

“Men Diggers and Women Carriers”: Gendered Work on Famine Public Works in Colonial North India*

MADHAVI JHA

*Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University,
New Delhi, India*

E-mail: madhavijha1@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: The history of labour on public works construction is usually presented as a masculine experience, either because the workforce studied is mostly male, or because the labour of women remains unrecorded. Does the history of labour and wage on public works undergo change if we account for women labourers? This article examines this question in the context of famine public works in the second half of nineteenth-century India. State employment on public works was part of a famine relief programme and women, largely from agricultural labouring and small peasant families, worked on the construction of roads, railways, canals, and tanks. The article traces the development of task-gender association on famine public works both as a norm and in practice. Further, it analyses the evidence on negotiations made by women labourers themselves with the existing gendered notions of work and wage. This study contributes to the historiography of labour in a colonial context in two ways: first, it adds to the existing corpus on forms of labour extraction for construction work; and, second, it explores the question of women’s work and remuneration outside factories, mills, and mines.

INTRODUCTION

The global turn in labour history in the 1990s has encouraged research on different labour forms away from the traditional factory context of the Global North. This new direction in historiography is influenced by labour histories written from the perspective of the Global South and by histories of gender, race, and ethnicity.¹ It is in the interface of labour histories from

* I would like to thank Dr Nonica Datta, Soni and Poorva Rajaram for their feedback on this paper. I am also grateful for the valuable suggestions made by the anonymous reviewers and the editorial team of the *International Review of Social History*.

1. For a discussion on Global Labour History and its antecedents, see Shahid Amin and Marcel van der Linden (eds), *“Peripheral” Labour?: Studies on the History of Partial Proletarianization* (Cambridge, 1997); Marcel van der Linden and Jan Lucassen, *Prolegomena for a Global Labour History* (Amsterdam, 1999); Jan Lucassen (ed.), *Global Labour History: A State of the*

Asia, Africa, and Latin America and the work done by feminists and gender historians that we can locate the particular historical experience of women working in the colonial context.² Much like the metropolises, wage work in urban areas was largely a male space in the colonies. However, unlike the countries of the industrialized Global North, much of the social reproduction activities in the colonies was rooted in the peasant subsistence economy in rural areas. This implied a continued dependence of the male wage earner on the waged and unwaged work of women and children. Far from seeing this as incomplete “modernization” of colonized nations, it is argued that all these forms of labour were (and continue to be) crucial for capitalist development.³ Gender and domesticity were central to the mutual constitution of the colonizers and the colonized. Gender was an important marker of class and race barriers. In the colonial context, this mainly manifested in anxieties about men and women’s sexualities in different imperial sites of labour extraction as well as in the variegated experiences of the deployment of the male breadwinner ideology.⁴ These concerns around gender often turned on the

Art (Bern, 2006); Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays Toward a Global Labour History* (Leiden, 2008); *idem*, “The Promise and Challenges of Global Labour History”, *International Labour and Working Class History*, 82 (2012), pp. 57–76.

2. While anthropological studies have shown that male authority structures within family predate capitalism, historians have studied gender relations that emerged from the specific historical interaction of patriarchy and capitalism. See, for example, Heidi Hartman, “Capitalism, Patriarchy and Job Segregation by Sex”, *Signs*, 1:3 (1976), pp. 137–169; Wally Secombe, “Patriarchy Stabilized: The Construction of the Male Breadwinner Wage Norm in Nineteenth-Century England”, *Social History*, 11:1 (1986), pp. 53–76; and, Sonya Rose, “Gender at Work: Sex, Class and Industrial Capitalism”, *History Workshop Journal*, 21:1 (1986), pp. 113–132. Also see articles in the Supplement of the present journal focusing on the male breadwinner family, “The Rise and Decline of the Male Breadwinner Family?”, *International Review of Social History* [hereafter, *IRSH*], 42: 55 (1997).

3. Elizabeth Anne Kuznesof, “The Role of the Female-Headed Household in Brazilian Modernization: São Paulo 1765 to 1836”, *Journal of Social History*, 13:4 (1980), pp. 589–613; Lisa A. Lindsay, “Domesticity and Difference: Male Breadwinners, Working Women, and Colonial Citizenship in the 1945 Nigerian General Strike”, *The American Historical Review*, 104:3 (1999), pp. 783–812; Samita Sen and Shamil Jeppie, “Editorial”, *SEPHIS E-Magazine*, 1 (2004), p. 1; Willem van Schendel, “Stretching Labour Historiography: Pointers from South Asia”, *IRSH*, 51: 514 (2006), pp. 229–261; Samita Sen, “Gender and Class: Women in Indian Industry, 1890–1990”, *Modern Asian Studies* [hereafter, *MAS*], 42:1 (2008), pp. 75–116; Mirta Zaida Lobato, “Women Workers in South America (Nineteenth-Twentieth Centuries)”, *Clio. Women, Gender, History*, 38:2 (2013), pp. 209–218.

4. Ann L. Stoler, “Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th-Century Colonial Cultures”, *American Ethnologist*, 16:4 (1989), pp. 634–660; Ann L. Stoler and Frederick Cooper, “Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda”, in Frederick Cooper and Ann L. Stoler (eds), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley, CA, 1997), pp. 1–56. For the differentiated deployment of the male breadwinner ideology in the metropole and colony, see Lindsay, “Domesticity and Difference: Male Breadwinners, Working Women, and Colonial Citizenship in the 1945 Nigerian General Strike”; Samita Sen, “Gendered Exclusion: Domesticity and Dependence in

very definition of women's work. Recovering historical experiences of women's work and analysing the contemporaneous gender norms allows us new insights on gender, class, and race.

