

CHAPTER 1

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY & SPIRITUALITY OF DROUGHT

The onset of drought brought the threat of starvation to some people and the promise of gain to others. It forced people to alter their behaviour to suit the new circumstances. Some followed strategies to better ensure their survival. Others capitalised on the fresh opportunities for profit. However, these behavioural changes were bound by the specific set of options available to each occupational group. People changed their conduct during drought but still operated within their occupational horizons. This chapter examines the behaviours of moneylenders, grain dealers, revenue intermediaries, and wealthy ryots during drought, and in particular their effects on the general public and on the poorer ryots. Furthermore, it explores the strategies pursued by the poorer ryots in sourcing food. Thus, this chapter considers the political economy of drought in the 1820s and 1830s and asks who gained and who lost during the subsistence crises. It also examines how drought was interpreted from a spiritual perspective, and how the faith of especially the poor was challenged during such times of dearth.

This chapter, and indeed this thesis, will not examine the British efforts to reform the operations of the moneylenders and the revenue intermediaries, as these efforts did not relate directly to the Bombay administration's scarcity-relief policies in the 1820s and 1830s. For instance, only after the Deccan riots of 1875, in which cultivators protested against the transfer of their land into the hands of local moneylenders, did the Bombay Government react in a manner that related to scarcity-relief. It attempted to provide cultivators with an alternative to borrowing from moneylenders by increasing the availability of takavi, or state agricultural loans.¹ Prior to 1875, however, the colonial authorities offered takavi loans for long-term economic development and scarcity-relief without the added intention of competing with the moneylender. British reformist attitudes towards the grain dealer, on the other hand, were central the administration's grain trade scarcity-relief policy in the 1820s and

¹ Ian J. Catanach, *Rural credit in western India, 1875-1930: rural credit and the co-operative movement in the Bombay Presidency*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970, pp. 10-12, 19-20, 24, 42-4, 52.

1830s, and are discussed in detail in Chapter Two. Yet while British efforts to reform the operations of certain occupation groups go beyond the purview of this thesis, the official opinions presented in this chapter of each Indian occupational group should be understood in their own reformist or conservative light.

Grain dealers and moneylenders: the political economy of 'exploitation'.

The grain dealers and moneylenders of Bombay Presidency had migrated from Gujarat in the seventeenth century and from Marwar in Rajasthan in the eighteenth century.² They soon came to dominate money-lending and the grain trade in western India.³ Most peasants saw them as foreigners even after two centuries of their residence.⁴ In most villages the occupations of grain dealer and moneylender were held by the same individual.⁵

Throughout the 1820s and 1830s, the cultivators of western India who produced the grain often did not have ownership rights over the stores of grain. These were instead held by the local grain dealers/moneylenders to whom most ryots were indebted.⁶ Debt was the principal means by which the grain dealers/moneylenders appropriated the ryots' grain. In normal years, moneylenders issued loans to the middle and lower orders of ryots. This was to enable them to fund what some British officials considered to be 'expensive ceremonies' required by the borrowers' 'religion or domestic relations'.⁷ At least as important, the moneylenders often provided the ryots with seeds to sow, the money to buy the seeds, and sometimes even the agricultural assets necessary for cultivation like ploughs and cattle. As a return on their investment the moneylenders typically appropriated the ryots' harvest at the time of year when

² H. Fukazawa, 'Agrarian Relations, Western India', Dharma Kumar, (ed.), *Cambridge Economic History of India*, vol. 2, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 182.

³ David Hardiman, 'Usury, dearth and famine in western India', *Past and Present*, vol. 152, Aug, 1996, p. 123.

⁴ Ravinder Kumar, *Western India in the nineteenth century: a study in the social history of Maharashtra*, London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1968, pp. 34-5.

⁵ While this dual function should always be kept in mind, the terms grain dealer, or moneylender, or grain dealer/moneylender, will be used when most suitable.

⁶ T. H. Townsend, Act Ahmednagar Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 29 Nov 1832, BRP, 31 Dec 1832, No. 6807, APAC; and J. Vibart, Ahmedabad Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 20 Nov 1832, BRP, 31 Dec 1832, No. 6802, APAC; and J. Burnett, Act 1st Asst Poona Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 17 Nov 1832, BRP, 28 Nov 1832, No. 6430, APAC; and A. Elphinston, Ratnagiri Cltr, to Rev Cmr, 18 Mar 1839, BRP, 17 Apr 1839, No. 2612, APAC.

⁷ W. C. Andrews, 2nd Asst Surat Cltr, to Surat Cltr, 20 May 1825, BRP, 6 Jul 1825, No. 31, APAC; and Hardiman, 'Usury, dearth and famine', pp. 120-1.

grain prices were at their lowest, and then often resold the grain back to the ryots out of season when prices were higher.⁸ These transactions suited the grain dealers/moneylenders more than the cultivators, who usually had few alternatives.

Moreover, the British Government of Bombay typically demanded its revenue be paid in money and not in grain. It often demanded that some of its revenue be paid before the harvest. Most ryots lacked the necessary funds at this inopportune time, and were forced to borrow from their local moneylender. The moneylenders saw to the ryots' revenue obligations, but later appropriated their harvests to recoup their loans.⁹ The sheer weight of revenue demanded by the Peshwa, and subsequently by the British, opened the door further for the moneylenders to enter the lives of the western Indian peasantry.¹⁰ Fukazawa has observed this process under the Peshwa, and Hall-Matthews has noted the same process under the British.¹¹ By these means the grain dealers/moneylenders came to own the lion's share of the country's grain supply. As Datta has stated, during drought 'the producers ... became net consumers of grain'.¹²

Thus, for the ryots to ensure access to food it was imperative for them to maintain a good relationship with their creditor, particularly during times of dearth. The moneylender-ryot relationship of the 1820s and 1830s was typically long-standing and was in some ways mutually beneficial.¹³ Fukazawa has argued that the moneylenders' supply of capital was essential to the cultivators' 'productive process'.¹⁴ Especially when the ryots' seeds failed to germinate in the soil from a lack of rain, the ryots benefited from borrowing funds from the moneylenders to purchase

⁸ Hardiman, 'Usury, dearth and famine', pp. 113-4; and David Hall-Matthews, 'Colonial Ideologies of the Market and Famine Policy in Ahmednagar District, Bombay Presidency, c. 1870-1884,' *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 36, no. 3, 1999, p. 307; and J. A. Dunlop, Sthn Konkan Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 18 Feb 1824, BRP, 10 Mar 1824, pp. 1235-8, APAC; and Henry Pottinger, Ahmednagar Cltr, to Sholapur Sub-Cltr, 20 Nov 1824, BRP, 15 Dec 1824, pp. 7986-7, APAC; and Thomas Williamson, Act Kaira Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 20 Feb 1824, BRP, 9 Mar 1825, No. 53, APAC; and L. R. Reid, Sec to Govt, to Rev Cmr, 22 Nov 1833, BRP, 27 Nov 1833, No. 6452, APAC.

⁹ J. A. Dunlop, Sthn Konkan Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 18 Feb 1824, BRP, 10 Mar 1824, pp. 1237-8, APAC; and Henry Pottinger, Ahmednagar Cltr, to Sholapur Sub-Cltr, 20 Nov 1824, BRP, 15 Dec 1824, p. 7987, APAC; and Sanjay Sharma, *Famine, Philanthropy and the Colonial State: North India in the Early Nineteenth Century*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 198.

¹⁰ For a detailed description of the heavy revenue demands of early British rule, see Chapter Eight.

¹¹ Fukazawa, p. 183; and Hall-Matthews, 'Colonial ideologies', p. 307.

¹² Rajat Datta, 'Subsistence Crises, Markets and Merchants in Late Eighteenth Century Bengal', *Studies in History*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1 February, 1994, pp. 93-5.

¹³ L. R. Reid, Act Rev Cmr, to Chief Sec to Govt, 11 Mar 1832, BRP, 23 May 1832, No. 2934, APAC.

¹⁴ Fukazawa, pp. 182-3.

food and the agricultural assets necessary for continuing cultivation.¹⁵ The moneylenders thus represented a safety net to ryots facing bankruptcy. By ensuring their debtors did not go bankrupt the moneylenders also benefited through maintaining the flow of debt repayments.¹⁶ Hardiman has argued this point in less favourable terms. To him the moneylender-peasant relationship was a parasitical one that required a live host.¹⁷ Regardless, drought heightened the importance of the ryots' relationships to their moneylenders.

Yet the poorest ryots were often unable to secure agricultural loans from the moneylenders during drought. While drought increased the business available for the local moneylenders, it also increased their chances of going bankrupt. The moneylenders were themselves borrowers from wealthy urban bankers. They secured loans from the city based on the assets of their grain store and of their ryots' likely crops. Drought reduced these assets and forced the moneylenders to contract their loans or become impoverished themselves. Drought thus forced the moneylenders to choose whom to continue supporting and whom to cut loose. Richer ryots represented a smaller risk on their investment, so the poorest ryots were often denied loans at the time of their most dire need.¹⁸ The Acting Northern Konkan Collector, Richard Mills, reported in 1825 that because of the drought 'few soucars are willing to advance money'. The poorest ryots' 'means of carrying on cultivation' was therefore 'blocked up'.¹⁹ Similar instances of creditors cutting loose their debtors were reported during the 1831-5 scarcity.²⁰ During normal years the moneylenders sought profit through offering their service of financing agricultural endeavours. This service provided benefits to the general cultivating populace. Drought, however, threatened the viability of the moneylenders' business, and self-preservation determined that specifically the poorest ryots be denied the loans they needed to cultivate.

¹⁵ Statement by A. Freese, no date given, attached to J. Thackeray, Principal Dharwar Cltr, to Deccan Cmr, 15 Sep 1824, BRP, 6 Oct 1824, p. 6302, APAC; and R. K. Pringle, Asst Poona Cltr on Deputation, to Poona Cltr, 8 Jul 1825, BRP, 10 Aug 1825, No. 39, APAC.

¹⁶ Hall-Matthews, 'Colonial ideologies', p. 307; and Sumit Guha, *The Agrarian Economy of the Bombay Deccan, 1818-1941*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 188; and Fukazawa, p. 183.

¹⁷ Hardiman, 'Usury, dearth and famine', p. 127.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 127-9.

¹⁹ R. Mills, Act Nthn Konkan Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 18 Mar 1825, BRP, 30 Mar 1825, No. 58, APAC; see also R. K. Pringle, Asst Poona Cltr on Deputation, to Poona Cltr, 8 Jul 1825, BRP, 10 Aug 1825, No. 39, APAC.

²⁰ T. Williamson, Rev Cmr, to Sec to Govt, 26 Aug 1833, BRP, 4 Sep 1833, No. 4982, APAC; and R. Mills, Ahmednagar Cltr, to Rev Cmr, 14 Aug 1833, BRP, 4 Sep 1833, No. 4868, APAC; see also Sharma, *Famine*, p. 211; and Hall-Matthews, 'Colonial ideologies', p. 307.

Still, even the cultivators who were fortunate enough to secure a loan were faced with the moneylenders' sizeable interest rates. In this regard, Hardiman's description of the moneylender-ryot relationship as parasitic might hold true. The standard rate of interest in western India in 1826 was 24 per cent.²¹ This rate seems to have gone unchanged throughout the period of this study. By 1875 moneylenders were typically still charging 24 per cent.²² Hardiman has argued that western Indian moneylenders 'expropriated the fruits of much of their clients' labour'.²³ Currie, too, has argued that the moneylenders dominated creditor-debtor relations.²⁴ Yet Fukazawa has emphasised the traditional constraints placed on the moneylenders, whereby their total interest payments were not allowed to surpass the original loan.²⁵ This was not the case in several districts during the 1838-9 drought, however, in which it was reported that through usurious interest rates the moneylenders were receiving two or three times more than the principal in repayments.²⁶ Currie has noted that, at least during the second half of the nineteenth century, a new bond was typically drawn up every three years that added compound interest to the original loan. This kept the ryots perpetually in debt.²⁷

Some officials within the Bombay administration, such as the Collector and Surveyor Robert K. Pringle, considered the high interest rates to be justified by the high risk involved for the moneylenders.²⁸ Yet other officials considered the interest rates to be too high. Thomas Williamson, the Acting Kaira Collector, observed in 1824 that the ryots were often forced to fall into the 'ruinous practice' of taking loans from the moneylenders, 'from whose intervention they are seldom free'.²⁹ The Assistant

²¹ Fukazawa, p. 183.

²² Ian J. Catanach, *Rural credit in western India*, p. 224.

²³ Hardiman, 'Usury, dearth and famine', p. 121.

²⁴ Kate Currie, 'Famines in 19th Century Indian History: A Materialist Alternative to Ecological Reductionism', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1986, p. 477.

²⁵ Fukazawa, p. 183.

²⁶ H. E. Goldsmid, Asst Ahmednagar Cltr, to Nasik Sub-Cltr, 16 Aug 1838, BRP, 30 Jan 1839, No. 681, APAC; and Babool Govind Sett, and 15 other Tannah petitioners, to Act Sec to Govt, 12 Oct 1838, BGP, 27 Mar 1839, No. 76, APAC; and Raum Urree Gaundee and Others, Poona Petitioners, to Act Sec to Govt, 21 Jan 1838, BGP, 4 Apr 1838, No. 57, APAC.

²⁷ Kate Currie, 'British Colonial Policy and Famines: Some Effects and Implications of "Free Trade" in the Bombay, Bengal and Madras Presidencies, 1860-1900', *South Asia*, vol. xiv, no. 2, 1991, pp. 39-40.

²⁸ R. K. Pringle to J. Vibart, 17 June 1840, Revenue Department, 1844, 107/1664, Bombay Archives, cited in David Hardiman, *Feeding the Baniya: Peasants and Usurers in Western India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 58; and see Catanach, *Rural credit in western India*, pp. 14-15.

²⁹ Thomas Williamson, Act Kaira Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 20 Feb 1824, BRP, 9 Mar 1825, No. 53, APAC.

Broach Collector, Robert Boyd, reported in 1824 that the ‘usurious interest’ rates of the moneylenders would ‘sink [the ryots] still deeper in misfortune’.³⁰ Henry Pottinger, the Ahmednagar Collector, also asserted that the moneylenders extracted ‘usurious’ rates of interest from their debtors, and that they would ‘extort the last seer of grain from him’ and ‘deprive him of the only means of subsistence for himself and family for many months’.³¹ The Southern Konkan Collector, John Dunlop, argued in 1824 that the ryots were forced to borrow ‘at great loss to themselves’.³² Drought therefore further impoverished many already poor ryots through increasing their liabilities.

