

New Insights into the Debates on Rural Indebtedness in 19th Century Deccan

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The peasantry in the Deccan suffered from widespread indebtedness during the 19th century. In March 1881, after touring the rural areas of Poona and Ahmadnagar districts, which were still recovering from the devastations caused by famine and the credit crunch followed by the peasant revolt of 1876–79, Mahadev Govind Ranade proposed the establishment of agricultural-shetkari banks. The nationalists led by Bal Gangadhar Tilak opposed the proposal. This article explores the debates on peasant indebtedness and the intervention of nationalists on behalf of the moneylenders to oppose even limited measures to assist peasants in the rural economy.

In the pre-colonial Deccan of the 17th century the peasantry, as far as their liability to the state was concerned, comprised two categories – those who paid little or no rent to the State and those who paid high rent. The first category was dominated by affluent Brahmins and elite Marathas who owned most of the fertile lands as rent free or *inam* lands. The *inams* were land grants often for the services rendered to the state. In the Deccan, villages and at times groups of villages were held as *inam*. In the Badami taluka of Belgaum district 76 complete villages and 42% of arable land in the remaining 151 villages were held as *inam*.¹ So what was available for cultivation to the second category of tax paying peasants called *mirasdars* (holder of hereditary rights) and *uparis* (without hereditary rights) was less fertile land. This category comprised a few landlords who were peasants from the Maratha-Kunbi castes and the rest owned less than five to 10 acres of land. Both the *inamdars* and the landlords hired wage labourers while the peasantry utilised family labour and offered surplus labour to *inamdars* and landlords. According to Utsa Pattnaik the “ratio of hired labour to family labour is [the] single most reliable criterion for categorising the peasantry”.²

The pre-colonial Peshwas collected taxes through tax collectors called *mamlatdars* who according to Sumit Guha were known to be “rigid, unfeeling and often corrupt tax gatherers”.³ The *mamlatdars* would seize the village crops until the revenue was paid.⁴ In case of famine, the peasants either perished or migrated to other parts. The famines of 1789–91 and 1802–03 drastically reduced the population.⁵ Ravinder Kumar states that the peasants could not complain against the *mamlatdars* and the Peshwa rule “imposed great suffering on the peasants”.⁶ Therefore, even before the British conquest, rural indebtedness was widespread in the Deccan.⁷

After the defeat of the Peshwa in 1818, Mountstuart Elphinstone, who incorporated newly acquired territories, retained the entire structure of revenue administration but subordinated the *mamlatdars* to British collectors. In 1835, the ryotwari settlement called the Bombay Survey System was introduced. The assessment made in the settlement though it reduced the rates of revenue on poorer soils, was not based on a share of the gross produce, the net produce or the rental value for fixing the revenue.⁸ William Wedderburn who worked as district judge throughout the Deccan criticised the government “for levying 20 rupees whether the crop is worth 960, 320 or 80 rupees”.⁹ He called this the “root cause of mischief for the misery of the Deccan peasants”.¹⁰

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The second important result was that the increase in the colonial government's demand for land revenue compelled the peasants to use as much land as possible for crop production.¹¹ The cotton boom of the 1860s too encouraged this expansion. According to Brahma Nand's calculation, this expansion was around 14.75 to 23.33 million acres or 60% during 1855-95.¹² This commercialisation of agriculture was wholly financed by the credit of merchant-moneylenders.¹³ The landlords who received credit at the rate of 12% essentially undertook this.¹⁴

During the famine period, even the peasants who did not go for agricultural expansion had to resort to borrowing from the moneylender for meeting his liabilities to the government and also to feed his family. Famines also reduced the cattle population, which forced the average peasant to be dependent upon the village moneylender for survival who charged an exorbitant interest rate of 25%.¹⁵ When a peasant borrowed from the moneylender, the right of occupancy was transferred to the moneylender and the peasant continued to work on the same land as a tenant, his wife and children became virtual serfs of the moneylender. Recurring famines transformed individual peasants into virtual tenants.