The labour history of public works construction has mainly been presented through masculine experiences of work: while in some sites the majority of construction labourers were males, in other places the presence of women has not been recorded in the sources. In the context of colonies, the labour histories of public works intersect with histories of penal colonies, convict labour, and slave trade. These histories emphasize the coercive nature of labour extraction, which resulted in a mixed labouring population consisting of a range of "free" and "unfree" labour, mostly male.⁵ In a historiographical survey of gender and transportation history, Margaret Walsh points to the construction of masculinity through the work and domestic space of labourers engaged in construction work and transportation services in a wide variety of contexts. In this survey, the typification of masculinity with construction work is connected to the male breadwinner ideology, "rough" work culture, and job segregation.⁶ This article departs from this historiography by focusing mainly on women labourers working on famine public works in colonial India. In the late nineteenth century, women worked in large numbers on the construction of public infrastructure, mainly within family units. However, it was in famine public works that women were individuated as labourers and became documented subjects of state relief. Famine relief works was the work assigned by the state on the construction of roads, railways, tanks (Figure 1), and canals in return for a subsistence wage during

Bengal", *IRSH*, 42: S5 (1997), pp. 65–86; Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, "Grammar of Difference? The Dutch Colonial State, Labour Policies, and Social Norms on Work and Gender, c.1800–1940", *IRSH*, 61: SI24 (2016), pp. 137–164.

5. For penal deportation and coercive labour on public works, see Clare Anderson, "Transnational Histories of Penal Transportation: Punishment, Labour and Governance in the British Imperial World, 1788–1939", *Australian Historical Studies*, 47:3 (2016), pp. 381–397 and *idem*, "The Andaman Island Penal Colony: Race, Class, Criminality and the British Empire", *IRSH*, 63: SI26 (2018), pp. 25–43. Recent works on various "motley" groups of labourers working on public works construction in Africa and Latin America include, Lucia Lamounier, "The 'Labour Question' in Nineteenth Century Brazil: Railways, Export Agriculture and Labour Scarcity", LSE Working Paper, No. 59/00 (2009), pp. 1–50; Timothy J Coates, "The Deposito de Degredados in Luanda, Angola: Binding and Building the Portuguese Empire with Convict Labour, 1880s–1932", *IRSH*, 63: SI26 (2018), pp. 151–167; Sarah Kunkel, "Forced Labour, Roads, and Chiefs: Implementation of the ILO Forced Convention in the Gold Coast", *IRSH*, 63:3 (2018), pp. 449–476; Evelyn P. Jennings, "The Path to Sweet Success: Free and Unfree Labor in the Building of Roads and Rails in Havana, Cuba, 1790–1835", *IRSH*, 64: SI27 (2019), pp. 149–171; Martine Jean, "Liberated Africans, Slaves, and Convict Labour in the Construction of Rio de Janeiro's Casa de Correção: Atlantic Labor Regimes and Confinement in Brazil's Port City", *IRSH*, 64: SI27 (2019), pp. 173–204.

6. Margaret Walsh, "Gender in the History of Transportation Services: A Historiographical Perspective", *The Business History Review*, 81:3 (2007), pp. 545–562, 555–562.

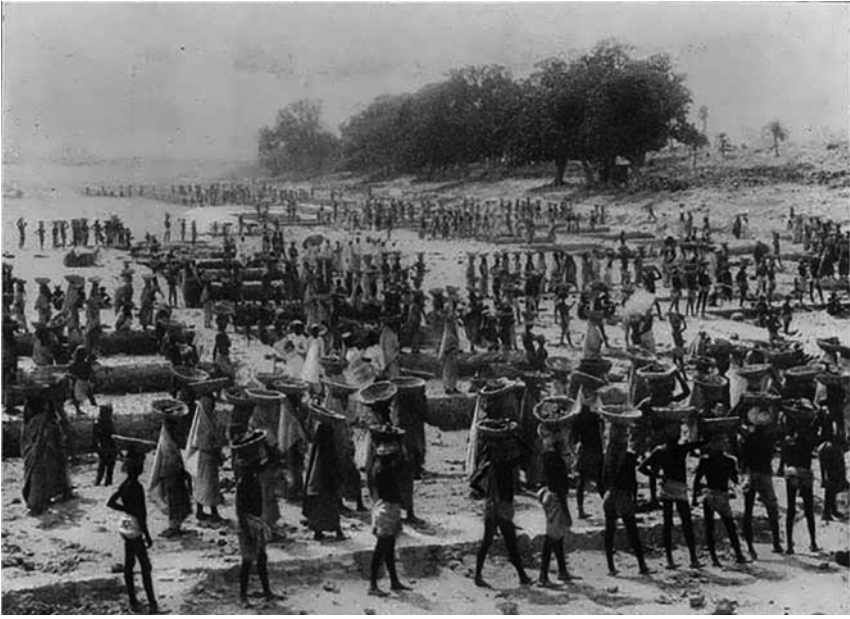


Figure 1. Famine relief works: tank digging.
Illustrated London News, 8 May 1897.

famines and scarcities. Typically, the state was the direct employer and there were no contractors on famine public works. According to one estimate, women formed around fifty per cent of workers on famine relief works by the end of the nineteenth century.⁷ Did the presence of women labourers on public works construction modify the norms around work and gender?