In their function as grain dealers, the grain dealers/moneylenders stood to profit from the high grain prices created by drought. Years of abundance were bad years for the grain dealers/moneylenders because the excess grain drove down prices and forced them to store their surpluses to the extent that their ‘credit would allow’. They had to wait for ‘more favourable times’.³³ When drought struck, the fear amongst the middle and upper orders of an eventual famine made them amenable to immediately paying inflated prices for the old grain. T. H. Townsend, the Acting Ahmednagar Collector, reported in 1832 that the monsoon had recently failed and that the increased ‘price is evidently in anticipation of a scarce season and cannot be the result of a sudden deficiency of grain’.³⁴ Archibald Robertson, the Khandesh Collector, noted in 1824 that the price of grain would ‘rise to a much higher price, higher even than I trust the stores actually in the country warrant that it should do’. But, he continued, ‘the great eagerness with which all classes are entering the market ... will necessarily produce this effect’.³⁵

Furthermore, the grain dealers stoked public fears by colluding and hoarding their supplies of grain and blaming the drought’s destruction of crops for the reduced

³⁰ R. Boyd, Broach Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 23 Dec 1824, BRP, 12 Jan 1825, No. 14, APAC.

³¹ Henry Pottinger, Ahmednagar Cltr, to Sholapur Sub-Cltr, 20 Nov 1824, BRP, 15 Dec 1824, p. 7987, APAC.

³² J. A. Dunlop, Sthn Konkan Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 18 Feb 1824, BRP, 10 Mar 1824, pp. 1237-8, APAC.

³³ John A. Dunlop, Sthn Konkan Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 23 Aug 1824, BGP, 15 Sep 1824, p. 5170, APAC.

³⁴ T. H. Townsend, Act Ahmednagar Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 20 Nov 1832, BRP, 31 Dec 1832, No. 6803, APAC; see also N. Kirkland, Act Broach Sub-Cltr, to Surat Cltr, 2 Sep 1833, BRP, 25 Sep 1833, No. 5354, APAC.

³⁵ A. Robertson, Khandesh Cltr, to Deccan Cmr, 1 Oct 1824, BRP, 3 Nov 1824, pp. 6969-70, APAC.

supply.³⁶ John Burnett, at Poona, reported in 1832 that a recent and sudden increase in the price of grain could only be explained by a combination between the grain dealers.³⁷ G. W. Anderson reported from Dharwar in 1833 that grain was ‘comparatively abundant, yet the dealers refuse to dispose of it in sufficient quantities’, which had created ‘a state of distress which the real state of things did not warrant’.³⁸ Thus, scarcity prices were determined by the point at which the heightened public demand for grain met the reduced amount of grain the merchants were willing to supply.³⁹

Hence, drought did not necessarily cause an overall lack of grain. On the contrary, in each drought of the 1820s and 1830s the grain supply was generally sufficient to meet the immediate needs of the entire populace.⁴⁰ R. Barniwall, the Kathiawar Political Agent, reported in 1824 that grain prices were very high despite the fact that there was, to his estimation, an entire year’s supply of grain stored in the region.⁴¹ Similarly, E. H. Briggs, the Assistant Kaira Collector, reported in 1833 that despite the fact there was ‘two year’s consumption in the country’, the grain dealers were causing ‘unnecessary distress’ by prematurely increasing ‘their prices to the famine price’.⁴² Grain was not as scarce as the grain dealers wished people to believe.

Yet the panicked rush to market of the middle and upper orders created an immediate and unnecessary scarcity for the lower orders. Their fear allowed the grain dealers to profit at the expense of the poor.⁴³ Barniwall noted in 1824 that the grain dealers were ‘naturally’ taking ‘advantage of the general failure of the crops and of an increased demand’. Their artificially high prices were ‘not within the means of the poorer class’,

³⁶ J. B. Simson, Sholapur Sub-Cltr, to Ahmednagar Cltr, 22 Jan 1825, BRP, 23 Feb 1825, No. 69, APAC; and C. Prescott, 1st Asst Kaira Cltr in Charge, to Chief Sec to Govt, 3 Sep 1833, BRP, 18 Sep 1833, No. 5139, APAC; and G. W. Anderson, Act Dharwar Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 27 Dec 1832, BRP, 23 Jan 1833, No. 270, APAC.

³⁷ J. Burnett, Act 1st Asst Poona Cltr in Charge, to Sec to Govt, 8 Nov 1832, BRP, 21 Nov 1832, No. 6178, APAC.

³⁸ G. W. Anderson, Act Dharwar Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 4 Jan 1833, BRP, 23 Jan 1833, No. 297, APAC.

³⁹ Hall-Matthews, ‘Colonial ideologies’, p. 327.

⁴⁰ A. Robertson, Khandesh Cltr, to Deccan Cmr, 1 Oct 1824, BRP, 3 Nov 1824, pp. 6969-70, APAC; and R. Mills, Act Poona Cltr, to Rev Cmr, 30 Dec 1832, BRP, 6 Feb 1833, No. 610, APAC; and R. Mills, Ahmednagar Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 3 May 1833, BRP, 22 May 1833, No. 3062, APAC.

⁴¹ R. Barniwall, Kathiawar Political Agent, to Sec to Govt, 29 Sep 1824, BGP, 20 Oct 1824, pp. 5915-6, APAC.

⁴² E. H. Briggs, Asst Kaira Cltr, to Kaira Cltr, 23 Aug 1833, BRP, 18 Sep 1833, No. 5140, APAC.

⁴³ Currie, ‘British Colonial Policy’, p. 52.

and despite the ample supply of grain in the region distress was ‘already felt’.⁴⁴ Amartya Sen has argued in his influential work, *Poverty and Famines*, that people typically starve not necessarily because there is an overall shortage of grain, but rather because, as individuals, they lack the ownership rights to a sufficient portion of society’s food supply.⁴⁵ In Sen’s words, the poor individual’s ‘endowment’ remained the same, that is, what he could offer in exchange for food. But the increased prices charged by the grain dealers reduced the poor individual’s ‘exchange entitlements’ to food, that is, what he would receive in exchange for his offer.⁴⁶ Keen has challenged Sen’s argument on the basis that, in his study of the Darfur famine of the late 1980s, it was the richer ‘Dinka’ farmers of southern Sudan who died in great numbers.⁴⁷ Yet as Keen himself has argued, the primary cause of the famine amongst the ‘Dinka’ was not economic, but was rather political in the form of ‘Baggara’ military raids.⁴⁸

Sen’s ‘exchange entitlements’ argument seems very applicable to the economics of drought in western India in the 1820s and 1830s. James D. DeVitre, the Kaira Judge, argued that ‘the necessities of the People’ were ‘entirely at the mercy of private speculation’.⁴⁹ Likewise, Bombay petitioners complained in 1833 that the prevailing prices were ‘exceedingly inaccurate and appear to be downright impositions’, which were ‘most injurious to the poor community earning a little substance’.⁵⁰ Similar complaints were voiced in 1838.⁵¹ Each of the three droughts of the 1820s and 1830s thus presented an opportunity for the grain dealers/moneylenders to make a considerable profit, which they seized with both hands. Meanwhile the poorest members of society were to look elsewhere for their subsistence.

⁴⁴ R. Barniwall, Kathiawar Political Agent, to Sec to Govt, 29 Sep 1824, BGP, 20 Oct 1824, pp. 5915-6, APAC.

⁴⁵ Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: an essay on entitlement and deprivation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981, pp. 1, 43-4.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 45-7.

⁴⁷ David Keen, *The Benefits of Famine: a political economy of famine and relief in southwestern Sudan, 1983-1989*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994, pp. 76-7.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 78, 92, 98, 109-11.

⁴⁹ J. D. DeVitre, Kaira Judge, to Sec to Govt, 16 Aug 1824, BGP, 1 Sep 1824, pp. 4792-3, APAC.

⁵⁰ Ramchunder Condoolia, and 66 Other Bombay Petitioners, to Sec to Govt, 1 Aug 1833, BGP, 14 Aug 1833, No. 27, APAC; see also E. H. Townsend, Act Ahmednagar Cltr, to Rev Cmr, 10 Dec 1832, BRP, 9 Jan 1833, No. 80, APAC.

⁵¹ Nursoo Havildar and 295 other Bombay Petitioners, to Act Sec to Govt, 5 Oct 1838, BGP, 24 Oct 1838, No. 20, APAC.

However, the grain dealers' business was arguably of benefit to the general public in some respects. By incurring the cost of storing grain during abundant years, and recouping that cost by selling the old grain during drought years, the grain dealers were providing a service to the populace by somewhat smoothing the peaks and troughs of grain's overall price and consumption. J. A. R. Stevenson, the Dharwar Collector, argued in 1824 that considerable stores of grain had been held by the grain dealers, 'which they have for a long time been unable to dispose of, but are now commencing to bring it into the markets, which keeps the price from rising greatly'.⁵² Thus, the introduction of grain stored from previous years greatly reduced what would otherwise be much higher grain prices during drought.

Still, the prices were set very high. High prices were in the grain dealers' interest, but were also, it may be argued, in the general interest. Their prices sent a signal to the general public that drought necessitated limited consumption, and that prolonged drought required a careful fostering of the food supply. Pottinger stated in 1824 that the price of grain was 'very high indeed', and that there was 'grain sufficient in the Country to feed even the whole population for nigh on ten months on the reduced scale of consumption which necessity will oblige all classes to adopt'.⁵³ Thus, the high prices set by the grain dealers had a rationing effect that was, perhaps from one perspective, beneficial to general society in the long run.

Yet it has been shown that the grain dealers were not rationing their sales with the intention of conserving the district's food supply, but were rather maintaining a sense of urgency among their customers to keep the prices high. Moreover, they were rationing their sales in case the price of grain rose still further, which would enable them to make even better profits. These prices were set higher than the poorest members of society could afford. Arthur Crawford reported from Ahmedabad in 1824 that 'the grain merchants are now as might be expected taking every advantage of the badness of the times by refusing to sell more than very small quantities of grain at a time, sometimes indeed they will not let you have any, unless for prices above the

⁵² J. A. R. Stevenson, Dharwar Cltr, to Principal Dharwar Cltr and Political Agent, 12 Aug 1824, BRP, 1 Sep 1824, p. 5571, APAC.

⁵³ H. Pottinger, Ahmednagar Cltr, to W. Chaplin, Deccan Cmr, 24 Sep 1824, BGP, 13 Oct 1824, p. 5778, APAC.

professed rate of the day'.⁵⁴ Although the grain dealers' high prices and restriction of sales provided some benefit in rationing the overall grain supply, this 'benefit' was mitigated by the fact that an inefficient grain supply was not the main cause of suffering during the scarcities of the 1820s and 1830s. Rather, such suffering was caused by the grain dealers' high prices that excluded society's poorest members from the market.

It could be argued that the grain dealers provided a public service, particularly during drought, by exporting grain from surplus districts and importing into deficit districts. This interpretation was the dominant discourse of the British administration throughout most of the nineteenth century. It was a perspective held by several Bombay officials during the 1820s and 1830s. John H. Cherry, the Northern Konkan Collector, reported in 1824 that in Kalyan the grain supply would 'not last beyond November' but 'the grain merchants are in treaty with those of Bombay for the purchase of grain expected from the Malabar Coast and Bengal'.⁵⁵ Similarly, Crawford reported from Ahmedabad that the 'very great distress' caused by the drought would have been 'much greater had not large importations of Badgere⁵⁶ and wheat been made from Malwa and the Northern Provinces'.⁵⁷ Through the grain dealers' established networks, districts fortunate enough to have experienced a good season could export their surplus to 'their less fortunate neighbours'.⁵⁸ The grain dealers' decisions regarding where best to export were influenced somewhat by each region's rain supply. Boyd noted in 1824 that a fall of rain 'just experienced' in Kathiawar had effectively cancelled a planned export of grain from Broach to that region.⁵⁹ This suggests grain dealers were well-informed and flexible exporters who sent grain where it was most needed. As long as the grain was exported to a district in

⁵⁴ A. Crawford, Ahmedabad Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 30 Sep 1824, BGP, 30 Oct 1824, p. 5740, APAC.

⁵⁵ J. H. Cherry, Nthn Konkan Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 11 Oct 1824, BGP, 20 Oct 1824, pp. 5920-1, APAC.

⁵⁶ Bajra/Bajri: 'A grain much cultivated throughout India, a species of panic or millet (*Panicum spicatum*). Bajri properly denotes a smaller kind which ripens earlier. It is also applied to the stalk of either sort used as fodder – *Wilson – Bombay*. *Panicum spicatum* – A kind of grain sown in June or July, reaped in September or October. Grain much used in cold weather for food – *N.W.P.*' *A Glossary of Vernacular Judicial and Revenue Terms, and other useful words occurring in official documents relating to the administration of the Government of British India*, Compiled in the Department of Revenue, Agriculture, and Commerce, Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1874, p. 9.

⁵⁷ A. Crawford, Ahmedabad Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 18 Apr 1825, BRP, 4 May 1825, No. 18, APAC.

⁵⁸ John A. Dunlop, Sthn Konkan Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 23 Aug 1824, BGP, 15 Sep 1824, p. 5169, APAC.

⁵⁹ Robert Boyd, Officiating Broach Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 23 Aug 1824, BGP, 15 Sep 1824, p. 5185, APAC.

greater need, the grain dealers' actions were beneficial in smoothing the geographical differences in grain supply. They benefited the poor in the importing districts through increasing the local food supply.

However, both Hardiman and Datta have argued that grain dealers exported only to districts that could afford to purchase their grain. This excluded regions with insufficient purchasing power.⁶⁰ Thus, regions suffering from scarcity that were poor were bypassed. Hall-Matthews has added that grain dealers would be reluctant to export grain to regions with artificially inflated prices, as this would automatically draw out the grain hoarded by local grain dealers and force prices down to a level not worth the exporter's expenditure. Furthermore, he has argued that exporters were reluctant to jeopardise their lucrative contracts for supplying Europe and other overseas locations by diverting the flow of grain to unfamiliar inland districts.⁶¹ Chakrabarti has noted that districts with a strong import trade in normal years were more likely to receive food during scarcity through their well-established trade links.⁶² Thus, regions that lacked a strong import trade or sufficient purchasing power were ignored.

Even worse, if the price was right grain dealers could export grain from districts suffering unfavourable seasons, which further increased prices in the exporting districts and worsened the plight of their poor.⁶³ Hall-Matthews has noted that the pull of overseas markets often meant grain was exported even from famine-stricken districts.⁶⁴ Chakrabarti has added that districts with a strong export trade in normal years often continued exporting during famine.⁶⁵ Conversely, Bayly has found that the districts with weak trade networks in normal years suffered less during drought.⁶⁶ Bombay Presidency's droughts of the 1820s and 1830s were the scene of similar

⁶⁰ Hardiman, 'Usury, dearth and famine', p. 132; and Datta, p. 82.

