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# Famine in the Ceded Districts of the Madras Presidency, 1876–1878: Drought, Agrarian Vulnerability and Colonial Relief Measures

**T Ranga Swamy**

PhD. Junior Research Fellow, Department of History , Osmania University

**ABSTRACT**

The Great Famine of 1876–1878 exposed the severe environmental and agrarian vulnerabilities of the Ceded Districts of the Madras Presidency, especially Bellary, Kurnool, and Cuddapah (present-day Kadapa). This paper Examines the relationship between deficient monsoon rainfall, crop failure, food-price pressures, rural poverty, and Colonial relief policy. It uses a qualitative historical method based on published official reports, district gazetteers, And later historical scholarship. Contemporary accounts describe exceptionally poor harvests in the interior Deccan And the rapid expansion of relief works and grain depots. The paper argues that drought was the immediate trigger, But the scale of suffering was shaped by prior agricultural weakness, limited household reserves, debt, transport Constraints, and administrative choices about eligibility and wages on relief works. It also treats colonial records Critically: official statistics and administrative narratives are valuable, but do not fully capture the experiences of Landless labourers, women, children, and marginal cultivators. The study therefore situates the famine not as a purely natural disaster but as a crisis produced by the interaction of climatic shock and unequal access to food and relief. Further taluk-level archival research is needed to quantify mortality, migration, and the distribution of assistance.

**Keywords**: Great Famine, Ceded Districts, Bellary, Kurnool, Cuddapah, Madras Presidency, colonial relief, agrarian history

## 1. Introduction

The famine of 1876–1878 was one of the most destructive food crises of nineteenth-century southern India. It Affected large areas of the Madras Presidency as well as Mysore, Hyderabad, and parts of the Bombay Presidency. In The Madras region, the interior districts of Bellary, Kurnool, and Cuddapah were especially vulnerable because Rainfall was unreliable and cultivation depended heavily on the seasonal monsoons. Contemporary and later accounts Describe the crisis as extending from the failure of the 1876 rains into 1878, with relief needs rising sharply as Harvests failed and food became harder to obtain [1, 2].The expression "Ceded Districts" refers historically to territories transferred by the Nizam of Hyderabad to the East India Company in 1800. Administrative boundaries changed over time; for this paper, the term is used in the Contemporary famine context to refer chiefly to Bellary, Kurnool, and Cuddapah, as contemporary accounts grouped Them together. This historical usage should not be confused with present-day district boundaries [2, 3].This paper asks three questions: how did rainfall failure become a prolonged agrarian crisis; what features of the Regional economy increased vulnerability; and how did

colonial relief policies respond to distress? The article is a Source-based historical synthesis, not a new quantitative reconstruction. Its contribution is to bring environmental Conditions, agrarian vulnerability, and relief administration together in a focused regional analysis.

## 2. Methodology and Sources

The study follows qualitative historical analysis and source criticism. It draws on William Digby's contemporary account of the famine campaign, the official report on railway famine traffic, the Cuddapah district gazetteer, and published regional scholarship [1–4]. These materials provide information about crop failure, relief works, food transport, grain depots, and administrative decisions. Contemporary reports are read both as evidence and as documents shaped by colonial administrative priorities. A limitation is that famine-era figures are not always directly comparable: reporting periods, district boundaries, definitions of "relieved," and categories of mortality differed. The paper therefore avoids combining numbers from different sources into a single total unless their scope is clear. It also distinguishes contemporary observations from later interpretation. A full journal submission should add archival references from the Madras Board of Revenue proceedings, district collector reports, and famine commission papers wherever possible.

## 3. Environmental Shock and Crop Failure

The immediate trigger was the failure of the monsoon rains in 1876. The south-west monsoon was deficient across much of the peninsula, and the north-east monsoon also failed in many affected areas. The resulting shortage of soil moisture undermined both rain-fed crops and the prospects for subsequent sowing. The drought continued into 1877, while irregular rainfall and damage to crops prevented a quick recovery [1, 2]. The Ceded Districts were particularly exposed because dryland farming formed a major part of the rural economy. William Digby's account records extremely poor harvests in Bellary and Kurnool and a severe shortfall in Cuddapah.These estimates were contemporary assessments rather than modern crop-yield measurements, but they demonstrate how officials understood the scale of the agricultural collapse [1]. The district gazetteer for Cuddapah also records the worsening outlook during 1876, the opening of relief works, sharp rises in prices, and the establishment of grain depots as the crisis intensified [3].Environmental stress did not operate in isolation. Poor seasons before 1876 had weakened reserves in parts of the region, while the failure of successive harvests reduced the ability of cultivators and labourers to withstand the shock. A household with little stored grain could be pushed into distress after one failed harvest; repeated failure made recovery far more difficult.