The history of women's labour in India has been a relatively understudied subject. Different historiographical reviews of Indian labour have pointed out the preponderance of studies on the organized labour concentrated in large-scale industries. This narrow historiographical focus has not only excluded different types of labouring population, including women, but also occluded the processes that led to the very formation of the "ideal" labouring population working in factories.⁸ Since the late 1980s, questions of gender and labour have been addressed in Indian historiography in two ways: firstly,

7. Government of India, *Report of the Indian Famine Commission 1898*, (Simla, 1898) [hereafter, FCR, 1898], p. 267.

8. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, "Paradigms in Historical Approach to Labour Studies on South Asia", in Jan Lucassen (ed.), *Global Labour History: A State of the Art* (Bern [etc.], 2006), pp. 147–161; Van Schendel, "Stretching Labour Historiography"; Chitra Joshi, "Histories of Indian Labour: Predicaments and Possibilities", *History Compass*, 6:2 (2008), pp. 439–454; and, Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay, "Indian Labour History: A Historiographic Survey", in Sabyasachi

through works that focus on women labourers in factories, mines, and plantations; and secondly, by looking at the evolution of working-class families and the nature of migration.⁹ However, the historiographical gap of women labouring in the agrarian and “informal” sector remains.¹⁰ Samita Sen has pointed out that “women’s historians, persuaded by arguments of ‘lack of evidence’, have neglected issues of work and workers. Poor and working women have fallen between the two stools of labour and women’s history”.¹¹ In studying labouring women on famine public works, the present article seeks to address this knowledge gap.

The rural links of the Indian working class, along with the gendered pattern of migration, has forced our attention to the specific type of labour mobilization that was necessitated for capitalist production in colonial India. Women in rural areas increasingly engaged in lower paid and unrecognized economic activities. Women’s work was not only intermittent, but also varied between different types of activities, especially in mines and plantations where labouring families were settled on the margins in small peasant holdings. Family labour was cheaper for capital in India and construction work was one such site where labour was mobilized. The focus of this paper is on the gendered norms and practices of work and wages that were produced and reproduced on famine public works in colonial North India.¹²

The trajectory of the declining labour force participation of women forms the context of various historical investigations of gendered work and remuneration in colonial India. While the dominant contemporary narratives in the late nineteenth and twentieth century often attributed this decline to protective legislation and women’s domestic roles, research has shown that women’s retrenchment was mostly a consequence of changes in the labour process, where women’s unfavourable position within the labour force left them

Bhattacharya (ed.), *Approaches to History: Essays in Indian Historiography* (Delhi, 2001), pp. 87–117.

9. Recent monographs on women labourers include: “City Lives: Women Workers in Bombay Cotton Textile Industry, 1911 to 1947” (Ph.D., Jawaharlal Nehru University, 1991); Samita Sen, *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India: The Bengal Jute Industry* (Cambridge, 1999); Piya Chatterjee, *A Time for Tea: Women, Labour and Post/Colonial Politics on an Indian Plantation* (New Delhi, 2003).

10. Historical works on rural women’s labour include Mukul Mukherjee, “Impact of Modernisation on Women’s Work”, *Indian Economic and Social History Review* [hereafter, *IESHR*], 20:1 (1983), pp. 27–45; Mitchell Maskiell, “Gender, Kinship and Rural Work in Colonial Punjab”, *Journal of Women’s History*, 2:1 (1990), pp. 35–72; Prem Chowdhry, *The Veiled Women: Shifting Gender Equations in Rural Haryana* (New Delhi, 1994); and Sen, *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India*, pp. 54–89.

11. Sen, “Gender and Class: Women in Indian Industry”, p. 76.

12. This article draws on sources from the three British provinces of Bengal, Punjab, and North Western Provinces and Oudh, with a special emphasis on the latter. The North Western Provinces and Oudh (NWP), which roughly corresponds to present-day Uttar Pradesh, was renamed as United Provinces in 1902.

vulnerable and disposable. The gendered division of labour that relegated women to “unskilled” tasks provided the rationale for both retrenchment of women as well as their lower wages. The construction of skill and strength was ideological and not based on any objective analysis. Hence, a number of tasks were considered “natural” or “suitable” for women. This association of task and gender, while drawing from wider notions around women’s abilities and strength prevalent in the contemporary society and culture, conveniently responded to the economic needs of the respective industries.¹³ Women’s reproductive roles within families, both generational and social, also contributed to the task-gender association in this period. The family type of male breadwinner and supplementary women earners was often a desired ideal rather than the reality of these workspaces.¹⁴ This article studies the

13. Thus, while women worked in mixed departments in the jute industry around Calcutta, the introduction of machinery delegated certain tasks as “male”. Women were further marginalized in this industry with another round of mechanization in the 1950s. See Arjan de Haan, “Towards a Single Male Earner: The Decline of Child and Female Employment in an Indian Industry”, *Economic and Social History in the Netherlands*, 6 (1994), pp. 145–167 and Sen, *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India*, pp. 89–142. In the case of tea plantations, plucking tea leaves was idealized as women’s “natural” task. It was constructed as an easy and pleasurable activity that did not require much strength. This was in stark contrast to the reality of the factory-like regime of plantations, which imposed strict rules on both the quality and quantity of plucking. See Chatterjee, *A Time for Tea*; and Nitin Varma, *Coolies of Capitalism: Assam Tea and the Making of Coolie Labour* (Berlin, 2016). Similarly, in the case of mines, where women mostly worked as family units, the deep-shaft mechanization excluded women from certain activities that were no longer perceived as suitable for them. See Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt, “From Gin Girls to Scavengers: Women in Raniganj Collieries”, *Economic and Political Weekly* [hereafter, *EPW*], 36:44 (2001), pp. 4213–4221; and Dhiraj Nite, “Work, Family and the Reproduction of Life: The Phase of Early Industrialisation in the Jharia Coalfields 1890s–1940s”, in Marcel van der Linden and Prabhu Mohapatra (eds), *Labour Matters: Towards Global Histories. Studies in Honour of Sabyasachi Bhattacharya* (New Delhi, 2009), pp. 82–105.

