

Subject:

History

Title:

The Role of the Colonial Power in Institutional Arrangements for Disaster Management in India

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Abstract:

The history of the British colonial power is the history of exploitation, oppression and endless drain of wealth to Britain from the Indian subcontinent. At the same time there had some contributions which the Indians indirectly benefitted from British thinking, innovation and measures. Modern thinking in different spheres of public life and government set up actually started in India after British came to India. During the reign of the British, the country faced a number of catastrophic events in the form of famines, floods, plagues which severely affected common people particularly public health and economic sector came to a serious challenge. To counter such challenges, the British government, had to take some policy actions and institutional measures although such actions and measures were not adopted keeping in mind Indian people rather British officials, armies and their family members were their main concerns. Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to study the role of the colonial power in institutional arrangements for disaster management in India.

Keywords:

Benefits, Colonial Power, Disaster Management, Exploitation, Institutional Arrangements

Introduction:

Famine was very frequent and devastating among all catastrophes during the British period in India. It resulted in millions of deaths since 18th century to the early 20th century. There were a number of factors which caused famine in the country. Sometimes natural factor, sometimes government policy and actions and sometimes combination of both factors resulting unimaginable deaths and human sufferings. The foundation of British rule in India indeed established by the British East India Company. As there was no specific legal arrangement to govern foreigners during the Mughal period, the Company grew their own legal and political authority in different parts of the country, which gradually increased with the decline of the Mughal Empire (Madan, 1989). Under the Charter of 1693, the East India Company acquired the right to acquire territory, fortify their stations, and defend their property by armed forces. From 1757 to 1857, five major laws were enacted to regulate the functioning of the British East India Company and to help them rule over India, i.e. Regulating Act of 1773, the Pitts India Act of 1784, the Charter Act of 1813, the Charter Act of 1833 and Charter Act of 1853. It is important to note that the Royal Charter of 1600 defined the constitution, powers and privileges of the East India Company and initially it gave permission to the Company to trade with Asia, Africa and countries, ports and islands of the American continent (Aggarwala, 1964).

However, the Battle of Plassey made the English the supreme masters of Bengal (Aggarwala, 1964); and also marked the beginning of the political supremacy of the English East India Company in India (Madan, 1989; Bandyopadhyay, 2004). Later on, the Battle of Buxer (1764) completed what Plassey had begun (Madan, 1989). The British initially sought permission for trade from the Indian rulers and set up their trade centres in the coastal regions particularly Bombay, Madras and Bengal Presidencies (Madan, 1989). Since the 1750s, India's economic interests were wholly subordinated to those of Britain (Chandra, et al., 2008). Some of the devastating famines in the colonial history occurred in Bengal province in 1770, in Madras in 1876-1878, in Chota Nagpur in 1896-1897, 1899-1900 in different parts of India and 1943 Bengal famine. In 1770, famine took place when East India Company was ruling. In the 1770s, an estimated 10 million people

died in the Bengal famine. Famines during 1875-1902 in different parts of India took a toll of 26 million people.

East India Company's raising of taxes disastrously coincided with this famine and exacerbated it, even if the famine was not caused by the British colonial government. Following this famine, successive British governments were anxious not to add to the burden of taxation. The Madras famine affected 58.5 million people over 2 years. It was caused by a drought that led to crop failure in the Deccan Plateau.

In the second Bengal famine in 1943, over 3 million people perished of starvation. And the official death toll was estimated at about 1.5 million (Famine Inquiry Commission, 1945; Sen, 1981; Debnath & Chakraborty, 2024). According to W. R. Aykroyd, who was a member of the Commission, it was an underestimate because it took little account of roadside deaths, even some people declared to be 3-4 million (Aykroyd, 1974; Sen, 1981; Debnath & Chakraborty, 2024).