⁶¹ Hall-Matthews, 'Colonial ideologies', pp. 328-9.

⁶² Malabika Chakrabarti, 'The Famine of 1896-97 in the Bengal Presidency: Food Availability Decline or "Exchange" Crisis?', *Calcutta Historical Journal*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1994, pp. 7-9.

⁶³ A. Crawford, Sholapur Sub Ctr, to Ahmednagar Ctr and Mgst, 4 Dec 1823, BRP, 14 Jan 1824, p. 219, APAC.

⁶⁴ Hall-Matthews, 'Colonial ideologies', pp. 328-9.

⁶⁵ Chakrabarti, 'The Famine', pp. 7-9.

⁶⁶ C. A. Bayly, 'The Age of Hiatus: The North Indian Economy and Society, 1830-50', in C.H. Philips and M.D. Wainwright (eds), *Indian Society and the Beginnings of Modernisation, c. 1830-50*, London, 1976, pp. 96-9; C. A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770-1870*, Cambridge, 1988, p. 291, both cited in Sharma, *Famine*, p. 204.

happenings. Crawford observed in Ahmedabad in 1824 that despite the anticipation of the ‘greatest distress’ brewing in his Collectorate, the grain dealers were still ‘exporting considerable quantities of grain out of our Districts’.⁶⁷ Henry Robertson reported from Poona that ‘there is no likelihood of a severe scarcity in this Collectorate ... provided the grain which is now in it is not exported to other places’.⁶⁸ Pringle noted in 1832 that local grain dealers were exporting grain from his drought-stricken district of Sholapur.⁶⁹ So the grain dealers did not necessarily export from areas with a grain surplus. Furthermore, they did not necessarily direct the flow of grain to where it was most needed. Rather, grain was sent to the most lucrative and reliable markets from any origin.

Revenue intermediaries: the political economy of ‘corruption’.

Drought also provided the prospect of gain for revenue intermediaries. In between the revenue-paying ryots and the revenue-demanding Government was a chain of revenue intermediaries who helped the Government assess the ryots’ revenue obligation. They also helped the Government decide whether remissions on that revenue obligation were required during drought, and whether agricultural loans should be issued. As such, the revenue intermediaries were well placed to intercept funds passing between the Government and the ryots.

The four main intermediaries and their means of embezzling public funds will be considered. Whether in years of drought or abundance, the kulkarnis, or village accountants, dealt with complex accounts beyond the understanding of a largely illiterate cultivating populace. As Kumar has noted, this provided the kulkarnis with considerable power in manipulating the flow of a range of revenue streams.⁷⁰ The patels, or village headmen, were charged with collecting the revenues from the villagers and passing them up to the Government. Villages were sometimes leased to patels, and in such cases they based their bids for leases on estimations of the villages’ productive capacities. But they sometimes overestimated and were forced to request

⁶⁷ A. Crawford, Ahmedabad Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 30 Sep 1824, BGP, 30 Oct 1824, p. 5740, APAC.

⁶⁸ H. D. Robertson, Poona Cltr, to Deccan Cmr, 25 Aug 1824, BGP, 15 Sep 1824, p. 5161, APAC.

⁶⁹ R. K. Pringle, Sholapur Sub-Cltr, to Rev Cmr, 7 Nov 1832, BRP, 28 Nov 1832, No. 6427, APAC.

⁷⁰ Kumar, pp. 30-1; see also John A. Dunlop, Sthn Konkan Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 15 Aug 1824, BRP, 12 Jan 1825, No. 44, APAC.

remissions from the Government in the agreed revenue obligation.⁷¹ Patels also sometimes requested government funds to invest in their ryots' productivity, such as for the purchase of seed and cattle and the building and repair of wells.⁷² The patels therefore handled numerous streams of funds that they could siphon into their own pockets. Mamlatdars, or taluka-level revenue collectors, could recommend to the Government remissions on the revenue obligations of certain villages, and could oversee the issue of government agricultural loans to the ryots.⁷³ Karkuns, or the Collector's clerks, occasionally set the ryots' annual revenue assessments on the Collector's behalf, and were sometimes sent to investigate suspicions of corruption among other revenue intermediaries.⁷⁴ The revenue intermediaries were therefore well situated to line their pockets even in normal years.

Drought increased the number of opportunities available for revenue intermediaries to peculate funds.⁷⁵ The threat that the drought presented to their wealth also provided an impetus to offset any losses through embezzlement. As Kumar has noted, the Government typically responded to drought by offering its cultivators an increased amount of remissions and agricultural loans. This increased the opportunities for revenue intermediaries to tap into the flow of funds.⁷⁶ The intermediaries could also elicit further government funds by exaggerating the severity of the drought. Because of the Collector's uncertainty regarding where the rains did and did not fall, and the sheer size of the district under his charge, he was vulnerable to misinformation from his subordinates. Pringle remarked in 1824 that 'there are a few villages where whole or part of the lands have fortunately received the contents of a passing cloud', but continued to say 'the instances are very rare and it is difficult to say in what quarter

⁷¹ T. Williamson, Asst Ahmedabad Cltr, to Ahmedabad Cltr, 27 Jan 1824, BRP, 10 Mar 1824, pp. 1216-7, APAC.

⁷² Robert Boyd, Officiating Broach Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 2 Apr 1824, BRP, 21 Apr 1824, pp. 2340-57, APAC; and R. K. Pringle, Asst Poona Cltr in Deputation, to Poona Cltr, 8 Mar 1825, BRP, 6 Apr 1825, No. 3A, APAC.

⁷³ W. Chaplin, Deccan Cmr, to Sec to Govt, 4 Nov 1823, BRP, 3 Dec 1823, pp. 9453-4, APAC; and Translation of Circular to Mamlutdars, in A. Robertson, Khandesh Cltr, to Deccan Cmr, 1 Oct 1824, BRP, 3 Nov 1824, pp. 6984-5, APAC; and R. K. Pringle, Asst Poona Cltr on Deputation, to H. D. Robertson, Poona Cltr, 8 Jul 1825, BRP, 10 Aug 1825, No. 39, APAC.

⁷⁴ W. Chaplin, Deccan Cmr, to Poona Cltr, 5 Feb 1824, BRP, 25 Feb 1824, p. 993, APAC; and Chahoo Vent Patell, and 21 other Tannah Petitioners, to Asst Sudder Foujdaree Adawlut Register, 7 May 1838, BRP, 25 Jul 1838, No. 5671, APAC.

⁷⁵ T. Williamson, Rev Cmr, to Sec to Govt, 13 Mar 1834, BRP, 16 Apr 1834, No. 1721, APAC.

⁷⁶ Kumar, p. 94.

the failures have been most intensive'.⁷⁷ Similarly, Crawford reported that setting the revenue assessment of one of his talukas had been a 'very troublesome and laborious undertaking' due to the general 'failure of the rains'.⁷⁸ The revenue intermediaries could therefore misinform their Collector regarding the locations and volumes of rain that fell in his district to their benefit.

The Collector could be misled regarding which ryots should pay their rent in full, which should pay a portion, and which should pay no revenue to the Government at all. He could also be misled regarding which ryots required financial assistance in the form of agricultural loans, and the amount that was required to ensure their continued cultivation. Boyd conceded in 1824 that even in 'ordinary times' the information gathered by his Indian subordinates was 'occasionally extremely imperfect'. But he stated that during the 'unusual calamities' of the prevailing drought he could not 'look upon the amounts assessed on some of the villages without great inquietude and doubt'.⁷⁹ Similarly, Crawford reported that his First Assistant had experienced great difficulty in setting the assessment for Veerungaum taluka 'in consequence of the total failure of the rains', and the 'numerous abuses and frauds that have been practised by almost every officer in the Purgunnah'.⁸⁰ Revenue intermediaries thus capitalized on the Collector's uncertainty during drought by withholding or fabricating information, which allowed for the embezzlement of public funds.

Revenue intermediaries had various options in embezzling public funds during drought. Some options were at the Government's expense, while others were at the ryots'. At the Government's expense revenue intermediaries could overstate the drought's destruction of the ryots' harvests, thereby procuring from the Collector remissions in the Government's revenue demand that the ryots did not require. The intermediaries would then collect the ryots' full rents, pass up only a portion to the Government, and keep the remainder.⁸¹ Intermediaries could also mislead the

⁷⁷ R. K. Pringle, Asst Poona Cltr, to Poona Cltr, 29 Jan 1824, BRP, 25 Feb 1824, p. 978, APAC.

⁷⁸ A. Crawford, Ahmedabad Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 24 Jun 1825, BRP, 13 Jul 1825, No. 28, APAC.

⁷⁹ R. Boyd, Officiating Broach Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 23 Dec 1824, BRP, 12 Jan 1825, No. 14, APAC.

⁸⁰ A. Crawford, Ahmedabad Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 24 Jun 1825, BRP, 13 Jul 1825, No. 28, APAC.

⁸¹ W. Chaplin, Deccan Cmr, to Sec to Govt, 4 Nov 1823, BRP, 3 Dec 1823, pp. 9451-4, APAC; and J. Vibart, Rev Cmr, to Act Chief Sec to Govt, 15 Feb 1839, BRP, 6 Mar 1839, No. 1462, APAC; and J. Vibart, Rev Cmr, to Act Chief Sec to Govt, 28 Mar 1839, BRP, 17 Apr 1839, No. 2483, APAC; see also T. Williamson, Rev Cmr, to Chief Sec to Govt, 22 Jun 1833, BRP, 10 Jul 1833, No. 3829, APAC.

Collector into thinking that government loans were required to support supposedly impoverished cultivators, and then pocket the advances.⁸²

At the ryots' expense revenue intermediaries could accurately state the drought's devastation of the ryots' crops and obtain a remission from the Government but still charge them full rent. This created considerable distress for the ryots. The intermediaries then passed up only the reduced rent demanded by the Government and pocketed the remission.⁸³ Moreover, if the Collector offered drought-stricken villages remissions in bulk, the intermediaries were then able to distribute the individual remissions amongst their allies 'who least require it', and not the 'most deserving objects' for whom the remissions were intended.⁸⁴ Further to the ryots' expense, the revenue intermediaries could correctly inform the Government of the ryots' need for financial assistance to continue cultivating, and then intercept the Government's agricultural loans intended for the struggling ryots.⁸⁵ Another option at the ryots' expense was for the intermediaries to receive the ryots' revenue obligations, and simply keep the money and inform the Government that the ryots did not pay. Such actions would be well hidden in the Collector's revenue accounts safely under the heading of 'arrears' to be collected later, which included vast numbers of ryots who had genuinely failed to pay their revenue obligation because of the drought.⁸⁶ The Government's revenue intermediaries were thus not lacking in methods of corruption, which were often at the expense of the impoverished and struggling ryot.

Because each revenue intermediary within the Government's revenue-collecting establishment ideally represented a check on the ability of other intermediaries to engage in corrupt practices, embezzlement often required complicity. This could be initiated from any link in the revenue chain.⁸⁷ Sometimes patels and kulkarnis approached mamlatdars and karkuns with bribes to obtain their cooperation. At other

⁸² H. D. Robertson, Ahmednagar Cltr, to Rev Cmr, 5 Aug 1831, BRP, 17 Apr 1832, No. 1841, APAC.

⁸³ H. D. Robertson, Poona Cltr, to Deccan Cmr, 1 Feb 1824, BRP, 25 Feb 1824, p. 974, APAC.

⁸⁴ W. Chaplin, Deccan Cmr, to Sec to Govt, 25 Jan 1825, BRP, 23 Feb 1825, No. 2, APAC.

⁸⁵ J. B. Simson, Asst Poona Cltr in Charge of Indapur, to Poona Cltr, 14 May 1824, BRP, 26 May 1824, pp. 3740A-B, APAC.

⁸⁶ W. Chaplin, Deccan Cmr, to Sec to Govt, 25 Jan 1825, BRP, 23 Feb 1825, No. 2, APAC.

⁸⁷ T. Williamson, Rev Cmr, to Chief Sec to Govt, 12 Jul 1833, BRP, 31 Jul 1833, No. 4275, APAC; and C. Norris, Chief Sec to Govt, to Rev Cmr, 26 Jul 1833, BRP, 31 Jul 1833, No. 4277, APAC; and L. R. Reid, Act Chief Sec to Govt, to Act Kaira Cltr, 2 Aug 1839, BRP, 14 Aug 1839, No. 4935, APAC; and T. Williamson, Rev Cmr, to Act Chief Sec to Govt, 12 Jul 1838, BRP, 15 Aug 1838, No. 6139, APAC.

times it was the district officials who approached village officers with a proposition of peculation. James B. Simson, the Sholapur Sub-Collector, reported in 1825 that certain village officers' corrupt activities were 'in some instances by the connivance, if not at the express instigation, of the Moamlutdar and Mhal Kurcherri⁸⁸ generally'.⁸⁹ He later complained that 'every Carkoon and Servant attached to me ... was more or less interested in preventing my acquiring a correct knowledge of the real state of affairs', and 'every Patail and Coolcurni has been both a principal and agent in these rogueries ... extended without exception to every village'.⁹⁰ Similarly, in 1831 Henry Robertson wrote from Ahmednagar that the embezzlement of government loans intended for the cultivators 'could only be successfully practised through a combination of the village and district officers to forge accounts. ... I am sorry to say the late trials I have held prove that such collusions are of frequent occurrence'.⁹¹

The ryots themselves were not always innocent pawns in the intermediaries' game. They, too, stood to gain from misleading officials into believing they had suffered more from the drought than was the case. Thomas Williamson, the Revenue Commissioner, cautioned a subordinate in 1833 that 'vigilance, care and circumspection, will be necessary in preparing the estimates of the failures, otherwise the cultivators will endeavour to deceive or corrupt our native officers'.⁹² Indeed, some ryots colluded with the village officials to mislead the Collector and take their share in the embezzled funds.⁹³

Typically, however, the ryots were the victims of corruption. The effects of drought, such as devastated crops and high grain prices, caused most members of society to

⁸⁸ Mahal, corruptly Mahl, Mhal, Maal, Mohaul, Mehaul, Mal: 'A province; a district; a division of a talook or district yielding revenue according to assessment. ... - *Wilson - Bombay*'. *A Glossary of Vernacular Judicial and Revenue Terms*, p. 66.

Kachahri / Kuchuhree / Kacheri / Kachhahari / Kachhari / Kacheli, corruptly Cutcherry: 'A court, a hall, an office, the place where any public business is transacted; also in Marathi the business carried on there, or the people assembled. - *Wilson - Bombay*'. *A Glossary of Vernacular Judicial and Revenue Terms*, p. 48.