14. Radha Kumar and Samita Sen have shown that in the case of jute factories and textile mills, the state, capitalists, and unions deployed the family ideology during periods of retrenchment and to justify lower wages for women. See Kumar, “City Lives: Women Workers in the Bombay Cotton Textile Industry”; and Sen, *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India*. In the case of cashew factories in Kerala, unlike men, who eventually became full time workers, women continued to be defined as seasonal agricultural workers and eventually housewives. See Anna Lindberg, “Class, Caste, and Gender among the Cashew Workers in the South Indian State of Kerala 1930–2000”, *IRSH*, 46:2 (2001), pp. 155–184. In the case of indentured labour on overseas plantations, women became important to the planters in their reproductive roles, once the system of indenture was in danger of shutting down and there was a need for a stabilized labouring family. This stabilized labouring family was “settled” on small cane farms and women became useful to the labour regime as both workers on these supplementary farms as well as in their reproductive roles. Their work on the “family farm” as opposed to labouring as wage workers on plantations strengthened the male provider ideology. See Rhoda Reddock, “Freedom Denied: Indian Women and Indentureship in Trinidad and Tobago, 1845–1917”, *EPW*, 20:43 (1985), pp. 79–87; Prabhu Mohapatra, “‘Restoring the Family’: Wife Murders and the Making of a Sexual Contract for Indian Immigrant Labour in the British Caribbean Colonies, 1860–1920”, *Studies in History*, 11:2 (1995), pp. 227–260; Samita Sen, “Unsettling the Household: Act VI (of 1901) and the

task-gender association as it evolved on famine public works. Unlike other spaces, in famine public works the state was the direct employer of women labourers. This provides the opportunity to examine the role of the state in idealizing certain notions of gender and work. The article further traces the reworking and negotiation of these norms on the famine public works, including the response of women labourers themselves. The analysis of famine public works is prefaced with a survey of gendered work and remuneration of women labourers on public works.

WOMEN LABOURERS AND PUBLIC WORKS

In the second half of the nineteenth century, women worked on construction projects carried out by the Public Works Department (PWD), Railways, and Military. Who were these women and what patterns of gendered remuneration existed in such work? Ian Kerr, in his survey of railway construction in the same period (1860 to 1890), identifies two types of labourers: those who were part of the “professional digging castes” that moved from project to project, called the “professional navvies” of India by engineers of the PWD, and those drawn from the rural labour market of landless agricultural labourers or marginal peasants. Both types of labourers included women and children who worked mostly in earthwork, i.e. digging and carrying earth. According to Kerr, around ten million workers were involved in railway construction in this period. Eighty per cent of these workers, including women and children, were engaged in “unskilled” work.¹⁵

Labourers were recruited as family units within a gang structure and the contemporary sources reveal little of the different dimensions of gender and work.¹⁶ The PWD relied on an elaborate system of contractors and sub-contractors for the construction of public works in India. This was a defining feature of public works and was connected to the nature of the labour supply that existed in the country and to the intermittent and contingent nature of the

Regulation of Women Migrants in Colonial Bengal”, *IRSH*, 41:S4 (2009) pp. 135–156; and, Arunima Datta, “Immortality, Nationalism and the Colonial State in British Malaya: Indian Coolie Women’s Intimate Lives as Ideological Battleground”, *Women’s History Review*, 25:4 (2016), pp. 584–601.

15. Ian Kerr, *Building the Railways of the Raj, 1850–1900* (New Delhi, 1995), pp. 85–126 and p. 200.

16. Literature on public works specific to labour has chiefly analysed labour mobilization and collective action. See Kerr, *Building the Railways of the Raj*; Ian Kerr, “Labour Control and Labour Legislation in Colonial India: A Tale of Two Mid-Nineteenth Century Acts”, *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 27:1 (2004), pp. 7–25; Jan Lucassen, “The Brickmakers’ Strikes on the Ganges Canal in 1848–1849”, *IRSH*, 51: S14 (2006), pp. 47–83; Chitra Joshi, “Fettered Bodies: Labouring on Public Works in Nineteenth-Century India”, in Van der Linden and Mohapatra, *Labour Matters*, pp. 8–12; and Ravi Ahuja, *Pathways of Empire: Circulation, ‘Public Works’ and Social Space in Colonial Orissa (c.1780–1914)* (Hyderabad, 2009).

demand for labourers.¹⁷ Consequently, the data on labourers who worked on different types of public works is scarce, as the survival of this data is dependent on the survival of labour contractor's records. Women labourers are present in the PWD records in the context of inquiries into the prevalent wages or an assessment of the labour situation.¹⁸ However, some points can be noted about the gendered pattern of work and wage.