Moneylending in the rural Deccan was dominated by the affluent Chitpavan Brahmins along with Gujarati and Marwari moneylenders. They were called the *sahukars*. They owned a shop stocking the daily necessities of the peasantry like grains, cloth, vegetables oil, salt and ironware. Besides lending money for these necessities they also advanced small sums of cash to pay land tax. The peasants pledged their livestock and land as security for the loan. If a peasant borrowed Rs 10, at the end of 10 years from the date of the loan, after having repaid Rs 110 he would still owe Rs 220 to the creditor, which was 33 times the sum actually borrowed.¹⁶ So the amount originally borrowed by the peasant was a small fraction of his total debt.¹⁷ The debt often continued for generations and usually the tenant was unaware of the actual source of the debt. The moneylender never returned the land back to the cultivator and used the civil courts to take possession of the land. The settlement officer of Hoshangabad reported that "there is hardly a single moneylender who is not a landlord".¹⁸

In 1851 it was estimated that about 95% of the peasants in Poona district were in debt to moneylenders and on an average, the interest paid by the villagers exceeded the state revenue demands. Peasants who were paying Rs 10 to 20, as tax owed as much as Rs 1,000 to Rs 2,000 to *sahukars*.¹⁹ By 1870, a large number of peasants were working on their own fields as hired labourers.

1 The Deccan Revolt

The peasants were not the only ones to suffer at the hands of the moneylenders. The Koli-fishermen, the Dhangars-shepherds and the Ramoshi tribes were equally indebted to the moneylenders. These groups constantly attacked the moneylenders since 1829.²⁰ By 1873-74, these attacks became intense in western parts of Poona and Ahmadnagar districts. An influential Koli chief Honya attacked the moneylender with the help of a well-trained gang. The exploits of Honya encouraged the Kunbi peasants to take on the moneylenders.²¹ The 1875-76 famine worsened the situation

and the indebtedness became grave. The scanty rainfall resulted in crop failures and aggravated the already existing distress situation. The gravity of the situation can be further judged by the statistics provided by Amiya Kumar Bagchi. In 1839-40 in Poona district the tillage was 1,95,438 acres and land revenue collected was Rs 6,70,966, Rs 1,06,399 was remitted and the outstanding amount was Rs 4,944 whereas in 1875-76, the tillage was 18,75,475 acres, the revenue collected was Rs 11,26,729 the amount remitted was Rs 34,805 and the outstanding amount was Rs 7,037.²² The refusal of the Bombay government to order the suspension of large amounts of revenue in times of distress was the immediate cause of the revolt.

The Poona Sarvajanic Sabha took an active interest in agrarian problems. The sabha, was started by Ganesh Vasudeo Joshi who was popularly known as *sarvajanic kaka* ("public uncle" for his tireless and unselfish efforts for public good) to act as a mediating body between the government and the people of Poona. Joshi was the first to wear and popularise khaddar or handspun cloth as a means of providing jobs to the rural poor and protest against the abolition of tariff on British imports in 1870. Under the guidance of Joshi and Mahadev Govind Ranade the sabha defended the interests of the peasants. It collected data on the peasants' liability to the government, moneylenders, rainfall, and grain reserves. It submitted a report to the government questioning the validity of the enhanced land revenue, and extended its support to the peasants who were resisting the newly revised revenue demand.²³ Vasudeo Balwant Phadke a young Chitpavan Brahmin was an employee at the Military Finance Office in Poona. He came under the influence of Joshi. He wore khaddar like Joshi and travelled extensively throughout the Deccan assessing the effect of drought and the consequent distress state in 1875-76.²⁴

