are able to walk, and to afford sufficient Relief to such as can not be removed'.<sup>112</sup> The

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1192–93.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 12 October 1782, pp. 100:–2.

<sup>110</sup> Sharma, *Famine, Philanthropy and the Colonial State*, p. 76.

<sup>111</sup> Freylinghausen, ed., *Neuere Geschichte der Evangelischen Missions-Anstalten*, 27 Stück, p. 337 (letter from C.W. Gericke in Madras, 2 November 1782); Innes Munro, *A Narrative of the Military Operations on the Coromandel Coast Against the Combined Forces of the French, Dutch, and Hyder Ally Cawn from the Year 1780 to the Peace in 1784 in a Series of Letters*, London, 1789, pp. 298–99; Jacob Haafner, *Lotgevallen op eene Reize van Madras over Tranquebar naar het Eiland Ceilon*, Haarlem, 1806, p. 88 (fn. †); *Imperial Gazetteer of India, Provincial Series: Madras*, Vol. 1, New Delhi, 1985 (reprint of 1908 edn), p. 79.

<sup>112</sup> OIOC, MPP, P/240/55, 3 December 1782, pp. 1321–22.

situation was further aggravated when seven large and more than 100 small grain vessels were destroyed while anchoring in the Madras roadstead on 15 October by a cyclone.<sup>113</sup> A Dutch eyewitness, Jacob Haafner, later published severe charges against the British grain merchants and the colonial government, accusing them of having jointly and purposely delayed the unloading of the ships in order to further drive up the market rates.<sup>114</sup> A Scottish officer, Innes Munro, believed the grain merchants to be responsible for the delay by which they, he alleged, had tried to force the Governor-in-Council to raise the regulated rate.<sup>115</sup> This version is more credible than a *pacte de famine* of the prosperous and the powerful, since the subsistence crisis had clearly reached dimensions implying grave dangers for the East India Company's presence in South India. In the middle of a serious war with the powerful sultanate of Mysore, the Governor-in-Council were forced at this stage to remove 10,000 *sepoys* from the Company's pay roll who were, as Munro observed, 'thus doomed to perish of famine upon the desolated plains'.<sup>116</sup> Paul Benfield recalled later that more soldiers had died from famine in the following weeks than on any of General Eyre Coote's disastrous campaigns.<sup>117</sup> Moreover, British administrators and other European observers were deeply shocked about the degree to which the human and material resources of the region were destroyed in the course of this famine.<sup>118</sup> Yet all instruments of 'famine policy' then imaginable appeared to be ineffective during this crisis and even the free trade mantras of the Governor-General's Council in Calcutta were uttered in a less than half-hearted manner in November 1782:

We conceive that the removal of every real or Ideal restraint upon the freedom of Importation is in general the best method of increasing it. How far this System could operate in your present Situation you must certainly be the properest Judges of, we do not therefore recommend it [. . .].<sup>119</sup>

#### *Stage 6: December 1782 to August 1783*

During the last days of the century's most terrible famine year in South India, the Governor-in-Council relaxed the restrictions on grain trade when they understood that the danger of a French naval blockade had vanished and the worst effects of

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 15 November 1782, p. 1203; *ibid.*, 22 November 1782, pp. 1247–49; Freylinghausen, ed., *Neuere Geschichte der Evangelischen Missions-Anstalten*, 27 Stück, p. 337 (letter from C.W. Gericke in Madras, 2 November 1782).

<sup>114</sup> Haafner, *Lotgevallen op eene Reize*, pp. 85–87.

<sup>115</sup> Munro, *A Narrative of the Military Operations*, p. 296.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 298–99.

<sup>117</sup> OIOC, Paul Benfield, Correspondence & Papers, Vol. 2, MSS.EUR.C.307, Benfield to Atkinson, 13 August 1783. See also *ibid.*, letter to Lord Shelbourne, undated, c. 1782–83.

<sup>118</sup> See for instance OIOC, Palk MSS (IOR Neg 4382), No. 383, G. Baker to R. Palk, 10 October 1784 (quoted in my *Mobility and Protest*, p. 391).

<sup>119</sup> OIOC, MPP, P/240/55, 29 November 1782, p. 1282.

famine seemed to recede from the city of Madras.<sup>120</sup> Yet at the same time the Madras authorities defended the regulation of retail prices for grain in a letter to Calcutta by referring to an old instrument of 'paternalistic' price regulation in England, which Adam Smith had sharply criticised: the 'assize' or regulation of the bread price.<sup>121</sup> They argued that

[r]ice being the common food of the People here as Bread is in England, It is at least as essential to settle an Assize for the former Article in times of Scarcity as it is for the latter in all times in Europe. It appears by the calculations you have transmitted to us that the Assize we settled left a reasonable profit to the Importer without allowing his avidity to be indulged to a degree that might be fatal to the poor.<sup>122</sup>