⁸⁹ J. B. Simson, Sholapur Sub-Cltr, to Ahmednagar Cltr, 22 Jan 1825, BRP, 23 Feb 1825, No. 69, APAC.

⁹⁰ J. B. Simson, Sholapur Sub-Cltr, to Ahmednagar Cltr, 29 Mar 1825, BRP, 2 Nov 1825, No. 7, APAC.

⁹¹ H. D. Robertson, Ahmednagar Cltr, to Rev Cmr, 5 Aug 1831, BRP, 17 Apr 1832, No. 1841, APAC.

⁹² T. Williamson, Rev Cmr, to 1st Asst Kaira Cltr in Charge, 28 Sep 1833, BRP, 9 Oct 1833, No. 5547, APAC.

⁹³ R. Mills, Poona Cltr, to Rev Cmr, 18 Oct 1838, BRP, 28 Nov 1838, No. 8843, APAC.

experience at least some losses.⁹⁴ Yet as we have seen, some occupational groups were nevertheless able to profit during drought. Many revenue intermediaries attempted to offset their losses and to gain overall through conspiring with other intermediaries to embezzle public funds. This was to the detriment of both the Government's and the ryots' finances, and was a constant in each of the three main droughts of the 1820s and 1830s.

Wealthy ryots: the political economy of profit and loss.

Guha has argued that drought brought a convergence of wealth by killing the poorest and impoverishing the richest peasants. According to Guha the wealthier ryot had more assets to lose, such as cattle.⁹⁵ Certainly, drought destroyed the crops of the wealthy, as well as the poor, ryots. Pottinger noted in 1824 that the wealthier ryots 'have suffered in common with the poorest'.⁹⁶ However, the wealthier ryots had financial reserves to draw upon to ensure their subsistence and even profit.⁹⁷ Drought represented an opportunity to accumulate important agricultural assets, such as cattle, from the poorer ryots. Cattle were an integral part of the cultivation process. They were used to pull the heavy ploughs needed to adequately break up the soil in preparation for sowing seeds.⁹⁸ Furthermore, their manure provided a good fertilizer.⁹⁹ Drought very quickly reduced the water supply available to the cattle, and killed the grasses upon which they grazed.¹⁰⁰ Drought therefore killed cattle by the tens of thousands. William C. Andrews, the Acting Surat Collector, reported in 1839

⁹⁴ Henry Pottinger, Ahmednagar Cltr, to Sholapur Sub-Cltr, 20 Nov 1824, BRP, 15 Dec 1824, p. 7986, APAC.

⁹⁵ Guha, *The Agrarian Economy*, pp. 152-3.

⁹⁶ Henry Pottinger, Ahmednagar Cltr, to Sholapur Sub-Cltr, 20 Nov 1824, BRP, 15 Dec 1824, p. 7986, APAC.

⁹⁷ G. W. Anderson, Act Dharwar Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 4 Jan 1833, BRP, 23 Jan 1833, No. 297, APAC.

⁹⁸ Robert Boyd, Officiating Broach Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 2 Apr 1824, BRP, 21 Apr 1824, pp. 2348-9, APAC.

⁹⁹ T. Williamson, Rev Cmr, to Act Chief Sec to Govt, 11 Jun 1838, BRP, 18 Jul 1838, No. 5425, APAC.

¹⁰⁰ T. H. Townsend, Act Ahmednagar Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 20 Nov 1832, BRP, 31 Dec 1832, No. 6803, APAC; and N. Kirkland, Broach Sub-Cltr, to Surat Cltr, 12 Aug 1833, BRP, 4 Sep 1833, No. 4889, APAC; and W. Stubbs, Kaira Cltr, to Rev Cmr, 16 Oct 1833, BRP, 6 Nov 1833, No. 6049, APAC; and E. B. Mills, Belgaum Cltr, to Act Sec to Govt, 18 Jan 1839, BGP, 13 Mar 1839, No. 54D, APAC; and A. Moola, and Other Surat Petitioners, to Act 1st Asst Surat Cltr in Charge, 4 Oct 1838, BRP, 31 Oct 1838, No. 8074, APAC.

on ‘the very large number of agricultural cattle that have died of starvation within the last two months’ of drought.¹⁰¹

Regardless of the season, the more substantial cultivators could afford a better quality of cattle,¹⁰² which made for higher productivity and income. When drought made forage scarce, poor cultivators were forced to give their cattle tree leaves and bark to eat, while the richer cultivators maintained the health of their cattle by buying grass from distant villages at very high prices.¹⁰³ The poorer ryots sold their cattle before they died to minimize their financial loss. Cattle sales reduced the amount of land an already impoverished ryot could plough and cultivate, and thereby reduced his harvest and income the following year.¹⁰⁴ Sen would characterise this process as a reduction in the poor individual’s ‘endowment’, which would engender greater poverty and susceptibility to starvation in the future.¹⁰⁵ William Stubbs, the Kaira Collector, observed in 1833 that the ryots’ loss of cattle would ‘disable them from cultivating their land in the next, and future years’.¹⁰⁶

The clamour of poorer ryots to sell their cattle made it a buyer’s market, and the price of cattle therefore often decreased during drought despite the fact that many had died and therefore there was a reduced supply.¹⁰⁷ The richer ryots purchased the

¹⁰¹ W. C. Andrews, Act Surat Cltr, to Rev Cmr, 1 Jun 1839, BRP, 26 Jun 1839, No. 3975, APAC; see also W. Chaplin, Deccan Cmr, to the Provisional Ahmednagar Cltr, 21 Jul 1824, BRP, 4 Aug 1824, p. 5139, APAC; see also H. D. Robertson, Poona Cltr, to Deccan Cmr, 25 Nov 1823, BRP, 17 Dec 1823, p. 9587, APAC; and Thomas Williamson, Act Kaira Cltr, to Act Sec to Govt, 18 Jul 1824, BRP, 11 Aug 1824, p. 5223, APAC; and J. Vibart, Ahmedabad Cltr, to Rev Cmr, 21 Aug 1833, BRP, 11 Sep 1833, No. 5051, APAC; and W. Elliot, Hubli Sub-Cltr, to Act Dharwar Cltr, 30 Dec 1832, BRP, 23 Jan 1833, No. 298, APAC; and W. Stubbs, Kaira Cltr, to Rev Cmr, 4 Sep 1834, BRP, 28 Jan 1835, No. 400, APAC; and D. A. Blane, 2nd Asst Dharwar Cltr, to Dharwar Cltr, 25 Sep 1837, BRP, 24 Oct 1838, No. 7981, APAC; and J. H. Petty, Cltr of Customs for Gujarat and the Konkan, to Act Chief Sec to Govt, 19 Mar 1839, BRP, 3 Apr 1839, No. 2252, APAC.

¹⁰² J. H. Cherry, Ahmedabad Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 12 May 1824, BRP, 23 Jun 1824, pp. 4216, 4220, APAC.

¹⁰³ Statement signed by A. Freese, attached to J. Thackeray, Principal Dharwar Cltr, to Deccan Cmr, 15 Sep 1824, BRP, 6 Oct 1824, p. 6319, APAC; and A. W. Ravenscroft, 1st Asst Dharwar Cltr, to Dharwar Cltr, 29 Sep 1837, BRP, 24 Oct 1838, No. 7981, APAC.

¹⁰⁴ A. Crawford, Sholapur Sub Cltr, to Ahmednagar Cltr and Mgst, 4 Dec 1823, BRP, 14 Jan 1824, p. 218, APAC; and W. Elliot, Hubli Sub-Cltr, to Act Dharwar Cltr, 30 Dec 1832, BRP, 23 Jan 1833, No. 298, APAC; and H. Borrodaile, Ahmedabad Cltr, to Rev Cmr, 21 Mar 1834, BRP, 23 Apr 1834, No. 1933, APAC; and W. Stubbs, Kaira Cltr, to Rev Cmr, 4 Sep 1834, BRP, 28 Jan 1835, No. 400, APAC.

¹⁰⁵ Sen, p. 47.

¹⁰⁶ W. Stubbs, Kaira Cltr, to Rev Cmr, 16 Oct 1833, BRP, 6 Nov 1833, No. 6049, APAC.

¹⁰⁷ J. Thackeray, Principal Cltr and Political Agent, to Deccan Cmr, 13 Aug 1824, BRP, 1 Sep 1824, p. 5564, APAC; J. C. Munro, Dharwar Sub-Cltr, to Principal Dharwar Cltr, 29 Sep 1824, BGP, , 27 Oct 1824, p. 6072, APAC; and W. Elliot, Hubli Sub-Cltr, to Act Dharwar Cltr, 30 Dec 1832, BRP, 23 Jan 1833, No. 298, APAC.

agricultural stock of the poor at bargain prices. The Poona Collector recalled that in the 1823/4 season ‘forage was scarce and dear’ and ‘cattle were therefore expensive’ to maintain. The cattle owner saved on the expense of forage and gained some money by selling his cattle, and ‘all the poorer ryots thus parted with their agricultural stock’. He stated that ‘the difficulty of feeding them occasioned their value to be trifling’. The ‘richer ryots who bought up the cattle’ made no immediate ‘profit by their bargains and their purchases amounted to little more than a contribution to the poor ryots’.¹⁰⁸ Cattle purchases increased a wealthy ryot’s assets, which in subsequent years could be hired out to those without cattle and provide a further source of income.¹⁰⁹ The wealthier ryots therefore capitalised on the opportunity offered by drought to increase their agricultural stock and earning potential, and drought forced the poorer ryots to part with such vital agricultural assets and sink further into poverty. Drought brought a divergence of wealth in cattle.

Poor ryots: the political economy of survival.

All classes of the poor suffered during drought. They were the first to suffer, and they suffered the most. This seems to have been an unchanging feature of drought. Habib has observed that during the great famine of 1630-2 in Gujarat and the Deccan the people who perished in the first year were largely the poor.¹¹⁰ Similarly, Davis has argued that the catastrophic famines of the late nineteenth century were a result of India’s increased poverty.¹¹¹ The income of the poor, by definition meagre even during normal years, was rendered grossly inadequate for purchasing food during drought. As grain prices skyrocketed, people focused their consumption budgets on acquiring food. The demand for the wares of spinners and weavers and others in the secondary sector dropped dramatically, as did their incomes.¹¹² Yet the ryots were the government’s main source of income and were therefore the officials’ main concern.

¹⁰⁸ H. D. Robertson, Poona Cltr, to Deccan Cmr, 1 Feb 1825, BRP, 2 Nov 1825, No. 5, APAC.

¹⁰⁹ G. C. Wroughton, 1st Asst Nthn Konkan Cltr, to Act Nthn Konkan Cltr, 31 Jan 1825, BRP, 30 Mar 1825, No. 58, APAC.

¹¹⁰ Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India, 1556-1707*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2nd edn., 1999, p. 116.

¹¹¹ Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Nino famines and the making of the third world*, London, New York: Verso, 2001, p. 149.

¹¹² Peter Harnetty, “‘Deindustrialization’ Revisited: The Handloom Weavers of the Central Provinces of India, c.1800-1947”, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 3, 1991, p. 470; see also Chakrabarti, ‘The Famine’, p. 2.

The primary documents therefore necessarily focus the attention of this study on the plight of the poor ryots.

The drought seriously reduced the ryots' harvests, which was their main source of income. With insufficient incomes many ryots were forced to rely upon and deplete their wealth stored from previous good years. Wealth represented a buffer between the owner and the ravages of drought. Fortunate individuals saved whatever wealth they accrued from good years, usually in the form of grain, gold or silver, and stored it as a safety net in case of drought.¹¹³ Yet as McAlpin has noted, the effectiveness of storing wealth in silver and gold depended on the existence of a flexible trade network that would divert grain to areas in which peasants were offering their stored wealth.¹¹⁴ It has been shown that the grain dealers were reluctant to divert the flow of grain away from their more lucrative and reliable contracts. Nevertheless, ryots with stored wealth had better chances of survival than their poorer counterparts.

Successive bad seasons quickly reduced less fortunate people's savings to nothing. Lacking a sufficient income, they became vulnerable to the full effects of drought.¹¹⁵ Conversely, De Waal has argued that the poor were no more likely than the rich to die during the Darfur famine of 1984/5. This, he has contended, was because most people saw famine primarily as a threat to their livelihoods, and therefore fasted to protect their wealth rather than exhaust it on the purchase of grain.¹¹⁶ Yet it was a common feature to all three western Indian droughts of the 1820s and 1830s that the poor suffered first and foremost. During the 1823-5 drought, Crawford mentioned only the 'lower classes of the community' as those who would soon 'begin to feel the distressing effects of scarcity'.¹¹⁷ Later that month the situation worsened, and he reported that the surviving crops would be insufficient to prevent the 'poorer classes of society from severely experiencing the dreadful effects of scarcity'.¹¹⁸ Pottinger

¹¹³ Thomas Williamson, Act Kaira Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 30 Jul 1824, BRP, 25 Aug 1824, p. 5546, APAC; and R. K. Pringle, Asst Cltr, to Poona Cltr, 29 Jan 1824, BRP, 25 Feb 1824, pp. 981-2, APAC; and Morris David Morris, 'What is a Famine?', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 9, 1974, p. 1857.

¹¹⁴ Michelle Burge McAlpin, 'Dearth, Famine and Risk: The Changing Impact of Crop Failures in Western India, 1870-1920', *Journal of Economic History*, vol. 39, no. 1, 1979, pp. 148-9.

¹¹⁵ R. K. Pringle, Asst Cltr, to Poona Cltr, 29 Jan 1824, BRP, 25 Feb 1824, pp. 981-2, APAC.

¹¹⁶ De Waal, Alexander, *Famine that kills: Darfur, Sudan, 1984-1985*, Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1989, pp. 121, 141, 148, 184-5, 193-4.

¹¹⁷ A. Crawford, Ahmedabad Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 3 Sep 1824, BGP, 15 Sep 1824, p. 5179, APAC.

¹¹⁸ A. Crawford, Ahmedabad Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 16 Sep 1824, BGP, 6 Oct 1824, pp. 5497-8, APAC.

believed another three weeks without rain would push prices high enough to cause distress specifically amongst the poor, and that if the Government did not provide work for them they would starve.¹¹⁹ In 1825 Dunlop expressed his belief that the Fort Ditch and wells were the only reliable source of water, and would only be ‘sufficient to maintain those who can afford to have water brought from thence’.¹²⁰ The suffering of the poor continued in the 1831-5 drought. Walter Elliot reported from Hubli in 1834 that the ‘distress of the poorer ryots was very great towards the latter end of the harvest’.¹²¹ Several more reports were made during this drought regarding the suffering of the poor in particular.¹²² The 1838-9 drought was witness to the same phenomenon. In 1839 John Vibart, the Revenue Commissioner, noted the ‘considerable suffering among the lower classes owing to a want of the means of procuring a subsistence’.¹²³ Similar observations were made on the same theme during this drought.¹²⁴ The poorest ryots were therefore hit first, and hit the hardest, by drought.