Phadke went beyond his mentor. He organised tribal Ramoshis, Dhangars-shepherds and Kunbi peasants. They made use of weekly bazaars for communicating their ideas to the peasants in neighbouring villages and organised the village servants, craftsmen and agricultural labourers.²⁵ They threatened the moneylenders with acts of violence if they refused to handover documents and bonds to the rebels.²⁶ The rebels systematically destroyed the documents relating to loans. The impoverished Deccan peasants were interested in destroying the records of debt transactions and they resorted to violence only when such attempts were resisted. The revolt took place throughout the Deccan and Konkan but was intense in the districts of Poona and Ahmadnagar. Over 1,000 peasants were arrested and special police posts were quickly set up in a number of villages.²⁷ In July 1879, Phadke was arrested and Joshi put up a spirited defence in court but could not save him. Phadke was sentenced to transportation of life in 1880. He was kept in a prison in Aden where he died in 1883.²⁸

The Deccan revolt witnessed a class type of consciousness as tribal, shepherd, artisan and peasant communities collectively rebelled against the moneylenders. In spite of this unity the revolt failed to achieve its twin objectives, i e, to liberate the peasants from the clutches of the moneylenders and reduce the heavy assessment by the colonial revenue authorities. However,

it served as a warning to the government, that if the interests of the peasants remained neglected for long the Deccan would witness similar revolts time and again.

2 The Deccan Agriculturists Relief Act

A commission headed by William Wedderburn was appointed in the 1870s to inquire into the causes of the Deccan revolt. Wedderburn was a district judge of Ahmadnagar at the time of the revolt, as a result he had first hand information on peasant indebtedness. A random survey conducted by the commission revealed that 55.7% of the peasants in Ahmadnagar had an average annual income of less than Rs 100. The commission felt that the peasants could be strengthened in three ways: (i) the government could assume the responsibility of providing them with cheap credit; (ii) it could modify the legal system in their favour; and (iii) reduce peasants' liability to the State. The Bombay government accepted the first two proposals but rejected the third. The governor of Bombay presidency, Richard Temple asserted the right of the government to defend Kunbis from the moneylenders but refused to consider that the land revenue was responsible for the misery of the Deccan peasants. He stated before the famine commission that a reduction of land revenue would not protect the peasants against famine and that high assessments only aggravated a famine and did not cause it.²⁹ The Bombay government passed the Deccan Agriculturists Relief Act (DARA) in 1879.

The DARA abolished imprisonment for non-payment of debts. If the peasants failed to repay the debt, his tools and land were exempt from attachment. It tried to safeguard the peasants against fraud by creditors in the original transaction of the loan. For this purpose, first, a valid bond between the peasant and the moneylender had to be drawn up under the supervision of a village registrar. Second, the Act provided for conciliators who were required to resolve disputes between a peasant and a moneylender through informal arbitration. The village headmen-*patils* – were to be officers of the court, responsible for enforcing the decree. Third, if such efforts failed then the peasants and moneylenders could proceed to the newly created *munsiff's* courts, which were situated within easy reach of the villagers. The parties in dispute could appeal to the subordinate judges only after going through the conciliators and *munsiffs*. Fourth, the subordinate courts had to investigate carefully the background of debt transactions. Fifth, the time limitation on lender's suit to recovery of debts was also extended from three to 12 years. So the Act aimed to restore the balance of power in the villages in favour of the peasants, which would also protect their interests from encroachment by moneylenders.

The glaring defect of the Act was that it did not reduce the assessment. The rigidity of revenue collection and higher tax rates were indeed the major cause of peasant impoverishment in the Deccan. This was in fact questioned by all those who were genuinely concerned with the welfare of the peasants. Wedderburn criticised the government for leaving the revenue system untouched.³⁰ Jotirao Phule criticised the Act for failing to recognise the heavy revenue demands as the main reason for peasant indebtedness.³¹ Ranade criticised the Bombay government for not reducing the basic rate of revenue assessment.³² The Bombay

government did not accept the plea for reduction of assessment and the introduction of flexibility in revenue collection.