## 4. Agrarian Vulnerability and Access to Food

The famine's severity cannot be explained by rainfall alone. Rural households differed in their ability to withstand scarcity. Cultivators with small holdings, tenant farmers, landless labourers, pastoral groups, and households dependent on seasonal agricultural wages faced different risks, but all could be harmed when crop employment contracted and grain prices rose. Those who had to purchase food with daily earnings were particularly exposed when wages failed to keep pace with prices. Debt and limited reserves deepened the crisis. In a failed agricultural year, cultivators might borrow for food or seed, sell livestock or household goods, or leave their villages in search of work. These coping strategies could provide short-term survival while weakening the household's ability to recover after the rains returned. The available sources describe economic distress and relief needs, but they do not consistently record the gender, caste,

occupation, or household circumstances of those affected. Those absences are themselves important: official reporting often rendered suffering legible through administrative categories rather than individual life histories. The Ceded Districts were also connected to wider grain and transport networks. Railways and public works could move food and provide employment, yet transport infrastructure did not automatically guarantee affordable access for the poorest households. The official report on railway famine traffic shows that transport was treated as an important component of famine response [4]. Whether grain reached a locality, whether prices were affordable, and whether distressed people could travel to relief sites were separate questions.

**5. Colonial Relief and Administrative Choices**

Relief included public works, limited gratuitous assistance for people unable to work, and the movement and storage of grain. Cuddapah's district account describes relief works opening in 1876 and increasing numbers seeking assistance as the year progressed. It also records the creation of grain depots for Bellary, Kurnool, and Cuddapah,with attention to transport from railway stations to local depots [3]. These measures show that officials recognised the need to combine employment, direct assistance, and food supply. Relief policy was nevertheless contested. Administrators debated the number of people eligible for assistance, the wages paid, the productivity of works, and the cost to government. Digby's account records proposals to restrict

admission to relief works and reduce wages during the crisis [1]. Such policies reflected the tension between humanitarian obligations and colonial concerns about expenditure, dependency, and administrative control. A relief work could provide income, but only if the task was achievable by a person weakened by hunger and if wages were sufficient to buy food. The distinction between relief for able-bodied adults and gratuitous relief for the aged, children, and people unable to work also mattered. Families could be split between work sites and villages, and the existence of a relief scheme did not ensure that all vulnerable people were reached. Administrative totals should therefore be interpreted as counts of people recorded by the system, not as a complete measure of need. Rail transport could help move grain into famine-affected areas, but the effectiveness of relief depended on coordination between railway authorities, district officers, traders, and village-level officials. Transport capacity, storage, local distribution, prices, and timing all influenced outcomes. The famine thus reveals both the potential and the limits of infrastructure when purchasing power and public assistance were unevenly distributed [3, 4].

**6. Social Consequences and Historical Memory**

Famine disrupted more than food consumption. It threatened livestock, seed stocks, agricultural employment, family stability, and the ability to pay rents and debts. Migration in search of food or work could separate households and expose people to disease and insecurity. The present source base confirms severe distress and extensive relief activity, but does not support precise claims about the experience of every social group in each taluk. Claims about mortality, migration, or caste-specific effects should be made only after checking district-level records and demographic evidence. The famine was remembered in regional accounts through terms such as "Pedda Karuvu" and "Dhathu Karuvu," names that conveyed the scale of the disaster in local memory [2]. Such terminology matters because it connects official descriptions of rainfall, crop output, and relief expenditure to a lived experience of hunger. Oral traditions and later local histories may preserve details missing from colonial paperwork, although these sources require their own contextual evaluation. The crisis also raises a wider question in environmental history:

when drought recurs in a region with limited irrigation and fragile household reserves, what turns scarcity into mass suffering? The evidence considered here points to the interaction of ecological exposure, agrarian inequality, market access, and state policy rather than a single cause.

## 7. Discussion

Three conclusions emerge. First, the famine was a multi-season crisis. Failure of the 1876 rains initiated crop loss, but poor conditions into 1877 and delayed agricultural recovery prolonged distress. Second, vulnerability was socially differentiated. The same drought had unequal consequences according to land access, reserves, wage dependence, debt, and the ability to reach food markets or relief sites. Third, relief was not merely a technical response; its rules shaped who received assistance, under what conditions, and at what cost to the recipient. The colonial archive provides valuable evidence about relief expenditure, grain movements, and administrative decisions, but it should not be treated as a neutral record. Reports written by officials often emphasised order, cost, work performance, and numbers relieved. A more complete account would compare these records with local revenue accounts, missionary reports, medical returns, census data, and vernacular sources. It would also map famine conditions at the taluk level to avoid treating the Ceded Districts as uniform. The argument here is deliberately bounded: it does not claim that every death or instance of distress resulted directly from government policy, nor does it reduce the famine to a natural event. Instead, it shows that climate, economy, and administration interacted. This approach allows responsibility and vulnerability to be examined without overstating what the surviving evidence can prove.

## 8. Conclusion

The Great Famine of 1876–1878 exposed the structural fragility of rural life in the Ceded Districts. Monsoon failure and crop loss were the immediate causes, but repeated agricultural shocks, limited household reserves, dependence on wage income, rising grain prices, and unequal access to relief made the crisis more destructive. Colonial authorities opened relief works, arranged grain depots, and used railway transport, yet administrative concern with expenditure and eligibility shaped the reach and adequacy of assistance. A stronger district history should next reconstruct monthly rainfall and crop reports, prices, relief enrolment, migration, mortality, and revenue remissions for Bellary, Kurnool, and Cuddapah separately. The most productive research path is to combine the official famine record with local archival and vernacular evidence. Such work would clarify not only how the famine unfolded, but also how households experienced it and how its effects shaped the region's later agrarian history.

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