The impact of the famine on the East India Company was colossal as revenues from Bengal declined to £174,300 in 1770–71. The stock price of the East India Company fell sharply as a result. As result, the company was forced to obtain a loan of £1 million from the Bank of England to fund the annual military budget of between £60,000–1 million. It is important here to note that in 1901, the Famine Commission found that twelve famines and four "severe scarcities" took place between 1765 and 1858.

Objective

There exist a vast literature which confirms that the history of the British colonial power is the history of exploitation, oppression and endless drain of wealth to Britain from the Indian subcontinent. At the same time there had some contributions which the Indians indirectly benefitted from British thinking, innovation and measures. In this context, this paper seeks to study the role of the colonial power in institutional arrangements for disaster management in India.

Disaster Management Practice in Ancient India

Disaster management is a modern day's concept, but if we try to trace its origin we need to look into ancient Indian epics and treaties particularly Kautilya's Arthashastra which would provide us the meanings of disaster (calamity) and a teaching how to manage those disaster events both natural and man-made. Kautilya regarded calamity as a chronic problem for the subjects as well as the king. Kautilya had talked about a lot on natural calamities in Arthashastra. Book 8, Chapter 1, section 127 of this treaty has comprehensively discussed calamities. Actually, in India, the systematic way of managing disasters goes back to 4th century BCE. To Kautilya, a calamity has a divine or human origin, which comes from either ill luck or wrong policy (Kangle, 1972).

In the modern days, we often divide disasters into two categories viz. natural and man-made. Kautilya called them 'Vyasana'. In Sanskrit, the words nipata, pidana, apatti/vipatti, and vyasana are used for calamity. He had classified the vyasana or calamities into two: Daivam (natural) and Manusama (man-made). Daivam signifies that it is divine. It is not only Kautilya but also the western scholars viewed that a natural calamity is an act of God. He mentioned eight types of daivam or natural calamities in his book. These are as follows: famine (durbhiksha), flood (udaka), fire (agni), epidemics (vyadhi), rats (musaka), beasts (vyala), snakes (sarpa) and demons (raksamsi).

Kautilya used to believe that there is no control over daivam or natural vyasana, but in the case of manusama or man-made vyasana, human beings are primarily responsible. He discussed all types of disasters broadly and gave his advice on how to prevent those calamities properly. After all, Kautilya warned and

reminded the king about the duty to protect his subjects from these calamities. To Kautilya, flood or water is the worst of all disasters. He expressed that the fire burns (at the most) a village or half a village; floods, on the other hand, carry away hundreds of villages. Kautilya was the early pioneer of modern day's disaster warning system. Moreover, he was also concerned about guilt or punishment in case of violations of respective duties at different levels of disaster. He opined that who do not go to the rescue activities must be punished, or the fine would be twelve panas.

Now a brief look should be given upon a few notable pre-independence legislation concerning disaster management particularly flood in the country. In this regard, the Bengal Irrigation Act of 1876 comes first, which dealt mainly with the construction, maintenance, and regulation of irrigation canals. The scheme for the protection of lands from floods can also be drawn up under Section 43 of the Act (The Bengal Irrigation Act, 1876). The Bengal Embankment Act, 1882 was intended to make better provision for the construction, maintenance, and management of embankments. The Act had empowered the Collector or the Magistrate to take the initiative regarding the construction and repairing of embankments for public safety. We can also refer to the Bihar Public Irrigation and Drainage Works Act of 1948. This was a pre-constitution act received the assent of the Governor on 24 March 1947 aimed at making construction, improvement, and maintenance of irrigation, drainage and other works for land improvements in the state of Bihar. Ultimately, the act had been associated with flood control works in India.