2.1 Nationalists and Their Opposition to the Act

Here, class refers to a population standing in a particular relationship to the means of production, status and income grouping. The nationalists in Maharashtra came from an economically powerful class and were closely connected with the defence of landed interests. In the pre-capitalist societies, "land remained overwhelmingly the single most important source of wealth and the basis of production".³³ It determined human relationships in terms of "master-servant" and enabled unlimited control of the master not only upon the productive ability of the servant, but also upon the latter's life. The social and familial relations denote unqualified obedience to the master. Bal Gangadhar Tilak often criticised the colonial rule for "changing the traditional well established master-servant relationship by giving power to the servants to appeal to the government against the master".³⁴

The group of nationalists in Maharashtra included Vishwanath Narayan Mandalik, one of the biggest landlords and related to the Peshwa family, and Bal Gangadhar Tilak, who came from a family of *mamlatdars* and moneylenders. This group also consisted of local magnates like Ganesh Joshi (also known as the *vasukaka* of Satara whom Tilak considered his mentor), Dada Saheb Khaparde, Mahadeo Ballal Namjoshi, Ramachandra Ganesh Barve, Balwant Ramchandra Natu, Hari Ramachandra Natu, N C Kelkar and K P Khadilkar, who came from either landed or moneylending families. They called themselves as "*rashtravadi-nationalist*" and opposed social and economic reforms proposed by Ganesh Vasudeo Joshi, Mahadev Govind Ranade and Gopal Krishna Gokhale by calling them "un-national *sudharaks*" (reformers). They articulated their opinion in the columns of the nationalist weekly the *Mahratta* established by Bal Gangadhar Tilak in 1881. They attacked DARA for ignoring the interests of the *sahukars*. Tilak criticised Phadke's revolt as a "hare brained attempt of the misguided person".³⁵ He declared that Phadke "organised bands for the purpose of looting" and warned the traders that "if the present state of things continued, more people would be committing the dacoities".³⁶

Tilak began his criticism of the DARA with an attack on "the right of the alien government to interfere in the internal affairs of the Hindu society". He criticised the British "for destroying the harmony in the villages by interfering on behalf of the peasants".³⁷ Tilak was actually aware of the extent of peasant indebtedness. He quoted the findings of the subordinate judge of Tasgaon, which stated that the "debt of the agriculturists in that Taluka which contained only forty-nine villages at not less than thirty lakhs equal to about eighteen times the assessment of the villages". Tilak accepted it and used it to argue that "hence the insolvent ryot has, properly speaking, no credit. Lending money to him is at best a risky speculation...If the government therefore does not wish to utterly ruin the *Sahukars* for having helped, (the) *Kunbi* must pay the debt".³⁸ Tilak argued that the DARA was enacted "for legally plundering the *Sahukar*". He criticised the courts for "fixing the interest on the loan not exceeding the original capital".³⁹ Tilak argued that "the provisions of DARA

struck at the root of the existence of the Brahmin and Marwari moneylenders".⁴⁰

The Conciliatory System

The "conciliatory system" introduced by the Act, which aimed to extend the courts into the villages, drew severe criticisms from Tilak. The Poona Sarvajanik Sabha welcomed the conciliatory system and called it "an imaginative variation of pre-British Panchayat system". Tilak criticised Ranade for undermining the powers of the existing judicial system by supporting the conciliatory system. He demanded the immediate abolition of the conciliatory system and expressed his implicit faith in the colonial judicial system.⁴¹

Ranade, as a judge, supervised the working of the conciliatory system during 1880-85 argued that "the chief objective of the Conciliatory System was to protect the person and property of the agriculturists from attachment, because the moneylender abused the power, which the law placed in his hands".⁴² To this Tilak replied bluntly:

we are sorry, we cannot understand the above argument...A Kunbi cannot avoid the necessity of going to a Sahukar. A Kunbi has very little or no personal property, except implements, husbandry, bullocks and a few necessities of life. These are all exempt from attachment by the civil procedure code. Sahukar who advances money has therefore to rely upon the crops for repayment and these too have been protected by the Act, then leaving the Sahukar no security for his advances.⁴³

Tilak insisted that "the Sahukar could not be regarded as the sole cause of peasant's indebtedness and it was the rigid revenue system, which was at fault".⁴⁴ Tilak argued that "the moneylender as an important member of the village community had rendered yeoman's services to the society and above all to the Kunbi in times of distress. He is the god of the agriculturists".⁴⁵

Tilak's defence of the interest of the moneylender was not just economic but social and political too. The reformers argued that the peasants were not only impoverished but also socially disadvantaged.