When it was felt that the worst of the crisis was over, 'charity' also ceased to be a mere instrument of deportation. Hence grain from Bengal and also from the Governor-in-Council's stocks was again sold by the 'Committee of Charity' to the 'native poor' without the condition of leaving town.<sup>123</sup> Charity performances in the theatre afforded opportunity to European notables to simultaneously display and legitimise a gentlemanly life-style in the midst of what continued to be a serious subsistence crisis.<sup>124</sup> The number of persons depending on alms was still (or again) considerable. As late as in April, a new building, the 'Monegar Choultry' was handed over to the 'Committee of Charity' for the distribution of food—a facility that was used time and again for the same purpose well into the nineteenth century.<sup>125</sup> As retail prices remained high, the Governor-in-Council regulated them again in February 1783, announcing that confiscation or corporal punishment would be inflicted on non-compliance.<sup>126</sup> There were also conflicts with the Nawab when Company servants tried to regulate prices on his bazaars in Madras.<sup>127</sup> Trade restrictions were further relaxed in March and sea customs on grain imports were reintroduced in July when Macartney and his Council were sure that the crisis was over.<sup>128</sup> Moreover, in spite of intense protest on the part of grain merchants

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 20 December 1782, pp. 1400–3.

<sup>121</sup> Campbell and Skinner, eds, *Glasgow Edition of Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith*, Vol. 2.1, p. 158; for the 'assize' in England see Thompson, *Customs in Common*, pp. 194, 199–200, 222–23, 290.

<sup>122</sup> OIOC, MPP, P/240/55, 21 December 1782, pp. 1430–31.

<sup>123</sup> Arasaratnam, *Maritime Commerce and English Power*, p. 115; OIOC, MPP, P/240/56, 7 February 1783, pp. 154–56.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156 and *India Gazette*, 28 December 1782, quoted in Love, *Vestiges of Old Madras*, Vol. 3, p. 233.

<sup>125</sup> Love, *Vestiges of Old Madras*, Vol. 3, p. 236.

<sup>126</sup> OIOC, MPP, P/240/56, 17 February 1783, p. 208.

<sup>127</sup> OIOC, Benfield Papers, Vol. 2, 'Translation of a written declaration in the Tallangah Tongue made by Veerah Soamy', 28 February 1783, and further papers in this volume. See also OIOC, MPP, P/240/56, 23 May 1783, pp. 491–92.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, P/240/57, 26 July 1783, p. 1056.

and the Calcutta government, all retail trade in rice was prohibited for several weeks in order to secure a better price for the Company's huge and now superfluous stocks.<sup>129</sup> The colonial administration responded to the end of the subsistence crisis in the same manner as it had to its beginning—by regulating the grain market.

### Colonial State Formation and 'Famine Policy' Before *Laissez Faire*

Until the turn of the century, the city witnessed three further crises of subsistence (1789, 1792 and 1798) though none of them acquired the dimensions of a famine. Interventions into the grain market continued to be a standard technique of counteracting the threat of famine on all these occasions. Indian as well as British grain traders protested against such 'grievous & oppressive Restrictions in the Sales' and some of them resorted to the *laissez faire* argument that sufficient grain supplies would be forthcoming if 'the market' was only 'allowed to regulate itself, and no Interferences permitted'.<sup>130</sup> The Governor-in-Council of Fort St George were, however, not to be convinced and persisted with the direct regulation of wholesale prices and bazaar rates, sanctioning sales quota and indirectly manipulating the grain market by their own, often extensive, commercial dealings in rice.<sup>131</sup>

Throughout the eighteenth century, the Madras colonial authorities held the view in times of famine that the 'immense number of People, who live immediately under our Protection [. . .] can only look to us for assistance in this Emergency [. . .]'.<sup>132</sup> This acceptance of responsibility was, as we have seen, fairly limited and applied mainly to the inhabitants of their 'Presidency town'. However, there are also statements that extended this obligation to the rural hinterland. Hence it was argued that the 'Inhabitants [. . .] in the present Scarcity which prevails throughout the whole Country must depend chiefly upon this Place for Subsistence'.<sup>133</sup> In order to 'supply the immediate calls of the multitude, who were clamorous for the means of subsistence'<sup>134</sup> and 'to afford the most extensive relief to the Inhabitants'<sup>135</sup> they did primarily rely on market regulation: '[R]egulating the issues, and the price, and preventing concealment'<sup>136</sup> were interventionist techniques of managing subsistence crises the colonial administrators regularly took recourse to and deemed perfectly legitimate. This legitimacy rested on the assumption of a 'fair' or 'just' price for grain to be established, if necessary, through political measures like the 'assize'. The government was responsible for settling a grain

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 29 July 1783, pp. 1060–61; *ibid.*, 7 August 1783, p. 1105–6.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, P/241/14, 1 September 1789, pp. 2533–34.

<sup>131</sup> The policies adopted by the colonial administration on occasion of these later subsistence crises are described in greater detail in Ahuja, *Erzeugung kolonialer Staatlichkeit*, pp. 323–26.