One interesting reference to women workers in public works in this period comes from Shahabad (Bengal province). In July 1860, Macnamara, the District Engineer of Shahabad, proposed a scheme for organizing the accounts of the Ferry Fund Works. The fund from this account was used to build roads and bridges in this region. Macnamara proposed nine forms and gave the figures from the previous year's operation as an illustration. Form B, "Figured abstract of daily expenditure of labour and material", is of relevance here. Macnamara gave the example of Form B for road work for one month (January). The work consisted of dressing, tamping, and smoothing the road. The labour employed was classified into nine groups: coolies first class; coolies second class; coolies third class; mate women; women; boys; boys second class; boys third class; and boys fourth class. A total of 689 women worked on this road, the second highest number after the coolies of second class (821). The wages for the former was five *pice*, while that of the latter was ten *pice*.¹⁹ This abstract also provides evidence of the employment of women mates: a total of thirteen women mates had been employed in this month.²⁰

17. For a history of the contract system in the construction of railways, see Kerr, *Building the Railways of the Raj*. For more recent work on the newly discovered private archive of a contractor from Sweden, Joseph Stephen, and his business networks in the region of Bombay, see Alexander Bubb, "Class, Cotton, and 'Woddaries': A Scandinavian Railway Contractor in Western India, 1860–69", *MAS*, 51:5 (2017), pp. 1369–1393.

18. Before the formation of the Public Works Department (PWD) in 1854, the Military Board was mainly instrumental in the construction of public works. The Military Board employed convict labour, specialized construction workers, as well as agricultural labourers. The absence of women labourers characterized convict labour. See Joshi, "Fettered Bodies". There are some stray references to women's labour in this period, especially in tasks like carrying water. However, women may have worked as part of undifferentiated categories that are presented in the Military Board records as "hired labourers" in this period. See Annual Reports, Combined Volume 1839–1842, National Archives of India, New Delhi [hereafter, NAI], Military Board, File nos 78, 132, 139, 162 and 194. Notably, the Military Department continued to employ women in different types of construction work well into the twentieth century and women workers became crucial to questions like soldier's sexual health in cantonment areas and the Maternity Benefit Act.

19. One *anna* was one sixteenth of one rupee and four *pice* were equal to one *anna*.

20. From the Commissioner of Patna to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, 19th July 1860, Oriental and India Office Collection, British Library, London [hereafter, OIOC, BL], Public Works Department [hereafter, PWD] (Bengal), File no. 54.

A detailed survey of the “wages of coolies” in all provinces of the country was undertaken in 1878. This survey gave the wage rates of men, women, and children in different types of construction projects.²¹ We see that women’s wages were consistently lower than men’s across the provinces and types of work, with three exceptions in military works in Lucknow, Nainital, and Ranikhet. On the Son River Canal the relative wage of women labourers (to men labourers) was fifty per cent to sixty-five per cent. The range of relative wage in railways in the North Western Provinces (NWP) was thirty per cent to eighty per cent. The relative wage for the Ganga Canal in the same province was sixty-five per cent to seventy-six per cent. The survey shows that the wages differed in the same region according to the type of work, i.e. roads, military, or canals. Similarly, the wages differed on the same infrastructural project according to the area through which it passed. Lastly, wages varied in a single province on the same type of public works in the different administrative subdivisions.

Did these differences in the wages of men and women reflect a division of work along gender lines? Was this differential pay a manifestation of the “hierarchically-ordered gender relationships within family work units” observed in public works?²² While the PWD records do not tell us much about the intra-family division of labour, we get some clues from the colonial ethnographic accounts of castes that were identified as “digging castes” in the provinces of Bengal, NWP, and Punjab (Figure 2). The most common nomenclature, found across all three provinces, for castes identified with earthwork was Beldar or Bildar. These terms have been used both for specific endogamous castes in these provinces as well as in a more general manner for labouring castes. Describing the work pattern of Beldars in Bengal, Risley stated that both men and women of this caste laboured – “the men digging and women carrying the earth in a basket on their heads”.²³ This division of work was quoted verbatim by William Crooke in his note on the Beldars in the NWP.

In Bengal, the other major caste identified with this occupation was Nuniya.²⁴ In the earlier instance of road work from Sahabad in Bengal province, Macnamara explained that a petty contract was the “most convenient for road work in general, and earthwork in particular” and that this type of work was “mostly executed by making advances to mate nooniahs”.²⁵ Perhaps some of the women employed on this work belonged to this caste. We have the following account of Nuniyas from Saran, a neighbouring district from the same province.

21. Return of Rates Paid to Coolies, October 1878, NAI, PWD (Railways), File no. 127–128.

22. Kerr, *Building the Railways of the Raj*, p. 89.

23. H.H. Risley, *Tribes and Castes of Bengal: Ethnographic Glossary*, 4 vols (Calcutta, 1892), I, p. 88.

24. *Ibid.*, vol. II, pp. 135–137.

25. From the Commissioner of Patna to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, 19th July 1860, OIOC, BL, PWD, (Bengal), File no. 54.