William Wedderburn, compared the emancipation of the Deccan peasants to the model emancipation of the European serfs from feudal bondage which had not only economic but political potential as well. Tilak described the abolition of imprisonment for debt as "misplaced and misdirected charity (that) threatened to disturb the whole fabric of social organisation" and warned the reformers of "the impending social upheaval that would result if the Act was not repealed".⁴⁶

Tilak's Arguments

The social upheaval that Tilak wrote about was initiated by Jotirao Phule who established the Satyashodhak Samaj in 1873. By 1881, the Satyashodhak movement had begun to penetrate into rural society⁴⁷ and the non-Brahmin leaders, whom Tilak admitted later, "were demanding the kind of respect that was traditionally accorded to a Brahmin".⁴⁸ A large number of recruits to the Satyashodhak movement were the Kunbi peasants. Tilak criticised Ranade and the reformers who "in their zeal to introduce alien ideas of equality had denied the respectability to the traditional elites like the Kulkarnes – hereditary village accountant and

Sahukar".⁴⁹ Ranade while proposing the list of respectable men for the village conciliatory system gave importance to the newly emerging educated middle class, which was receptive to changing premises of human behaviour. In the new system; the landed elites like the Kulkarnis were summarily avoided. This was the demand, which Phule had been making for some time.⁵⁰ The Chitpavan reformers who came from non-landed background supported Ranade. Tilak criticised Ranade for "woeful betrayal of caste interests" and "dividing the Chitpavan community".⁵¹ Tilak repeatedly argued that the conciliatory system would lead to the break down of social order. By opposing the DARA and the agricultural bank, Tilak was not only opposing the economic and judicial help to peasants, but also their subsequent challenge to traditional authority. The enactment of DARA had immediate effect. Within months, the sahuksars began to lose cases against the peasants in the courts.⁵²

The opposition to the Act from Tilak and other nationalists made both Ranade and Wedderburn address a series of public meetings to put forward their argument in support of the new law. Both argued that the insolvent Deccan peasant had no movable property and the courts had a moral responsibility to defend the peasants from moneylenders.⁵³ Countering "the moral responsibility" argument of Ranade, Tilak responded that "the actual moral responsibility is to prevent the peasant from becoming a cheat as under the Act a peasant in distress situation could plead insolvency before the courts and not repay the debt".⁵⁴ Tilak who a year earlier had argued that the sahuksars were rendering a service by lending to beggarly peasants, now asserted that the "Kunbis had more than enough unmovable property".⁵⁵

Tilak's argument that the peasants had enough property and that the moneylenders were rendering a valuable service by advancing loans to peasants in times of distress is disputed by all the writers on the condition of peasants in the 19th century Deccan. In fact, moneylenders were the major contributing factor to land alienation in the 19th century in the Deccan. The *deshmukh* of Parner in Ahmadnagar district had 500 acres of land in 1818 and by 1875, the lands completely passed into the hands of local moneylenders.⁵⁶ The condition of subsistence peasants was worse. After the 1870s, famine lands gradually started passing on to the hands of moneylenders. Wedderburn pleaded in 1884 that "the percentage of holder of land under five acres is fast decreasing and called for making arrangements to provide work for the daily increasing number of labourers".⁵⁷