The ryots were not, however, entirely passive in awaiting a fate that was predetermined for them by the actions of others. Ryots facing the ravages of drought had numerous options still available to them in seeking subsistence, though the options available to the poorest ryots were fewer and more drastic. Impoverished ryots could exploit their function as the Government’s main source of income by petitioning for revenue remissions and agricultural loans. The Government’s revenues would otherwise suffer if too many ryots went bankrupt and permanently stopped cultivating.¹²⁵ However, although petitioning was a successful means of bringing the

¹¹⁹ H. Pottinger, Ahmednagar Cltr, to Deccan Cmr, 24 Sep 1824, BGP, 13 Oct 1824, p. 5780, APAC.

¹²⁰ John A. Dunlop, Ahmednagar Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 15 Aug 1825, BRP, 31 Aug 1825, No. 36, APAC.

¹²¹ W. Elliot, Hoobly Sub-Cltr, to Dharwar Cltr, 29 Oct 1834, BRP, 10 Dec 1834, No. 6652, APAC.

¹²² T. Williamson, Rev Cmr, to Sec to Govt, 8 Nov 1832, BRP, 28 Nov 1832, No. 6425, APAC; and R. K. Arbuthnot, Bagulcota Sub-Cltr, to Act Dharwar Cltr, 13 Jun 1833, BRP, 10 Jul 1833, No. 3794, APAC; and T. Williamson, Rev Cmr, to Sec to Govt, 13 Jul 1833, BRP, 31 Jul 1833, No. 4205, APAC; and W. Gilbert, Brigadier General Commanding Sthn Division, to Quarter Master General, 10 Aug 1833, BRP, 4 Sep 1833, No. 4962, APAC; and G. W. Anderson, Act Dharwar Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 17 Jun 1833, BRP, 10 Jul 1833, No. 3793, APAC.

¹²³ J. Vibart, Rev Cmr, to Act Chief Sec to Govt, 4 Jul 1839, BRP, 24 Jul 1839, No. 4679, APAC.

¹²⁴ Framjee Cowasjee, and other Bombay Petitioners, to Act Sec to Govt, 10 Oct 1838, BGP, 15 Oct 1838, No. 28, APAC; and G. Coles, Act Broach Sub-Cltr, to Act Surat Cltr, 24 Apr 1839, BGP, 15 May 1839, No. 503, APAC; and Ragoonath Sadasewjee and Others, Bombay Petitioners, to Act Sec to Govt, 4 May 1838, BGP, 19 May 1838, No. 39, APAC.

¹²⁵ John A. Dunlop, Sthn Konkan Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 18 Feb 1824, BRP, 3 Mar 1824, pp. 1139-40, APAC; and Robert Boyd, Officiating Broach Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 8 Jan 1824, BRP, 26 Jan 1825, No. 26, APAC; and J. J. Sparrow, Bombay Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 16 May 1825, BRP, 25 May 1825, No. 41,

Government's attention to situations of which it might not otherwise be aware, the petitioners' requests for remissions and loans were granted only after the Government investigated the circumstances and deemed the petitioners eligible.¹²⁶ Petitioners were sometimes rejected, and often because the Government assumed the 'very favourable terms in which the petitioners cultivate their land is sufficient, one year with another, to compensate them for all losses'.¹²⁷ Petitioners had various requests. Some requested the removal of forage taxes so they could better feed their starving cattle. Others requested the Government's assistance in the construction and cleaning out of wells and tanks. Still others requested the Government's intervention in the grain trade. All experienced varying degrees of success and failure.¹²⁸ In 1824 Boyd handed up to the Council a number of petitions from distressed villagers in Hansot taluka requesting agricultural loans to enable cultivation. The Council's responses varied from declining those who had poor credit ratings, to sanctioning half the requested amount of most petitioners.¹²⁹ Ryots hurt by the drought could therefore at least ask for help from the Government.

Ryots had a number of coping strategies that could be pursued at or near the home to mitigate the effects of drought and ensure their survival, and one such strategy was to assist each other. When one village's drinking water dried up, the inhabitants often

APAC; and J. B. Simson, Nthn Konkan Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 25 May 1825, BRP, 8 Jun 1825, No. 13, APAC; and G. More, Sthn Konkan Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 26 Sep 1825, BRP, 5 Oct 1825, No. 69, APAC; and H. D. Robertson, Poona Cltr, to Deccan Cmr, 17 Jun 1823, BRP, 2 Jul 1823, p. 6024, APAC; and R. Mills, Act Nthn Konkan Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 10 Mar 1825, BRP, 16 Mar 1825, No. 27, APAC; and J. Farish, Sec to Govt, to Act Nthn Konkan Cltr, 15 Mar 1825, BRP, 16 Mar 1825, No. 28, APAC; and J. B. Simson, Nthn Konkan Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 6 May 1825, BRP, 18 May 1825, No. 24, APAC; and James Farish, Sec to Govt, to Nthn Konkan Cltr, 14 May 1825, BRP, 18 May 1825, No. 25, APAC.

¹²⁶ R. Mills, Act Nthn Konkan Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 15 Mar 1825, BRP, 23 Mar 1825, No. 61, APAC; See also G. C. Wroughton, First Assistant Nthn Konkan Cltr, to R. Mills, Act Nthn Konkan Cltr, 31 Jan 1825, BRP, 30 Mar 1825, No. 58, APAC.

¹²⁷ This was particularly so for mirasdars. See R. Mills, Act Nthn Konkan Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 18 Mar 1825, BRP, 30 Mar 1825, No. 33, APAC, and J. Farish, Sec to Govt, to R. Mills, Act Nthn Konkan Cltr, 26 Mar 1825, BRP, 30 Mar 1825, No. 34, APAC.

¹²⁸ Aluxo de Silva and others, Petitioners, to Act Sec to Govt, 3 Nov 1824, BRP, 24 Nov 1824, pp. 7704-7, APAC; and R. K. Pringle, Asst Poona Cltr in Deputation, to Poona Cltr, 8 Mar 1825, BRP, 6 Apr 1825, No. 3A, APAC; and J. Farish, Sec to Govt, to Nthn Konkan Cltr, 20 Jan 1824, BRP, 21 Jan 1824, pp. 344-5, APAC; See also G. More, Act Sec to Govt, to Nthn Konkan Cltr, 5 Apr 1824, BRP, 7 Apr 1824, pp. 2086-8, APAC; and J. Farish, Sec to Govt, to Nthn Konkan Cltr, 25 Apr 1825, BRP, 27 Apr 1825, No. 61, APAC; and Balloo Muccadam and Others, Petitioners, to 29 Sep 1824, BGP, 29 Sep 1824, pp. 5438-40, APAC; and J. Farish, Sec to Govt, to Balloo Muccadam and Others, Petitioners, 29 Sep 1824, BGP, 29 Sep 1824, p. 5440, APAC.

¹²⁹ Robert Boyd, Officiating Broach Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 2 Apr 1824, BRP, 21 Apr 1824, pp. 2340-57, APAC.

relied upon the neighbouring village's supply if some was available.¹³⁰ Moreover, when ryots could not afford to offer *soucar*, or money, security on their agricultural loans from the Government, they often grouped together to offer *sankel zameen*, or collective security. This enabled poorer ryots to obtain the vital government loan and pool the risk of one member ryot defaulting on his repayment, for which the remaining members accepted responsibility. Although this communal spirit enabled ryots who were incapable of offering money security to secure the essential agricultural loan, such communalism had its limits. The poorest ryots were too great a liability for others to accept them as group members. They were thus unable to secure the essential government loans.¹³¹ Following a year of drought, villagers who were fortunate enough not to have lost all their cattle sometimes shared them during the ploughing season with their less fortunate neighbours, which enabled them to cultivate their fields.¹³² Thus, ryots impoverished by drought could group together, to some extent, to mitigate the drought's detrimental effects.

Ryots could also pursue, at or near the home, coping strategies as individuals to reduce the adverse effects of drought on their livelihoods. Ryots had options regarding their individual cropping practices. McAlpin has observed the survival strategy followed by western Indian ryots of raising mixed crops in a single field to reduce the variance of yield and preserve the soil quality.¹³³ Morris has noted that ryots were typically risk averse in drought-prone regions. He has argued that such cultivators usually sowed drought-resistant crops in preference to more profitable higher yielding crops that were more susceptible to drought.¹³⁴ Yet when drought did strike, this practice was also followed in less drought-prone regions such as Gujarat. Jowar, according to Divekar, was a millet crop often grown in western India for its resilience in harsh conditions.¹³⁵ Several Collectors of the Gujarat region noted in the early 1820s that when the rice and cotton crops failed, some ryots re-sowed their

¹³⁰ A. Robertson, Khandesh Cltr, to Deccan Cmr, 1 Oct 1824, BRP, 3 Nov 1824, p. 6969, APAC.

¹³¹ R. Mills, Act Nthn Konkan Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 18 Mar 1825, BRP, 30 Mar 1825, No. 58, APAC.

¹³² H. D. Robertson, Poona Cltr, to W. Chaplin, Deccan Cmr, 5 Aug 1824, BRP, 25 Aug 1824, p. 5522, APAC.

¹³³ McAlpin, 'Dearth, Famine and Risk', p. 147.

¹³⁴ Morris, p. 1857.

¹³⁵ V. D. Divekar, 'Regional Economy 1757-1857, Western India', Dharma Kumar, (ed.), *Cambridge Economic History of India*, vol. 2, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 336.

Jowar / Jowaur / Jowari / Jawari: 'The tall, extensively cultivated millet of India, *Sorghum vulgare*. The reedy stems are 8 to 12 feet high'. Ivor Lewis, *Sahibs, Nabobs and Boxwallahs*, Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 137.

fields with grains such as jowar and wheat in the hope that their second attempt would stand a better chance.¹³⁶ Thus, even cultivators with less experience of drought could follow flexible cropping strategies when the monsoon failed.

Borrowing funds was another potential coping strategy, but this relied on the creditor's willingness to extend credit. Impoverished ryots, as we have seen, could turn to the local moneylender for a loan, but during a prolonged drought the poorest ryots represented too great a risk for the moneylender to indulge.¹³⁷ Ryots could use government loans intended for agricultural investment to purchase food. The Government offered some ryots loans for building new wells or repairing old ones, which some ryots spent on food instead.¹³⁸ Once in May 1824, and again in May 1825, the Government offered loans expressly for the ryots' subsistence to ensure that they survived and remained at home in preparation for the next sowing season. However, these were rare occurrences not to be relied upon by ryots seeking subsistence.¹³⁹

When the home-based coping strategies failed the ryots were forced to travel significant distances in search of food for themselves and their cattle. Poorer ryots lacked the funds to sustain their cattle with the purchase of scarce forage during drought. But they were not entirely powerless in protecting their beasts of burden. Many ryots drove their cattle considerable distances in search of grazing lands. This was a feature that was common to drought throughout the 1820s and 1830s. In 1823 Pottinger noted that due to the 'parched' nature of the ground offering no grass for the cattle to graze on, the villagers were 'forced to send all their cattle away in search of

¹³⁶ J. Pyne, 1st Asst Broach Cltr in Charge, to Sec to Govt, 14 Jun 1823, BRP, 8 Jul 1823, p. 6190, APAC; and J. H. Cherry, Ahmedabad Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 27 Jun 1823, BRP, 16 Jul 1823, pp. 6281-2, APAC; and W. J. Lumsden, Surat Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 24 Aug 1824, BGP, 15 Sep 1824, pp. 5182-3, APAC; and A. Crawford, Ahmedabad Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 3 Sep 1824, BGP, 15 Sep 1824, pp. 5177-8, APAC.

¹³⁷ R. Mills, Act Nthn Konkan Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 18 Mar 1825, BRP, 30 Mar 1825, No. 58, APAC; and R. K. Pringle, Asst Poona Cltr on Deputation, to Poona Cltr, 8 Jul 1825, BRP, 10 Aug 1825, No. 39, APAC.

¹³⁸ H. F. Dent, Asst Khandesh Cltr, to Khandesh Cltr, 15 Nov 1824, BRP, 15 Dec 1824, p. 8020, APAC.

¹³⁹ J. B. Simson, Nthn Konkan Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 6 May 1825, BRP, 18 May 1825, No. 24, APAC; and James Farish, Sec to Govt, to Nthn Konkan Cltr, 14 May 1825, BRP, 18 May 1825, No. 25, APAC; and A. Robertson, Khandesh Cltr, to Deccan Cmr, 27 Apr 1824, BRP, 19 May 1824, pp. 2801-2, APAC; and G. More, Act Sec to Govt, to Deccan Cmr, 15 May 1824, BRP, 19 May 1824, p. 2805, APAC.

pasturage'.¹⁴⁰ Elliot reported in 1834 that half his taluka's cattle had 'died from want of forage and all that had strength to walk were driven to the ghat forests where alone grass could be obtained'.¹⁴¹ Similarly, Stevenson reported that many ryots were leaving his district and driving their cattle to the Mysore forests for forage.¹⁴²

Cattle-driving was not a strategy without its flaws, as it put a considerable distance between the ryots' fields and their main agricultural assets. For instance, the poorer cultivators of Sholapur drove their cattle to the Ghats in the Nizam's Territory in search of forage. Yet this caused the cattle to be unavailable 'at the very time they were required' for cultivation when the rains returned.¹⁴³ This drawback was only experienced by the cultivators who were too poor to afford the high forage prices that would enable them to keep their cattle at home. Yet the poor had no other option in keeping their cattle alive if they wished to maintain ownership. The poor ryots that chose not to drive their cattle to other lands typically watched them die at home. Pottinger stated in 1824 that the cattle that 'had not been removed to the Ghauts' were 'either dead or dying from want of forage, which is in most places not only enormously dear, but absolutely not to be had'.¹⁴⁴ Thus cattle-driving was accepted by the poorer ryots with some reluctance.

Cattle-driving increased the poorer ryot's chances of keeping his cattle alive, but it did not guarantee their survival. Pottinger observed that despite the measure, many had 'perished in the hills from want of water and other causes'.¹⁴⁵ Likewise, Elliot reported in 1832 that the drought had forced many ryots to drive their 'wretched herds ... towards the west where exhausted by the fatigue and hardship of the way, hundreds arrive only to die'.¹⁴⁶ Nevertheless, cattle-driving was the only effective

¹⁴⁰ Henry Pottinger, Ahmednagar Cltr, to Mr. Chaplin, Deccan Cmr, 1 Dec 1823, BRP, 14 Jan 1824, p. 213, APAC.