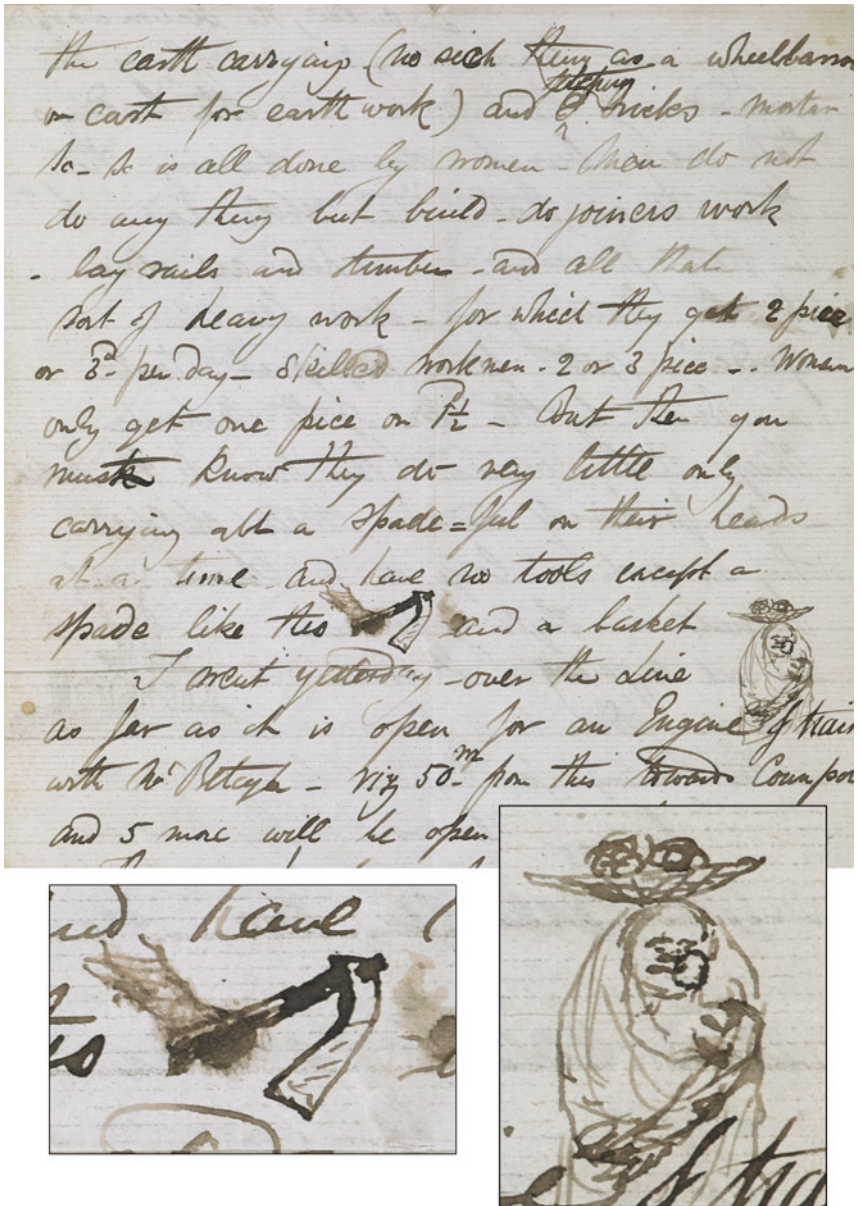


Figure 2. Excerpts from a letter written by Samuel Carrington (b 1832), a Civil Engineer with the East India Railway Company, to his mother dated 15th November 1857. The letter contains the observations of Carrington regarding the tasks performed by women labourers, their wages, and the tools used by them during the construction work at the railway station yard in Allahabad (North Western Provinces).

© British Library Board (MSS Eur B 212/2: 1857-1881).

Nuniyas were characterized as “expert diggers” and the “best labourers” in the district. Further, it was stated that “they migrate in large numbers in search of employment on roads, embankments, railway lines, etc. The females assist the males in earthwork and in making saltpeter, but do not migrate”.²⁶

The Nuniyas of the Bengal province were called Luniyas in NWP. They were described as, “on the whole fairly industrious, respectable people, who are more adventurous in emigrating with their families than their neighbours. They will collect on a railway or other large work and take contracts for earthwork. The men dig and women and children carry off the clay in the baskets”.²⁷ In Punjab, Ibbetson classified Beldars, along with Ods and Changars, as a “wandering caste”, marked by a “fixed occupation, though no fixed dwelling place”. While other castes also worked on earthwork, Ibbetson described Ods as the “professional navvies of the Punjab” and stated that “the men dig and the women carry earth to the donkeys which they always have with them, and the children drive the donkey in the spoil bank”.²⁸

It is clear from the above account that women were part of the labouring groups on construction works and that, at least in the British ethnographic observations, there existed a gendered division of labour among the castes associated with earthwork. However, the evidence on women’s wages and work is scanty and provides us with little scope to analyse them in detail for their gendered consequences. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the colonial government systematized its famine relief efforts by creating technical, bureaucratic, and statistical standards and measures. This article relies on the official archive created in the process of the codification and administration of relief mainly found in the Famine Commission reports and the departmental proceedings of the PWD, the Department of Revenue and Agriculture, and the Scarcity Department. Even though there are a number of non-official contemporary accounts of famines, including from missionaries and in national and international newspapers, the questions of women’s work and wages on public works were not raised in a detailed manner in these accounts. For instance, missionaries provided relief to women during famines, but this was mainly through activities like spinning, weaving, and lace making within women’s homes. In 1897, the London Missionary Society report from NWP distinguished this type of women from those who were engaged in the “rough work on roads and tanks”.²⁹

26. L.S.S. Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteer Saran* (Calcutta, 1906), pp. 86.

27. William Crooke, *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, 4 vols (Calcutta, 1896), II, p. 391.

28. Denzil Ibbetson, *Punjab Castes* (Lahore, 1916), p. 275. For a history of a similar caste, Wudders in the Madras Presidency, see Ian Kerr, “On the Move: Circulating Labor in Pre-Colonial, Colonial, and Post-Colonial India”, *IRSH*, 51: S14 (2006), pp. 85–109.