Tilak's second argument that there was little capital available for investment in the agricultural sector cannot be corroborated by the contemporary sources available. The report of the commission appointed to enquire into the working of the DARA mentioned that the local moneylender agreed that lending was more profitable than shopkeeping.⁵⁸ The availability of capital for investment in agriculture was not limited and it was profitable for those in moneylending to continue to engage in the area rather than make productive investment.⁵⁹ When the moneylenders found it difficult to lend money to the peasants under the new Act, a group of sahuksars from Poona proposed the institution of agricultural banks to find avenues of profitable employment of capital that lay idle in their hands. According to this proposal, the

revenue officials had to collect dues from the peasants along with annual revenue. The Bombay government refused to act on behalf of the sahumars. Evelyn Baring, the finance member of the viceroy's Executive Council, applying the experience of agricultural banks in Egypt to the problems of rural India, opposed the indiscriminate extension of assistance to moneylenders.⁶⁰

3 The Agricultural Bank

The DARA brought the courts closer to the villages and restricted the flow of capital from the moneylender to the peasants.⁶¹ There was an immediate necessity of providing alternative credit to the peasants. Ranade and Wedderburn proposed the establishment of agricultural banks to provide loans at a lower rate of interest to the peasants.⁶² Ranade argued:

even under most favourable circumstances the peasant hardly finds decent maintenance. Add to this, [is] his extreme indebtedness and accidents of droughts and he at these times becomes involved in a vortex of overwhelming difficulties and the establishment of agricultural banks would provide much needed respite to the peasants.⁶³

According to this scheme, the agricultural banks would borrow money from various sources and lend it to the peasants at an interest rate of 12%. This scheme, if implemented, would have freed the peasants from the clutches of moneylenders who were charging 24% to 36% per annum; added to this was the additional charge for renewal of bonds every year.⁶⁴ Tilak once again attacked Ranade "for being partial to peasants and introducing hardships to the Sahukars".⁶⁵ He asked the government to accept "the proposals of the Poona moneylenders who had a sincere desire to improve the condition of the poor peasants and wanted to secure proper repayment of their capital with reasonable interest within reasonable time".⁶⁶ If this was not acceptable then "the best option before the government is to discard the proposal of the agricultural banks and repeal the DARA and restoring the old system in its entirety". Tilak repeatedly questioned "the right of the alien government to interfere in the internal relations of various classes".⁶⁷

Tilak's attack on the DARA and on the establishment of these banks had considerable effect. Though the DARA was not abolished, the proposal for the bank was not cleared by the secretary of state for India. Tilak was delighted that "the desires of the minority that has stood bravely...in the controversy of the propriety or otherwise of the Loan Banks scheme" had been heeded.⁶⁸ The nationalists as accepted by Tilak were in a minority yet they could campaign much more vigorously and defend "Indian interests from alien government" more vocally than what Ranade and the reformers could do to defend the interests of the peasants. Hence the colonial government did not risk bringing about legislation, as it had elicited widespread opposition from the nationalists. Though the secretary of state refused permission to start an agricultural bank, the government of Bombay approved the establishment of such a bank on a trial basis in the Purandhar taluka in 1888. Tilak criticised the enthusiasm behind the experiment:

We still believe that the success anticipated for the scheme and the benefit to the Ryot pointed out would be more imaginary than real... philanthropy is out of question The question of the poverty of the Ryot

is a large one, and it is doubtful how far agricultural banks would help its solutions; but this much is certain that an organised body of Sahunars would be better able to protect their and their debtors' interests than the present detached individuals.⁶⁹

Tilak called upon "the local Sahunars to organise on the modern system of banking to defeat such ventures".⁷⁰ Due to stiff opposition from the nationalists and moneylenders, the bank was closed down within a year.

The consistent nationalist opposition to DARA and the agricultural banks made the government wary of undertaking further measures to improve the condition of the peasants during 1880-96. Though the Act empowered the peasants to protect themselves from the ruthless exploitation of the moneylenders, due to the chronic lack of agricultural capital, peasants were forced to return to the mercy of the moneylender who now demanded a complete sale deed against the money lent to the peasants.⁷¹ The land alienation continued at a faster rate than ever before through the mortgage of land in exchange for loans. The land thus transferred always went into the hands of the moneylending and non-cultivating classes.⁷² By the end of the 19th century in some talukas of Thana district, 70% of land had changed hands from the original owner cultivator, tribal, and fishermen to non-resident Parses, Brahmins and Banias chiefly from Bombay city.⁷³