¹⁴¹ W. Elliot, Hoobly Sub-Cltr, to Dharwar Cltr, 29 Oct 1834, BRP, 10 Dec 1834, No. 6652, APAC; see also R. Mills, Act Poona Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 1 Nov 1832, BRP, 28 Nov 1832, No. 6418, APAC.

¹⁴² J. A. R. Stevenson, Dharwar Cltr, to Principal Dharwar Cltr and Political Agent, 12 Aug 1824, BRP, 1 Sep 1824, p. 5572, APAC; see also W. Simson, Bagulcote Sub-Cltr, to Act Dharwar Cltr, 18 Dec 1832, BRP, 23 Jan 1833, No. 302, APAC.

¹⁴³ A. Crawford, Sholapur Sub Cltr, to Ahmednagar Cltr, 4 Dec 1823, BRP, 14 Jan 1824, p. 219, APAC.

¹⁴⁴ H. Pottinger, Ahmednagar Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 3 Aug 1824, BRP, 25 Aug 1824, pp. 5523-4, APAC.

¹⁴⁵ Ahmednagar Cltr's abstract of his Kamavisdar's report, an attachment to Henry Pottinger, Ahmednagar Cltr, to Deccan Cmr, 17 Aug 1824, BRP, 1 Sep 1824, p. 5579, APAC.

¹⁴⁶ W. Elliot, Hubli Sub-Cltr, to Act Dharwar Cltr, 30 Dec 1832, BRP, 23 Jan 1833, No. 298, APAC.

option available for the poorer ryot, and provided his best chance for maintaining his level of productivity in the following season.

Migration was another survival strategy pursued during drought. Some ryots were more likely to migrate than others. Mirasdars¹⁴⁷ had greater security and perquisites to occupying their land. They held hereditary rights to their soil, which meant they could not be removed from their land by the patel and replaced with another cultivator. Conversely, uparis¹⁴⁸ were ‘annual tenants’ with rights to occupy their land only for one year at a time. They were not guaranteed the patel’s permission to resume their tenure the following year.¹⁴⁹ Furthermore, the patels typically assigned uparis the least valuable village lands to cultivate.¹⁵⁰ Uparis, given their circumstances, were therefore more likely to migrate when pressed by drought. D. Davidson reported in 1837 that the patels of Kolwan taluka had prompted migration amongst the village outsiders by placing too heavy a revenue burden on their shoulders. Those who were not the patel’s ‘friends and family’ were given ‘little or no encouragement’ to remain. The uparis were more likely to migrate during drought because, in Davidson’s words, ‘they have no ties to any one place’ and ‘they may be better off in another’ so ‘away they go to try’.¹⁵¹ Yet even some mirasdars migrated to lands with more attractive leases. Henry Robertson reported in 1823 that ‘a good number of substantial Mirasdars’ were migrating to ‘the Nizam’s Country to take the favorable cowls¹⁵² to be had there’, and they were ‘not to be blamed for leaving their Miras lands in bad seasons like these when such temptations are held out to them so near at hand’.¹⁵³ Yet Robertson’s particular concern that some of his district’s mirasdars were emigrating elsewhere stemmed from the implicit knowledge that the mirasdars were typically the

¹⁴⁷ Mirasdar: ‘Cultivator with hereditary rights to the land’. Neil Charlesworth, *Peasants and Imperial Rule: agriculture and agrarian society in the Bombay Presidency, 1850-1935*, Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 301.

Miras: ‘Hereditary land’. Lewis, p. 165.

¹⁴⁸ Upri/Upari: ‘Newcomer with no proprietary claim to the soil’. Charlesworth, p. 302.

¹⁴⁹ W. J. Lumsden, Surat Cltr, to Act Sec to Govt, 30 Apr 1824, BRP, 25 Aug 1824, pp. 5494-5502, APAC.

¹⁵⁰ Extract of letter from John Pyne, 1st Asst Broach Cltr, to Broach Cltr, 21 Dec 1824, BRP, 12 Jan 1825, No. 14, APAC.

¹⁵¹ D. Davidson, Act 3rd Asst Tannah Cltr, to Tannah Cltr, 7 Aug 1837, BRP, 18 Jul 1838, No. 5521, APAC.

¹⁵² Cowle / Kaul: ‘1. Word, promise, bargain, compact, written undertaking, lease. It has become a technical word in the Indian vernaculars, owing to the prevalence of Mohammedan law.’ 2. In India also a safe-conduct pass, or amnesty’. Lewis, p. 94.

¹⁵³ H. D. Robertson, Poona Cltr, to Deccan Cmr, 25 Nov 1823, BRP, 17 Dec 1823, pp. 9587-8, APAC.

most closely bound to their land – their migration was worthy of note. Thus the types of tenure held by the cultivators affected their likelihood of migrating during drought.

More important, perhaps, than the cultivators' types of tenure was their wealth in dictating the odds of migration. People migrated, as Pottinger observed in 1825, due to 'their utter inability to support themselves from the extremely distressed circumstances into which they are fallen'.¹⁵⁴ So by definition a migrant during drought was typically destitute. Thus, the wealthier a cultivator was before the onset of drought, the less likely it was that the drought would impoverish him and his family to such a degree as to spur them to migrate in search of food. Not surprisingly, it was those who were poor in normal years that migrated first during drought.¹⁵⁵ Frost has found that the migrants from Kaira district during the 1824-5 scarcity were the poorer members of society, viz. brahmans, kolis, weavers, sweepers, herdsmen, bards and water-carriers.¹⁵⁶

The poor made up the bulk of migrants during each of the three main droughts of our time period. Mills reported from the Northern Konkan in 1825 that the 'middling class of ryots' might 'suffer considerably in their wealth from the very high price of grain, but their credit is generally sufficient to meet every exigency'. He argued that it was the 'lowest orders of ryots ... whose credit ... is not sufficient to procure them the necessaries of life'. As such, they were 'obliged to fly from the misfortunes which oppress them, and to seek a livelihood away from their villages and friends, where, and in what way it can be procured'.¹⁵⁷ Henry Robertson reported in 1833 that the influx of migrants into his district from Sholapur were poor people.¹⁵⁸ Arthur Ravenscroft stated in 1837 that 'the poor people seeing no prospect of securing a means of subsistence ... left their homes to seek it in the adjoining districts of the

¹⁵⁴ H. Pottinger, Ahmednagar Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 25 Feb 1825, BRP, 9 Mar 1825, No. 55, APAC.

¹⁵⁵ Ravi Ahuja, 'State Formation and "Famine Policy" in Early Colonial South India', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 39, no. 4, Oct-Dec, 2002, p. 357; and J. H. Cherry, Nthn Konkan Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 8 Oct 1824, BGP, 20 Oct 1824, pp. 5833-4, APAC.

¹⁵⁶ Marcia J. Frost, 'Coping With Scarcity: Wild Foods and Common Lands: Kheda District (Gujarat, India), 1824/5', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2000, p. 315.

¹⁵⁷ R. Mills, Act Nthn Konkan Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 18 Mar 1825, BRP, 30 Mar 1825, No. 58, APAC.

¹⁵⁸ H. D. Robertson, Poona Cltr, Sholapur Sub-Cltr, 15 Jul 1833, BRP, 31 Jul 1833, No. 4208, APAC.

Canarese Country'.¹⁵⁹ Migrants during the droughts of the 1820s and 1830s were thus typically indigent.

Ultimately it was the inability to purchase food that spurred migration. Andrews argued in 1839 that the people who would soon turn to migration would be those who had 'consumed all their little substance'.¹⁶⁰ Cherry believed in 1824 that there was a sufficient supply of grain in his district to last another four months, but stated that it was largely 'in the possession of substantial Ryots', and for the 'majority of the cultivating classes, there is hardly enough in hand for present consumption'.¹⁶¹ Thus when food was too scarce to be forthcoming and affordable to the poor in their home district they migrated elsewhere in the hope of finding a district with greater and cheaper supplies of grain. Districts that had suffered from drought to the same degree as the migrant's point of origin could offer no respite. Williamson reported migrants passing through his district in 1824, and stated that 'the high price of food prevents their remaining here, and most of them press on' to where there are better harvests.¹⁶² Similarly, Townsend reported in 1832 that many cultivators of his district had migrated to the Nizam's territories, and that 'others are only prevented from going ... by the fact that the scarcity there is greater than it is here'.¹⁶³ Migration was thus forced first and foremost upon the poorest ryots who were the least bound to their land by tenure. Unable to secure subsistence at home, they opted to search abroad for regions less affected by drought where food might be more forthcoming.

Rent arrears provided further motivation for impoverished ryots to migrate. The lack of rain and the unlikely prospect of a return on the cost of cultivating motivated some ryots not to sow their fields at all. Nevertheless, some revenue officials aggressively pursued rents on unsown lands and unintentionally forced the poorer ryots, who had no means of paying the revenue demanded of them, to migrate in the hope of escaping their debts.¹⁶⁴ Being aware of this issue, Simson recommended a remission on the

¹⁵⁹ A. W. Ravenscroft, 1st Asst Dharwar Cltr, to Dharwar Cltr, 29 Sep 1837, BRP, 24 Oct 1838, No. 7981, APAC.

¹⁶⁰ W. C. Andrews, Act Surat Cltr, to Act Sec to Govt, 18 Jan 1839, BGP, 30 Jan 1839, No. 55, APAC.

¹⁶¹ J. H. Cherry, Nthn Konkan Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 11 Oct 1824, BGP, 20 Oct 1824, pp. 5920-2, APAC.

¹⁶² T. Williamson, Act Kaira Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 6 Oct 1824, BGP, 20 Oct 1824, p. 5936, APAC.

¹⁶³ T. H. Townsend, Act Ahmednagar Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 20 Nov 1832, BRP, 31 Dec 1832, No. 6803, APAC.

¹⁶⁴ W. Chaplin, Deccan Cmr, to Act Sec to Govt, 26 Jul 1824, BRP, 10 Nov 1824, p. 7086, APAC.

Government's revenue demands in 1825. He argued that an unrelenting pursuit of the revenue would encourage the ryots to migrate out of British territory and cultivate lands free of debt.¹⁶⁵ Yet the British had a reciprocal arrangement with the Indian princely states surrounding their territory that defaulting ryots fleeing their revenue obligations to neighbouring territories would either be repatriated or forced to pay.¹⁶⁶

However, most ryots migrated to search for subsistence rather than to avoid their debts. Many ryots migrated not to accept better leases elsewhere, but rather migrated only temporarily with the intention of returning home when the crisis subsided. Seaports had ready access to grain by ship, but owing to the Presidency's primitive roads people living further inland had less easy access to grain.¹⁶⁷ Also, principal towns throughout the Presidency usually held greater stores of grain per capita than surrounding villages.¹⁶⁸ Consequently, migrants flocked to such trade network nodes where grain prices were lower.¹⁶⁹ Ryots unable to procure loans from local moneylenders migrated in search of loans from the wealthier bankers residing in larger towns.¹⁷⁰ Also, the younger men often temporarily migrated to larger towns in search of work to relieve the burden on their remaining family members back home.¹⁷¹ Some sought private employers, and others, 'eager to be employed in any description of labour merely to earn a daily meal', sought employment on the Government's public works schemes.¹⁷² In some areas, entire villages were abandoned. In Sholapur Simson noted that 'a Mhar¹⁷³ or two is all that is left for the protection of the absentees' dwellings' from robbery.¹⁷⁴ But this implied an intention eventually to return. Conversely, some ryots migrated with the intention of returning home but were then persuaded by favourable weather and leases to cultivate and live

¹⁶⁵ J. B. Simson, Nthn Konkan Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 19 Apr 1825, BRP, 11 May 1825, No. 14, APAC.

¹⁶⁶ W. J. Lumsden, Surat Cltr, to Act Sec to Govt, 18 Sep 1824, BRP, 29 Sep 1824, p. 6229, APAC.

¹⁶⁷ Rev. Henry Davies, Bombay Msny, 24 Sep 1824, C I 3 M 1, p. 103, CMS; and J. Farish, Sec to Govt, to Sthn Konkan Cltr, 12 Oct 1824, BGP, 13 Oct 1824, p. 5759, APAC.

¹⁶⁸ W. Lumsden, Surat Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 31 Aug 1824, BGP, 15 Sep 1824, p. 5119, APAC.

¹⁶⁹ J. W. Langford, On Special Duty, to Act Sec to Govt, 30 Nov 1838, BGP, 12 Dec 1838, No. 136, APAC.

¹⁷⁰ Hardiman, 'Usury, dearth and famine', p. 129.

¹⁷¹ H. D. Robertson, Poona Cltr, to Deccan Cmr, 31 Dec 1824, BRP, 19 Jan 1825, No. 17, APAC.

¹⁷² H. F. Dent, Asst Khandesh Cltr, to Khandesh Cltr, 15 Nov 1824, BRP, 15 Dec 1824, p. 8021, APAC; and H. Gray, Jnr Mgst of Bombay Police, to Sec to Govt, 20 Oct 1824, BGP, 27 Oct 1824, p. 6062, APAC.

¹⁷³ Mhar: 'A village servant of low caste (a *balutedar*). – *H.A.D.*' *A Glossary of Vernacular Judicial and Revenue Terms*, p. 72.

¹⁷⁴ J. B. Simson, Sholapur Sub-Cltr, to Ahmednagar Cltr, 22 Jan 1825, BRP, 23 Feb 1825, No. 69, APAC.

elsewhere permanently.¹⁷⁵ Thus, although burdensome debts motivated some ryots to migrate, the strongest motivator was the need to secure subsistence, and such migration was often, but not always, of a temporary nature that lasted as long as the drought prevailed.

In practical terms the option of migration was only available to the able-bodied. The compelling instincts of self-preservation forced some migrants to leave behind their less able 'old and helpless' loved ones to an uncertain subsistence 'on the roots and grass seeds to be picked up in the fields'.¹⁷⁶ Yet Frost has argued that the practice of abandoning loved ones was often followed in the hope of increasing the whole family's chances of survival. The able-bodied men would search abroad for temporary employment and thereby reduce the number of mouths to feed at home. Frost has argued that this strategy was better suited to villages with greater sources of wild foods, such as forests and other communal lands, on which the people left behind might subsist.¹⁷⁷ Yet the practice was also followed in areas without these extra sources of food. Pringle wrote from Poona in 1825 that the effects of such a diet on those who were left behind 'were too plainly visible in their emaciated countenances and swollen limbs'.¹⁷⁸ Many of these people died of starvation.¹⁷⁹

Abandonment was often a death sentence. Robert Arbuthnot reported from Bagulkot in 1833 that 'children have been picked up, and taken in to [the] Mamlutdar's office, in a dying state either deserted by their parents, or bereaved of them altogether'.¹⁸⁰ He argued that, without intervention, many of the people who were unable to migrate from his district would starve to death.¹⁸¹ He noted again in 1839 that many men had migrated elsewhere with their cattle 'to provide themselves with the means of living in other places till the rains set in', leaving their 'women and children' behind, who

¹⁷⁵ John A. Dunlop, Ahmednagar Cltr, to Deccan Cmr, 9 Jul 1825, BRP, 27 Jul 1825, No. 13, APAC.