29. Report of the London Missionary Society, North India, 1867–1897, OIOC, BL, box no. 1/1. Missionary relief activities focused on *pardanashin* women. *Pardanashin* literally translates as “the veiled” and refers to women from upper castes and classes under varying levels of seclusion.

FAMINE PUBLIC WORKS

Famine public works, the site of women's work that concerns the present study, emerged as the centre of famine relief administration in the second half of the nineteenth century. Marked on both ends by famines in Bengal, the period from 1770 to 1943 in India witnessed intermittent famines and scarcities throughout the British rule. The second half of the nineteenth century saw an increase in the number and frequency of recorded famines in different parts of India. Beginning with famines in 1860–1861 in NWP, Punjab, Rajputana, and Kutch and the Deccan in 1862, this period saw major famines in almost all parts of the country.³⁰ Compilation of different contemporary sources puts the total famine mortality figure for the period of 1876 to 1902 between 12.2 million and 29.3 million.³¹ Historical investigation of famines requires consideration of the social, political, and economic context beyond the proximate causes and immediate consequences.³² At the same time, for historians, the exceptionality of famines throws into relief the possible histories of “subordinate social groups”.³³ This section contextualizes the work site of famine relief works in the broader history of famine relief in the second half of the nineteenth century. We also look at the nature of work and wages on famine relief works.

Colonial State and Famine Relief Works

The devastating famine in Orissa in 1866 led to the policy recognition that “saving lives” was the duty of the state. Even though famines usually followed droughts or unseasonable rains, the British administration saw the shortage of grains as a localized phenomenon. Demand for field labour in agriculture contracted. Consequently, famines were seen as a shortage of work that mainly affected labouring classes, especially those in rural areas. This understanding of the cause of famines sat well with the contemporary philosophy of laissez-faire,

30. A compilation of the major recorded famines in this period can be found in B.M. Bhatia, *Famines in India: A Study in Some Aspects of the Economic History of India, 1860–1965* (New York, 1967), p. 363.

31. Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London [etc.], 2001), p. 6.

32. Sanjay Sharma considers the state relief efforts in the early nineteenth century within the framework of philanthropy and state-making, Sanjay Sharma, *Famine, Philanthropy and the Colonial State: North India in the Early Nineteenth Century* (New Delhi, 2001). Questions of hunger and famine have been considered within the broader framework of war and state policy in the context of twentieth-century Bengal famines by authors like Paul Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943–44* (Oxford, 1982); Madhusree Mukerjee, *Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India during World War II* (Chennai [etc.], 2010); and Janam Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal: War, Famine and the End of Empire* (London, 2015).

33. David Arnold, *Famine: Social Crisis and Historical Change* (Oxford, 1988), p. 3.

which prescribed non-interference with market forces. Hence, the two consistent principles of famine relief throughout this period were non-interference in the grain market and public works as the primary mode of relief administration.

The vast divergences in the actual practices of conducting relief and their consequences, either in terms of increased financial costs or greater mortality, became evident in the 1870s and led to codification of famine relief rules. The problems associated with overspending and underspending during famines is best exemplified in the controversies surrounding Richard Temple. His famine administration as the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal in 1874 was as feted for successfully avoiding starvation mortality as it was severely criticized for the high costs of relief. Three years later, Temple was sent to Madras and Bombay presidency as the representative of the Supreme Government, where he suggested a drastic reduction in famine rations. This was opposed by both the labourers on relief work and the Sanitary Commissioner of Madras, W. R. Cornish, who based his objection on diets given to prison inmates. This debate demarcated the boundary within which the logic of famine wage was discussed in the coming decades – government expenditure and the subsistence level of the labouring population.³⁴

The first Famine Commission was set up by the Government of India on 16 May 1878 under R. Stratchey, and one of the stated aims of this commission was to “inquire into the best system of famine-relief, with special reference to such topics as the amount of wage, the quantity of food necessary to sustain health”.³⁵ In its Report (FCR 1880), this Famine Commission laid down the fundamental principles on which each of the provinces were to come up with their respective codes. A more detailed model code was drafted in 1883. Around two decades after the first Famine Commission, a second commission was constituted to assess the working of the provincial codes, especially during the famines of 1896–97, which had affected districts of NWP, Bengal, Madras, Central Provinces, Bombay, and Punjab. One year later, there was another widespread famine and the recommendations of the Famine Commission Report 1898 (FCR 1898) were scrutinized by a third Famine Commission in 1901 (FCR 1901).

The evolution of the colonial state’s famine relief has invited much scholarly attention. The Malthusian theory that cast India as the “land of famines” and famines as one of the natural checks on population, the policy of *laissez-faire*, which prescribed non-interference with the market forces as the best solution, and the fear of demoralization that was the guiding principle of the Poor Laws in England have been identified as the main ideological influences on famine

34. See A. P. MacDonnell, *Report on the Food-Grain Supply and Statistical Review of the Relief Operations in the Distressed Districts of Behar and Bengal during the Famine of 1873–74* (Calcutta, 1876).