4 The Famines of 1896-1900

The monsoon rains failed in 1896 and the merchant-moneylenders bought and hoarded the stocks of grains in Poona and other small towns in order to capitalise on the anticipated shortage. Grain riots broke out within three months.⁷⁴ The colonial government as in the earlier famines was ill-prepared to tackle the situation. Tilak demanded that the relief work ought to be done in consultations with the leaders of the concerned places and wrote passionately about the scarcity of food and water. He called upon the grain merchants "to take normal profit" and established a shop to sell foodgrains at "cheapest rates".⁷⁵ Tilak also criticised the government for not suspending tax collection and the continued extravagance of the government. The government was reluctant to grant the suspensions and remissions of the land revenue, which had been specified in the Famine Relief Code that was drawn up after the famine of 1870s.⁷⁶

By this time, the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha had been captured by the nationalists. Tilak set out to do what the sabha did during the 1876 famine. He now needed new supporters as the Nattu brothers and Barve faced criminal charges for their involvement in the Hindu-Muslim riots during 1894-96. He appointed seven young men all from either landed or moneylending backgrounds – N C Kelkar, Achut Sitaram Sathe, Shivram Mahadev Paranjape, Shankar Ganesh Lawate, V K Rajwade, Mahadkar, and Narayan Shivram Barve – to travel throughout Deccan to begin a no tax campaign.⁷⁷ They visited small towns and villages and preached to the villagers not to pay taxes.

The campaign did not have the effect desired by Tilak. The 1896-97 famine was uneven and affected the eastern and the southern parts while the nationalist activity was concentrated in the western part of the presidency. Rains failed in Nasik, Ahmadnagar, Sholapur and Bijapur and there was little response

in these districts. Whereas in Thane and Kolaba which were the least affected by the famine, there was a determined “pay no rent” campaign. Tilak supported the demand for suspension and remission claimed by the non-agriculturists by stating that they had done so for the sake of the peasants.⁷⁸ The Bombay government rejected Tilak’s demand and retaliated by ordering the confiscation of property of the richest defaulters, which resulted in immediate payment of land revenue even by the poor peasants, who otherwise would have been exempted according to the Famine Relief Code of 1879. Tilak’s no-tax campaign was also unsuccessful because in his own constituency, the inamdars, fearing a reduction in their own rent, did not support the campaign.

The Deccan Sabha

The reformers responded to the famine differently. They had been without an organisation after the nationalists had captured the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha. The failure of monsoon in July 1896 made Ranade, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Raghunath Daji Nagarkar, Vishnu Moreswar Bhide and Gangarambhai Muske establish the Deccan Sabha to assist the peasants.⁷⁹ The sabha deputed its members to meticulously collect village by village information on rainfall, the condition of kharif and rabi crops, fodder for cattle, drinking water, grain stocks, and the health of the people and the livestock. This formed the basis of six memorials to the government urging it to lighten the load of the revenue collection. Each village had different requirements. Some villages had drinking water but no fodder for the cattle, while others had fodder but no drinking water.⁸⁰ They also suggested village-wise remedies like temporarily shifting 43 lakhs of cattle, 35 lakhs of sheep and goats to nearby forests by trains, starting of a railway line between Barsi and Pandhrapur and increasing the wages of men and women employed in the public works.⁸¹ The sabha demanded equal wages for both men and women and cash compensation for children. The government accepted the proposals, agreed to the railway line, increased the wages of men and women from one and a half and one anna to three annas for both and the compensation for children from half to one and a half annas.⁸² It opened the forests for grazing but refused to take responsibility of transporting the cattle. It also gave one anna to non-working children for their maintenance.⁸³ The Deccan Sabha and the acting chief secretary to the Bombay government J Monteath were in constant touch with each other.