Institutional Arrangements for Disaster Management in India (1830-1947)

Although rule by the British colonial power in India had many dark sides still the British period was the phase of awareness concerning calamities in India. Indeed, the British laid down the foundation of studying natural disasters in the country. The East India Company and the British Government had the economic interest in India. As an imperial power, their primary motive was commercial profit, so the welfare of the native Indians was not their main priority. In other words, they only knew how to drain wealth from India to Britain. It is very much clear in the writings of Dadabhai Naoroji, R. P. Dutta and M. G. Ranade. The British administrators were also aware of the fact that calamities and its subsequent result as disasters negatively affect the economy. To stabilize their regime in India, they considered calamities like famine and drought a severe threat to the administration. Under such circumstances, British officials in India started writing research papers on different types of calamities and disaster. And also the colonial government had planned to set up some commissions and committees to deal with natural calamities. Based on these commissions and committees' reports, the government was forced to adopt a few decisions and policies to deal with disasters. The First Famine Commission was set up in 1878 under the Chairmanship of Sir Richard Strachey. The commission recommended state interference in food trade in the event of famine.

The Famine Commission laid down the foundation for the first Famine Code in 1878. The code outlined the role and function of the administration to avoid extreme distress. The commission further recommended the formation of a separate Department of Agriculture in 1881. Natural calamities like flood and drought were brought under the supervision of the Ministry of Agriculture for the first time. The erstwhile Ministry of Agriculture has now become the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare. Earlier Ministry of Agriculture was known as the Department of Agriculture. Following the famine during 1876-78, a special fund of 1.5 crores was arranged in 1882 that was known as the Famine Relief and Insurance Fund. In the post-independence, the decision of the Finance Commission of India to provide a fund for relief works in disasters was the credit of the British.

The British established the first climatic observatory at Alipore, Calcutta (now Kolkata) on the recommendation of Census Commission after the disastrous famine of 1876-1877 in November 1879.

Throughout the period, the British officials and writers wrote a good number of books, articles, reports, and documents on different aspects of natural disasters. The British established a Meteorological Department in 1875 (Kapur, 2009). Not to forget that the British Government also set up a Military Department in 1786. This Military Department played a seminal role during the time of disasters like floods, earthquakes and famines. This was the precursor of the present day's Ministry of Defense. We witnessed several times that in modern days the army is the crucial stakeholder in disaster management irrespective of floods, earthquakes, landslide, forest fire or man-made disasters such as terror attack, infrastructure collapse, in every situation; army takes an instrumental role in relief and rescue operations. Only in eight years from 1994 to 2002, the army was called nearly 126 times for disaster management in India (Kapur, 2009). Even as an international relief organization, an office of the Red Cross Society was also set up in India in 1920. Thus, it could be said that the British were quite aware of the impacts of natural disasters on the society particularly on economy. The colonial regime was aware that dealing with such disasters is essential to be in power for a longer time. In the pre-independence period, the British Government had established institutions for disaster management. Two vital institutions were set up, which are still functioning in Independent India. One is Indian Meteorological Department and other is Central Water Commission.

I. Indian Meteorological Department:

In 1875, to bring all meteorological works under a central authority, the British colonial government established this department. The Indian Meteorological Department is the prime government agency in all matters relating to meteorology and seismology. Before establishing IMD, British East India Company set up weather forecasting stations at Calcutta in 1785 and Madras in 1796. There are six regional meteorological centres at Mumbai, Chennai, New Delhi, Kolkata, Nagpur and Guwahati at present in the country. Now, it works under Ministry of Earth Sciences (IMD, 2020).

II. Central Water Commission:

The Central Water Commission is a technical organization in the field of water resources. It works under the Ministry of Water Resources, Government of India. The CWC was established in 1945 to promote measures for controlling flood, conservation, and utilization of water resources throughout the country, irrigation, hydropower generation, flood management and river conservation (CWC, 2020).

Conclusion

Disaster management is an important aspect of modern day's governance worldwide. For effective management of disasters there predominantly require awareness and preparedness. In regard to the British Government in India, they were quite aware about the economic loss due to drought and famines. Therefore, the British took some measures to deal with the adverse effects of disasters particularly famine.

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