¹⁷⁶ R. K. Pringle, Asst Poona Cltr in Deputation, to Poona Cltr, 8 Mar 1825, BRP, 6 Apr 1825, No. 3A, APAC.

¹⁷⁷ Frost, p. 329.

¹⁷⁸ R. K. Pringle, Asst Poona Cltr in Deputation, to Poona Cltr, 8 Mar 1825, BRP, 6 Apr 1825, No. 3A, APAC.

¹⁷⁹ R. K. Pringle, Asst Poona Cltr, to Poona Cltr, 2 Apr 1825, BRP, 13 Apr 1825, No. 78, APAC.

¹⁸⁰ R. K. Arbuthnot, Bagulcotah Sub-Cltr, to Act Dharwar Cltr, 3 Jul 1833, BRP, 31 Jul 1833, No. 4329, APAC.

¹⁸¹ R. K. Arbuthnot, Bagulcotah Sub-Cltr, to Act Dharwar Cltr, 3 Jul 1833, BRP, 31 Jul 1833, No. 4329, APAC.

now required assistance to survive.¹⁸² The migration of the able-bodied family members was sometimes a viable survival strategy for the whole family, but at other times it was viable for the able-bodied only.

The path of the able-bodied migrant by no means guaranteed survival, but the plight of the migrant will be considered in a subsequent chapter. Periodic fasting was one of the final survival strategies left available to any individual of desperate circumstances. This stage of desperation came sooner, however, for the less able-bodied individual who had been abandoned. Sharma has argued that fasting was probably a common survival strategy practiced by many families during famine.¹⁸³ Many people of Dharwar district who had sold their property and taken on debts to survive in 1824 were ‘obliged to starve for a day or two’ to conserve food supplies until the rains returned.¹⁸⁴ Several petitioners from Ratnagiri reported in 1839 that some people ‘have lived partly on grain meal and partly on leaves of trees, and some have had occasion to fast’.¹⁸⁵ The term ‘strategy’ is only somewhat applicable here because it implies a choice of options. Not all people fasted out of their own volition to conserve their food supplies, but rather did so involuntarily due to a lack of any food whatsoever. J. Nisbett reported from Dharwar in 1833 that thousands of people were ‘in absolute want of food’, who were ‘totally unable to work and destitute of all other means of subsistence’.¹⁸⁶ An unnamed mamlatdar of Indi taluka reported in 1833 that ‘every where the poor of all castes after having fasted 4 or 5 days and having no strength left in their hands and feet and being totally helpless, are dying’.¹⁸⁷

Many people did finally succumb to starvation. Most cases occurred during the 1831-5 scarcity, which was the most severe of the three early nineteenth century scarcities discussed in this thesis.¹⁸⁸ Yet isolated cases of starvation were reported in the 1823-5

¹⁸² R. K. Arbuthnot, Ahmedabad Cltr, to Act Chief Sec to Govt, 8 May 1839, BRP, 29 May 1839, No. 3444, APAC.

¹⁸³ Sharma, *Famine*, p. 200.

¹⁸⁴ Statement by A. Freese, in J. Thackeray, Principal Dharwar Cltr, to Deccan Cmr, 15 Sep 1824, BRP, 6 Oct 1824, p. 6302, APAC.

¹⁸⁵ R. V. Goodhuleykur, and 10 Other Ratnagiri Petitioners, to Act Chief Sec to Govt, 9 Mar 1839, BRP, 11 Sep 1839, No. 5716, APAC.

¹⁸⁶ J. Nisbet, Dharwar Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 31 Aug 1833, BRP, 25 Sep 1833, No. 5225, APAC.

¹⁸⁷ Translation of a Letter from Indee Mamlutdar, 29 Jun 1833, BRP, 31 Jul 1833, No. 4329, APAC.

¹⁸⁸ R. K. Arbuthnot, Bagulcotah Sub-Cltr, to Act Dharwar Cltr, 3 Jul 1833, BRP, 31 Jul 1833, No. 4329, APAC; and Translation of a Letter from Indee Mamlutdar, 29 Jun 1833, BRP, 31 Jul 1833, No. 4329, APAC; and Translation of a Letter from Modeebhall Mamlutdar, 5 Jul 1833, BRP, 31 Jul 1833,

and 1838-9 droughts also.¹⁸⁹ Many of those who died were migrants that fell short of their destination. Yet many also died abandoned at home. Price rises had excluded them from the grain market. Thus, the reaction to drought of the more fortunate members of society in protecting their interests and pursuing profit, in conjunction with the effects of drought itself upon grain prices and the poorer ryots' crops and income, rendered the drastic action of migration necessary among the poorest members of society. Yet the final act that brought starvation to the doorstep of the physically unable poor was when they were reluctantly abandoned by the able-bodied members of the same socio-economic group.

Parents who could no longer provide for their children had an alternative to abandoning them to starvation. A survival strategy for the desperately poor during drought was to sell their children into lifelong servitude. Ahuja has stated that this was a common occurrence in serious subsistence crises.¹⁹⁰ Habib has noted the following occasions in which the practice was followed in the Mughal era: the Gujarat severe scarcity of the 1560s; the 1597 Kashmir famine; the great famine of 1630-2 in Gujarat and the Deccan; the 1646 Punjab scarcity; and the 1670 Bijapur drought.¹⁹¹ The practice was also followed under British rule. Pringle observed in 1833 that 'sales of children have become frequent' in Sholapur.¹⁹² Arbuthnot reported from Bagulkot in the same year that many parents were 'in such distress that they are offering their children for sale'. The parents did this, he argued, 'to keep themselves alive'.¹⁹³ Yet often the children were sold for trifling sums and the sales benefited the parents only in that there was one less mouth to feed.¹⁹⁴ The practice was primarily intended to keep the child alive.

No. 4329, APAC; and R. K. Pringle, Sholapur Sub-Cltr, to Poona Cltr, 9 Jul 1833, BRP, 31 Jul 1833, No. 4206, APAC; and R. K. Pringle, Sholapur Sub-Cltr, to Poona Cltr, 12 Jul 1833, BRP, 31 Jul 1833, No. 4208, APAC.

¹⁸⁹ R. K. Pringle, Asst Poona Cltr, to Poona Cltr, 2 Apr 1825, BRP, 13 Apr 1825, No. 78, APAC; and R. V. Goodhuleykur, and 10 Other Ratnagiri Petitioners, to Act Chief Sec to Govt, 9 Mar 1839, BRP, 11 Sep 1839, No. 5716, APAC.

¹⁹⁰ Ahuja, p. 357.

¹⁹¹ Habib, pp. 114, 115, 117-8, 119.

¹⁹² R. K. Pringle, Sholapur Sub-Cltr, to Poona Cltr, 9 Jul 1833, BRP, 31 Jul 1833, No. 4206, APAC; and R. K. Pringle, Sholapur Sub-Cltr, to Poona Cltr, 12 Jul 1833, BRP, 31 Jul 1833, No. 4208, APAC.

¹⁹³ R. K. Arbuthnot, Bagulcota Sub-Cltr, to Act Dharwar Cltr, 13 Jun 1833, BRP, 10 Jul 1833, No. 3794, APAC.

¹⁹⁴ Sharma, *Famine*, p. 77.

Arguably the wealthy benefactor was exploiting the hopeless circumstances of their poor beneficiary. The parents and the child were motivated sellers, in that if the would-be benefactor rejected them the child would likely starve to death. Yet the would-be benefactor knew this and was therefore somewhat a motivated buyer from a moral standpoint. The wealthy individuals that chose to adopt or purchase a child during drought did so from a sense of fulfilling a social obligation. Sharma has noted that during the 1837-8 North Indian famine, many of the Indian sub-officials adopted orphans or purchased children cheaply, and typically retained these minors as servants for the rest of their lives.¹⁹⁵ The practice made sense in terms of ensuring survival. In western India Stevenson wrote from Dharwar that interfering with the practice of slavery would jeopardise the lives of children who would otherwise be saved from starvation during drought.¹⁹⁶ Being so desperately impoverished, all the parents could offer was their child's lifelong labour. Unwilling to offer something for nothing in return, the benefactor accepted.

Crime was another drastic survival strategy available to the able-bodied poor. Most official explanations for why crime increased during famine, as Sharma has asserted, were based on the understanding that hunger, or the fear of impending hunger, was the primary motivator.¹⁹⁷ Barniwall reported from Kathiawar in 1824 that some of the poor were resorting to 'theft and predatory pursuits' to secure subsistence.¹⁹⁸ High grain prices that year in Ahmedabad district forced some people to 'commit depredations' to ensure survival.¹⁹⁹ Arbuthnot reported in 1839 that the higher grain prices had forced some people to turn to crime to provide 'the means of livelihood to the parties concerned'.²⁰⁰ When drought deprived people of their usual sources of food, some people stole to survive.

Each of the three droughts that comprise this study caused an increase in crime rates. Yet not surprisingly crime rates were highest during the most severe drought of 1831-

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 77.

¹⁹⁶ R. D. Choksey, *Economic History of the Bombay Deccan and Karnatak, 1818-1868*, Poona, 1945, p. 297.

¹⁹⁷ Sharma, *Famine*, pp. 63-4, 94-5, 344-7.

¹⁹⁸ R. Barniwall, Kathiawar Political Agent, to Sec to Govt, 29 Sep 1824, BGP, 20 Oct 1824, p. 5916, APAC.

¹⁹⁹ A. Crawford, Ahmedabad Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 16 Sep 1824, BGP, 6 Oct 1824, pp. 5494-6, APAC.

²⁰⁰ R. K. Arbuthnot, Ahmedabad Cltr, to Act Chief Sec to Govt, 8 May 1839, BRP, 29 May 1839, No. 3444, APAC.

5. Some areas experienced a partial breakdown of law and order. Anderson reported in 1833 that ‘scarcity has already induced a great prevalence of gang robberies and plunder’. Even some policemen had been driven by poverty to abandon their posts in search of plunder and subsistence.²⁰¹ Edward Mills wrote from Kaira in 1833 that ‘it is utterly impossible for me to give you any idea of the ferment the Country is thrown into’. The season ‘has assumed a character that it is painful for a reflecting mind to view in its ultimate results’.²⁰² The increase in crime induced a degree of public panic. The inhabitants of Parel village, near Bombay city, complained in 1833 that gangs of robbers had ‘infested the surrounding villages’, leaving the people in ‘a state of constant anxiety and terror’.²⁰³ Villages were sometimes ransacked by bands of robbers in their hundreds. Those who resisted were often killed.²⁰⁴ Widespread fear seems to have characterised the 1831-5 drought.

Criminal acts were committed against various sections of society. The aim was always to secure food, for which some people took the direct approach of assaulting those in possession of grain. Grain dealers were often targeted during the droughts of the 1820s and 1830s. William Lumsden reported in 1824 that ‘the people at Bulsaur have plundered a boat which was laden with grain’.²⁰⁵ In 1839 petitioners of Broach district described attacks on houses known to ‘possess any stock of grain’.²⁰⁶ Crimes committed specifically against grain dealers will receive further attention in the following chapter. Even humble cultivators in possession of a small amount of grain were not immune to violence, as sometimes roaming gangs killed villagers to steal their food.²⁰⁷ The possession of food made people a target. Arbuthnot reported two cases in 1839 in which people were ‘cut down’ near Goga town by people ‘driven to the act by the positive want of food’.²⁰⁸ Other desperate people chose the indirect approach of committing crimes for money, which could then be used to purchase

²⁰¹ G. W. Anderson, Act Dharwar Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 4 Jan 1833, BRP, 23 Jan 1833, No. 297, APAC.

²⁰² E. B. Mills, Kaira Cltr, to Rev Cmr, 15 Aug 1833, BRP, 4 Sep 1833, No. 4890, APAC.

²⁰³ Dadajee Yadojee and Other Parel Village Petitioners, to Sec to Govt, 31 Mar 1833, BGP, 17 Apr 1833, No. 61, APAC.

²⁰⁴ Asharam Lakhmeeram Mookhee Patell, Ahmedabad Petitioner, to Act Chief Sec to Govt, 7 Apr 1838, BRP, 15 Aug 1838, OIOC, No. 6236.

²⁰⁵ W. J. Lumsden, Surat Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 21 Sep 1824, BGP, 29 Sep 1824, pp. 5429-31, APAC.

²⁰⁶ Dessaie Houkoomutroy Dowlutroy Muzmoodar and 372 Other Broach Petitioners, to Act Chief Sec to Govt, no date given, BRP, 20 Feb 1839, No. 1076, APAC.

²⁰⁷ W. J. Lumsden, Surat Cltr, to Act Sec to Govt, 15 May 1824, BRP, 9 Jun 1824, pp. 3770_3-13, APAC.

²⁰⁸ R. K. Arbuthnot, Ahmedabad Cltr, to Act Chief Sec to Govt, 8 May 1839, BRP, 29 May 1839, No. 3444, APAC.

food. Sharma has found that during the North Indian famine of 1837-8, some people kidnapped young girls between the ages of six and twelve and sold them into prostitution to secure the funds needed for food.²⁰⁹ Kidnappings were not unheard of in western India. Saville Marriot reported from the Northern Konkan in 1824 that criminals were kidnapping affluent individuals and holding them for ransom.²¹⁰ Thus, anyone with food or money without adequate protection was considered fair game.

Crime, to other people, represented a subtler strategy in the pursuit of subsistence. Cherry noted in 1824 that previous Indian governments had executed thieves, and that the British Government of Bombay's criminal subjects did not fear its one or two year sentences. He stated that 'a cooly²¹¹ returning to his village at the expiration of the term of imprisonment is remarked to be in better condition than when he went', and that 'petty thefts are sometimes committed by them with the view of securing to themselves the subsistence and clothing afforded by Government'.²¹² Impoverished ryots could therefore turn to crime to secure their subsistence.

Missionaries and the Indian public: the spirituality of drought.