The Deccan Sabha closely monitored the relief measures and criticised the government when the number of male workers declined. The government on its part explained that very often people turned up with children, not to work but to collect the allowances given to non-working children and in many cases women with children were working while the men remained idle in the villages.⁸⁴ Such close monitoring of relief measures contributed to an overall decline in death rates during 1896 in comparison to 1876. The Deccan heaved a sigh of relief as the rains started in the last week of November and the Deccan Sabha began to plead for *tagai* loans for the peasants to buy seeds and write off some of it as bad debt.⁸⁵ The government agreed for a remission of Rs 48.2 lakh and suspension of Rs 64.2 lakh for the three divisions of the Deccan.⁸⁶

Revenue Collection in Inam Lands

The famine of 1896 was not a single season phenomenon. Rainfall was scanty throughout 1897-1900. Added to this misery, widespread plague further devastated the Deccan. The peasantry lost 20% of their livestock and the plague caused 12 million deaths.⁸⁷ Many peasant households had members working as industrial labour in the textile mills of Bombay and other towns of western India who perished in the plague. The Deccan peasantry had not recovered even partially by 1900. Within three years of his no-rent campaign and even before the famine ended Tilak began to personally request the government “to strictly collect the taxes in the Inamdar’s lands”. Legally the inamdars had no powers to collect the revenue and had to depend upon the government officials. Tilak criticised “the village officers who are kept quite independent of all control of the inamdars and collude with the tenants in not collecting the revenue”. Tilak urged the Bombay government to order an inquiry into the non-collection of revenue in the inam lands:

the Inamdars have not the same control over the village officers as the government...The authority of the Inamdars over the village officers is not commensurate with their own dignity...we hereby make an appeal to Lord Northcote personally and trust his lordship will bestow his particular attention on the subject and earn the gratitude of the inamdari class.⁸⁸

The government objected to such suggestions on the ground “that such powers in the hands of inamdars would enable them to misuse it”. Tilak, in turn, called it “as the government desire to do away with any active agency between themselves and the peasants.” Tilak now elevated the pro-inamdar agitation to an anti-British one. He held that under the British rule, the inamdars had lost the old prestige and power and the government was encouraging the peasants to revolt against their masters.

The advent of the British government has topsy-turvyed the entire fabric of the mutual relations between the inamdars, who should be the king, the Hakdars who are his dependents the village officers who should be his servants and the tenants who occupy the place of his subjects. And as things stand at present the inamdar has become outlander or even an outlaw in his own capital; while the Hakdars and the tenants who have duties to perform towards the inamdars, are indirectly encouraged to defy and even rebel against him owing to the countenance gratuitously given to them by the alien government... The inamdars has been grossly sinned against in the recovery of their dues.⁸⁹

In order to put an end to the miseries of the inamdars, Tilak called upon the people “to revive the old systems – traditional village organisations destroyed by the colonial rule”.⁹⁰ Tilak once again made a personal appeal to the Bombay government “to invest Inamdars with both revenue and judicial powers...to take prompt measures for preventing tenants from doing away with the field’s produce”. He also stressed that “the interest of the British is served better as powerful Inamdars would work as effective local magnets for the government”.⁹¹ However, the Bombay government rejected the suggestions.

The nationalist response to the peasant indebtedness was guided by caste-class interests. Tilak often identified himself with “real leaders of the Hindu society – Deshmukhs, Deshpandes, Deccan Sowkars, Konkani Khots and Inamdars”. He also insisted that the opponents of economic and social reforms advocated by Ranade

were "titled nobility".⁹² Tilak criticised the colonial rule for levying excessive revenue but did not press for reduction in land revenue. This was because if the colonial government reduced the revenue then it would be confined not only to the ryotwari villages but would also include inamdari and khoti villages. This would adversely

affect the income of the landed elites. Tilak in his no tax campaign of 1897-98 asked the peasants not to pay taxes in the ryotwari villages but, on the other hand, personally requested the colonial government to stringently collect taxes in the inamdari villages during the same famine period, leading to similar conclusions.

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