<sup>132</sup> See footnote 59.

<sup>133</sup> See footnote 67.

<sup>134</sup> OIOC, MPP, P/242/9, 22 December 1798, p. 4079.

<sup>135</sup> See footnote 61.

<sup>136</sup> OIOC, MPP, P/241/30, 24 January 1792, p. 375.

price that was 'just & reasonable, and at the same time sufficient to produce a fair Profit to the Merchant',<sup>137</sup> that 'left a reasonable profit to the Importer without allowing his avidity to be indulged to a degree that might be fatal to the poor'.<sup>138</sup> To a certain extent, the colonial regime thus accepted being held responsible for guaranteeing its subjects' right of subsistence. This commitment was rather limited—investment in irrigation and provision of cheap loans to famine stricken agriculturists, measures applied by rulers during subsistence crises in parts of the subcontinent, were not considered and the reallocation of the region's resources into military channels continued. Even the rudimentary institutional means of colonial 'philanthropy' could, as we have seen, be turned into instruments of deportation when the British oligarchy perceived the presence of the famished as a threat to their own security. Moreover, colonial administrators allotted a right of subsistence unevenly to different categories of Indian subjects: House owners, occupational groups of strategic value and possibly Brahmins received preferential treatment. The regulation of the grain market was, furthermore, not exclusively motivated by the attempt to assist the famished, but could also serve as a method of securing commercial returns for the Company as well as for British grain merchants. More important were, however, considerations that subsistence crises had to be counteracted for immediate security reasons (such as ensuring supply for the army) and for fear that the human and material resources of the colonial regime might be seriously reduced by mass emigration and excess mortality if no political measures were adopted: 'if some support be not given them [the inhabitants, RA] it is to be feared[,] many of them may perish or quit their Habitations to the great detriment of the Country and of the Company's Investment'.<sup>139</sup> In fact, Madras colonial officials had occasion for many years after the Great Famine to examine its devastating economic and demographic effects, among them considerably reduced collections of land revenue.

The processes of state formation in eighteenth century South India constituted a historical context in which early colonial 'famine policy' acquired a specifically regulatory form which was clearly at odds with the increasingly influential theories of classical political economy in contemporary England. These processes, in which the colonial state was created in alliance, competition and conflict with other emerging states of post-Mughal India, determined forms of 'famine policy' in at least two substantial ways.

First, the early colonial state was compelled to compete with its Indian rivals for sources of legitimacy. The framework of legitimising practices to which the Company regime had to refer was not yet that of the 'modern' bourgeois European state whose principal *raison d'être* consisted in the protection of 'private property'. Instead, the relevant framework was the 'political culture' of pre-colonial India where protecting the 'poor' in times of dearth and famine had been among the

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 7 February 1792, pp. 490–91.

<sup>138</sup> See footnote 122.

<sup>139</sup> See footnote 67.

more important techniques of legitimising wealth and power for centuries. This may be *one* reason why the political techniques actually implemented by the early colonial regime during crises of subsistence were not the ones recommended by *laissez faire* theory, but rather measures that had long been implemented by Mughal and post-Mughal Indian rulers in various parts of the subcontinent, namely 'charitable' distribution of food, regulation of urban bazaars and prohibition of grain exports from famine-stricken regions. However, these techniques of legitimisation by way of 'famine policy' were, of course, not specifically Indian. Colonial officials could explicitly refer to older English views of a 'moral economy' (for instance, the concept of a 'fair' grain price) and to corresponding 'paternalist' techniques of governance (like the 'assize'), which were clearly at variance with the theories of Smithian political economy but had not altogether vanished from contemporary Britain.

The regulation of markets in general and of the grain market in particular was, second, an essential feature of eighteenth century Indian state formation by itself. The most important source of revenue, the appropriation of agrarian surplus, was realised through the grain market. It has already been argued above that political power of any local or regional authority was decisively dependent on their ability to regulate the grain market in their respective sphere of influence. This feature of late pre-colonial and early colonial state formation was even more pronounced in South India during the second half of the eighteenth century, when almost incessant military conflict created a kind of 'war economy' and where the most disastrous crisis of subsistence, the great famine of the early 1780s, was coincident with (and partly caused by) the fiercest war of the period. In this context, a 'famine policy' that implied the regulation of the grain market was a precondition for keeping agriculture, commercial manufacture and services supplied with labour and, more immediately, for preventing a breakdown of the military labour market. In the process, South Indian mercantile capital had been weakened to an extent that it could exert little pressure on the colonial state by the later decades of the century. European private entrepreneurs, on their part, did not so much oppose 'interference' with the grain market in general, but sought to achieve modes of regulation that were most favourable to their own interest. And even those colonial officials who had imbibed the spirit of *laissez faire* were rather doubtful whether the implementation of a 'free trade' policy was compatible with their efforts to establish British domination over peninsular India.