Most Indian villagers strongly believed that, when dissatisfied, their gods and goddesses would send droughts and accompanying diseases. A natural survival strategy during drought was therefore to try to influence the deities into returning the rains. Hardiman has noted that peasants habitually conducted ceremonies even before a drought around ploughing time. If the rains failed they would conduct further ceremonies.²¹³ A pupil at the Bombay school of the Church Missionary Society, Hurree Kessowjee, wrote in 1824 that locals had recently spent Rs. 5,000 'in making burnt-offering and giving clothes, money, and food to the Brahmins for the rain. Mussulmans also prayed and fasted for 3 days on the Esplanade for the rain'.²¹⁴ When the monsoon failed in Nasik district in 1832 some Hindus, in their anger and

²⁰⁹ Sanjay Sharma, 'The 1837-38 Famine in U.P.: Some Dimensions of Popular Action', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 30, no. 3, 1993, p. 362.

²¹⁰ Saville Marriot, Nthn Konkan Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 1 Jan 1824, BRP, 14 Jan 1824, pp. 202-5, APAC.

²¹¹ *Coolie / Cooly*: '1. An aboriginal tribe of Gujarat and the Konkan, formerly robbers, now labourers and cultivators. 2. Hired labourer, burden-carrier in India and the Far East'. Lewis, pp. 91-2.

²¹² J. H. Cherry, Ahmedabad Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 12 May 1824, BRP, 23 Jun 1824, pp. 4222-4, APAC.

²¹³ Hardiman, 'Usury, dearth and famine', pp. 135-6.

²¹⁴ Hurree Kessowjee, Bombay School-boy, 9 Aug 1824, C I 3 M 1, p. 83, CMS.

frustration, bricked up the entrance to their idols as a punishment. They imprisoned their god without ‘water, offerings, or adoration, until the rain began to fall, when they liberated their prisoner and begged his pardon’.²¹⁵ Many people believed that diseases like cholera, which were a typical accompaniment to drought, were also sent by the gods. When cholera struck Muckmalabad town in 1835 the inhabitants referred to it as a ‘destroying demon’.²¹⁶ Some people responded to the cholera that struck Bombay in 1824 by sacrificing ‘goats, cocks &c., to their local deities’.²¹⁷ Some of the Company’s Indian civil servants also believed in the influence of the gods. In 1835 the Nasik Mamlutdar ordered the villagers to go into the fields and pray for rain.²¹⁸ Similar practices were followed by officials during the 1746-7 famine in Surat, and the 1792 famine in Poona.²¹⁹ The belief in a divine influence over the weather was therefore common in Indian society.

Many Europeans in western India also believed that the weather was divinely ordained. The missionaries typically took a spiritual perspective on the lack of rain. The Reverend Henry Davies, a Bombay-based missionary, professed in 1824 that ‘the Lord ... has to speak the word only and the Clouds shall drop down rain and cause the Earth to bring forth its increase’.²²⁰ Yet even the Company’s European civil servants often referred to God’s influence over the drought. DeVitre expressed his ‘fervent hope’ in 1824 that ‘Providence may still be pleased to avert the dreadful visitation with which the Country is at present menaced’.²²¹ Archibald Robertson stated in 1824 that ‘it has pleased Providence to withdraw rain from the surrounding countries’.²²² Charles Prescott reported a return of the rains in 1834, and hoped that ‘by God’s assistance’ the cultivators would soon recover from the drought. Richard Mills rejoiced in 1839 that ‘by the blessing of Providence, a very heavy storm of hail and

²¹⁵ Rev. Charles Farrar, Nasik Msny, 15 Sep 1834, C I 3 M 2, p. 9, CMS.

²¹⁶ Rev. Charles Farrar, Nasik Msny, 13 Aug 1835, C I 3 M 2, p. 122, CMS.

²¹⁷ Hurree Kessowjee, Bombay School-boy, 9 Aug 1824, C I 3 M 1, p. 83, CMS.

²¹⁸ Rev. Charles Farrar, Nasik Msny, 13 Aug 1835, C I 3 M 2, p. 121, CMS.

²¹⁹ ‘Miratey Ahmedee’, cited by Hoozoor Deputy Surat Cltr, 30 Sep 1867, in A. T. Etheridge, *Report on Past Famines in the Bombay Presidency*, Bombay: Education Society’s Press, 1868, p. 64; and Munohur Bheorao, Khasnavis and Potnis, no date given, in Etheridge, p. 94.

²²⁰ Rev. Henry Davies, Bombay Msny, 24 Sep 1824, C I 3 M 1, pp. 103-4, CMS.

²²¹ J. D. DeVitre, Kaira Judge, to Sec to Govt, 20 Jul 1824, BGP, 4 Aug 1824, OIOC, p. 4233.

²²² A. Robertson, Khandesh Cltr, Translation of Circular Instructions to the mamlatdars, [no date given], p. 6992, attached to A. Robertson, Khandesh Cltr, to Deccan Cmr, 1 Oct 1824, BRP, 3 Nov 1824, p. 6968, APAC.

rain occurred'.²²³ Both Indians and Europeans, therefore, typically looked to the heavens when the rains failed.

More to the point, each religious group believed that only their own god or gods were responsible for the weather. Mrs. Caroline Farrar, a Nasik-based missionary, stated in 1835 that 'Mussulmans, Hindoos, all are crying – every man unto his god. Prayer for rain is also daily made in our chapel unto the Lord Jehovah'.²²⁴ Drought therefore became a test of one's faith. It also became an opportunity to show to unbelievers the strength of one's own god. Mrs. Farrar continued, 'O that He would make this an occasion of manifesting His own glory'.²²⁵ Rev. Henry Davies, a Bombay-based missionary exclaimed in 1824, 'what a mercy would it be if some by this dispensation should be convinced that their Idols can do nothing for them, and all be convinced that our God alone is able to supply our need, and deliver us out of our distress'.²²⁶ Mrs. Farrar's husband, Reverend Charles Farrar, presented a prayer in Marathi to his congregation: 'may He spare this people from the miseries of disease and famine, and by the mighty power of His Spirit turning them from the error of their ways, may He bring them to the knowledge of Himself'.²²⁷ Drought therefore highlighted the religious divisions of society.

However, it was especially the European evangelicals who took drought as an opportunity to aggressively challenge what William Wilberforce referred to as the 'grand abomination' of India's religions.²²⁸ The evangelicals were Christian reformers in Britain who, in the early nineteenth century, formed an increasingly easy alliance with the free traders and utilitarians on reformist issues of free trade and education.²²⁹ In India, they wished to convert Indian society to Christianity through the introduction of English education, or what Stokes has referred to as 'a direct assault on the mind'.²³⁰ The missionaries of Bombay Presidency confronted non-Christians during times of drought with the proposition that, in the words of the Belgaum missionary

²²³ R. Mills, Act Poona Judge, to Act Sec to Govt, 31 May 1839, BGP, 19 Jun 1839, No. 1165, APAC.

²²⁴ Mrs. Caroline Farrar, Nasik Msny, 8 Aug 1835, C I 3 M 2, p. 141, CMS.

²²⁵ Mrs. Caroline Farrar, Nasik Msny, 8 Aug 1835, C I 3 M 2, p. 141, CMS.

²²⁶ Rev. Henry Davies, Bombay Msny, 24 Sep 1824, C I 3 M 1, pp. 103-4, CMS.

²²⁷ Rev. Charles Farrar, Nasik Msny, 5 Aug 1835, C I 3 M 2, p. 120, CMS.

²²⁸ Speech of William Wilberforce, 22 June 1813: *Hansard*, 1st series, vol. xxvi, p. 164, cited in Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959, p. 31.

²²⁹ Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959, pp. 30, 40, 54.

²³⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 30, 56.

Reverend Beynon, the Indians' 'great sin of idolatry', paid in homage to their false gods, had angered the one true God. Thus, Beynon argued, the Indians themselves were 'the cause of all these judgments' of drought and scarcity. Conversion was presented as their only means of salvation.²³¹ The Reverend Christian Warth, a Nasik-based missionary, argued with the inhabitants of Harnutwardee village in 1838. He later reported that they had complained of 'their useless efforts to prevail upon their idols to send rain ... but that their souls stand in need of the waters of life they could scarcely be brought to understand'.²³² The religious arm of the reform movement had laid down its gauntlet.

The response from the Indian populace to the earnest sermons of the European missionaries was both logical and challenging. They compared the fruits of Christian versus non-Christian prayers for rain. The exasperated Reverend Henry Davies wrote from Bombay in 1824 that 'many of these poor creatures have asked questions very difficult to solve', such as: "How is it, that God is not better to you Christians. ... You and we are in the same circumstances?" Several Parsi members of the Bombay community presented Davies with the challenge: "we have prayed to our God and have offered alms, yet there is no rain, it will be well if the Christians pray and see if their prayers have any effect".²³³ Drought was made a battleground in a war of words waged for the devotion of souls.

When the rains finally did return, it was seen by each religious group as a confirmation of their own faith and a refutation of others'. Each group boasted of their own god's apparent influence and mocked the impotence or non-existence of rival deities. The Reverend John Dixon visited a temple soon after the rains returned to Nasik district in 1835. He found that 'those who were present immediately with exultation began to boast that their gods had sent the present rain; and said that our God was nothing at all, but that the Brahmin were the great gods'.²³⁴ The Reverend William Mitchell reported that 'the Banks of the river were crowded with persons paying their respects to the goddess who, they fancied had come down to them in the

²³¹ Rev. W. Beynon, Belgaum, 24 Dec 1833, CWM/LMS. South India. Journals. Box 4. Number 83, LMS, p. 4c.

²³² Rev. Christian Warth, Nasik Msny, 25 Jul 1838, C I 3 M 3, p. 161, CMS.

²³³ Rev. Henry Davies, Bombay Msny, 24 Sep 1824, C I 3 M 1, p. 104, CMS.

²³⁴ Rev. John Dixon, Nasik Msny, 26 Aug 1835, C I 3 M 2, p. 103, CMS.

heavy showers which have fallen today'.²³⁵ Mrs. Farrar reacted with some disillusionment not in her own faith but in her hopes of bringing Christianity to India:

The Lord has been entreated for this people, and has sent a gracious rain to replenish the earth; but they attribute the mercy to the power of their false gods, and suppose it to be the effect of their charms and incantations. I fear Jehovah is greatly provoked by their wickedness, that He thus suffers them to be confirmed in their delusions.²³⁶

If drought was indeed a battleground in a war fought for devotion, the rate of attrition was very low – few souls changed hands between the gods.

Those who were most susceptible to falling on the battleground, however, were the very poor. Missionaries did not always give alms to the poor during drought. The Reverend Cyrus Stone, a Nasik-based missionary, wrote of the increasing numbers of beggars approaching the mission for food. He recorded that 'we endeavour to direct them to look to God, and not to their idols to avert the evil which they fear, and to Jesus Christ for the bread of life'.²³⁷ Yet some missionaries did give to the poor, and this point of contact provided missionaries with an opportunity to preach the gospel which they lacked with those who could feed themselves. Mrs. Abigail Stone, a Nasik-based missionary, stated in 1838 that 'one of the men among the beggars to whom I daily read a portion of scripture and distribute alms died a few days since'.²³⁸ Similarly, Mrs. Robinson, a Poona-based missionary, distributed alms to 'about a hundred of blind, halt and maimed' poor people in 1824. The Reverend R. Kenney, who was visiting Mrs. Robinson's mission at the time, took the opportunity to 'address' the gathering on the benefits offered by Christianity.²³⁹ The audience of the missionaries could always feign interest or even devotion while the drought persisted to secure access to food. This would constitute another survival strategy available to the poor during drought. As Hardiman has argued, the western Indian peasant was not as spiritually passive as others have suggested.²⁴⁰

²³⁵ Rev. William Mitchell, Nasick Msny, 15 May 1833, C I 3 M 1, p. 451, CMS.

²³⁶ Mrs. Caroline Farrar, Nasik Msny, 28 Aug 1835, C I 3 M 2, p. 144, CMS.

²³⁷ Rev. Cyrus Stone, Nasik Msny, 10 Nov 1838, C I 3 M 3, p. 220, CMS.

²³⁸ Mrs. Abigail Stone, Nasik Msny, 20 Nov 1838, C I 3 M 3, p. 232, CMS.

²³⁹ Rev. R. Kenney, Bombay Msny, 28 Oct 1824, C I 3 M 1, pp. 105-6, CMS.

²⁴⁰ 'Others' such as Paul Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943-4*, New York, 1982, cited in Hardiman, 'Usury, dearth and famine', pp. 117-8.

However, far more impressionable were the children of the poor. In addition to food the missionaries offered education, which promised an eventual escape from poverty and suffering in future droughts. Mrs. Farrar noted in 1835 that all the pupils in their school were ‘the children of the poor’.²⁴¹ The children of the poor were therefore most susceptible to conversion. Mrs. Farrar wrote a prayer for rain and gave it to her pupils to read and take home to read to their parents. She stated that ‘one of the little girls very naturally asked: “Now we have prayed to the Lord, will not rain fall?”’²⁴² The missionaries also took in orphans, which was an annual occurrence but increased considerably during drought because of the increase in mortality rates, particularly amongst the poor. These orphans, too, were typically converted to Christianity. Khan has noted the link between poverty and conversion. He has argued that the conversion of Indian orphans to Christianity was received nervously by many Indians, and that during the North Western Provinces famine of 1837 many people believed that the British rulers were intentionally impoverishing India to make the population ripe for conversion.²⁴³ Drought therefore presented both temporal and spiritual challenges to the poor in particular. The faith of their children was especially placed under fire.

Conclusion.

The benefit or otherwise of drought in the 1820s and 1830s was therefore in the eye of the beholder. Grain dealers saw increased profits through the sale of old grain at enhanced prices. Moneylenders saw profits from lending to desperate borrowers. They also saw unacceptable liabilities in the faces of their poorest borrowing clients, who were to be shunned else they impoverish their lender. Revenue intermediaries saw remote Collectors susceptible to misinformation and ryots as prey with excess fat to be consumed by the pack. Wealthy ryots saw the advantages of obtaining precious agricultural assets being sold from desperate hands at bargain prices. Middling ryots often scraped by. Poorer ryots saw many people turn their backs on their plight. They saw a decreasing set of increasingly drastic options in sourcing food. People saw their own gods as the bringers of drought and rain. Drought represented an opportunity for missionaries to challenge non-Christian religions, particularly of the poor. Thus

²⁴¹ Mrs. Caroline Farrar, Nasik Msny, 8 Aug 1835, C I 3 M 2, p. 141, CMS.

²⁴² Mrs. Caroline Farrar, Nasik Msny, 8 Aug 1835, C I 3 M 2, p. 141, CMS.

²⁴³ Sayyid Ahmad Khan, *Asbab-i Baghawat-i Hind*, 2nd edn, repr. Delhi, 1971, pp. 103-4, cited in Sharma, *Famine*, p. 214.

drought was experienced economically, but it was also experienced physically and religiously. The poor in particular faced the brunt of drought's challenges.