35. Government of India, *Report of the Indian Famine Commission, 1880–1885* (London, 1885) [hereafter, FCR 1880], p. 8.

relief.³⁶ It is pointed out that the reigning ideologies of the period were more in the nature of justifying the steps taken to safeguard the British political and economic interests rather than guiding them.³⁷ The role of personalities, political power and patronage, individual agency, and imperial hierarchy have also been important in the debates on famine relief.³⁸

The famine codes, with all their internal dissensions and departures, in practice sought to represent an ideal, a standard. Sanjay Sharma has argued in the context of the early nineteenth century that famine relief became a means for the state to connect its “will” to govern with its ability and capacity to do so. Famine relief became an occasion for expansion and consolidation of the colonial state and displayed the state’s deeper desire for standardization.³⁹ Famine relief works, beyond the objective parameters of being effective, signified the state’s desired relationship with both the market and the labourers. Central to this was the state’s definition and organization of relief work and the ideal relief recipient. Relief works were to be carried out on objective and scientific lines and the labouring body was considered to be the ideal relief recipient.⁴⁰

Work and Wage on Famine Works

According to the famine codes, the PWD had to select works for relief bearing in mind that the works it chose had permanent utility and were capable of employing a large number of the unskilled population for a long period of time. Both the revenue department and the PWD contributed to the famine works establishment. For instance, in NWP, which had one of the most elaborate systems of famine administration, the officer-in-charge of the works was usually the *naib tehsildars*, assisted by the sub-overseers or work agents. Workers were arranged in gangs under a *muharrir*, who checked attendance and calculated and distributed the wages. Each gang/group of workers was given a card showing the daily amount of work done and the wages earned. Every day, this information was abstracted into what was called the gang *muharrir*’s register, which was printed in the vernacular. The gang register

36. S. Ambirajan, “Political Economy and Indian Famines”, *South Asia: Journal of Asian Studies*, 1:1 (1971), pp. 20–28; and S. Ambirajan, “Malthusian Population Theory and Indian Famine Policy in the Nineteenth Century”, *Population Studies*, 30:1 (1976), pp. 5–14.

37. Bhatia, *Famines in India*, pp. 182–209.

38. For the role of and relationship between various actors in famine administration, see L. Brennan, “The Development of the Indian Famine Codes: Personalities, Politics and Policies”, in Bruce Currey and Graeme Hugo (eds), *Famine: As a Geographical Phenomenon* (Deventer, 1984), pp. 91–111; and David Hall-Matthews, “Inaccurate Conceptions: Disputed Measures of Nutritional Needs and Famine Deaths in Colonial India”, *MAS*, 42:6 (2008), pp. 1189–1212.

39. Sharma, *Famine, Philanthropy and the Colonial State*, pp. 136–144.

40. In fact, wherever possible, the labour component was inserted in gratuitous relief such as poor houses, orphanages, and relief to the *pardanashin* women.

formed the basis of the weekly report sent by the officer in charge of the works to the district engineer/surveyor, who, in turn, reported to the Chief and Superintending Engineer.⁴¹

Famine public works differed from public works in non-famine times in one crucial manner. The famine codes prohibited the use of contractors. Workers were arranged in gangs under mates. Both time rate and piece rate existed on famine public works, but the piecework was restricted through a minimum wage. The FCR 1898 found that, in practice, the stipulation of a minimum wage was violated and a large number of workers earned one or two *pice* less than the code minimum. Both the minimum wage and task work on famine public works were criticized within and beyond official circles for making relief works “too attractive”. However, it was only by the end of this period that minimum wage and task work were abandoned by the famine codes.

Wages were calculated on the basis of the rations that were laid down in the codes. These rations provided the reference for the locally drawn price basis table of wages, which indicated the wages of each class of workers according to the prevalent prices of grains. Though the wages were calculated on an individual basis, depending on the number of men, women, and children in a particular gang, they were paid through the mates. The codes stressed the regular, if not daily, payment of wages. Wages were to be given in cash and labourers were expected to buy their rations from nearby markets. Facilitated by the colonial government, *banias* and grain traders became a crucial part of the diet provision on public works. The ability of workers to obtain the wages prescribed in the codes were, however, constrained by the difference between the market rates of grains and those fixed on the works. The wage scale did not respond immediately to changes in the market price of grains.⁴²

The most common form of famine relief was earthwork, which included the tasks of digging and carrying earth. In 1863, standardized schedules for different types of works undertaken by the PWD were laid down.⁴³ In the case of

41. Department of Public Works, *Appendices to the Resolution (no: 2469 dated 23rd Nov. 1897) on the Administration of Famine Relief in the North-Western Provinces and Oudh in 1896–1897*, 3 vols (Allahabad, 1897), III, p. 27 and pp. 107–130. The PWD augmented its establishment through temporary recruitment of subordinate officers. Advertisements for overseers and work agents can be found in contemporary journals. For example, in 1896, Roorkee College graduates with experience in “simple works such as road making” were encouraged to apply for the post of sub overseer in the PWD provincial works in Allahabad (NWP). *Indian Engineering. An Illustrated Weekly Journal*, Vol. XX, July to December 1896, p. 312.

42. This did not go uncontested by the labourers and is reflected in the conflicts between labourers and shopkeepers. Plunder of Bania’s Shops on Relief Works in the North Western Provinces and Oudh, September 1897, Uttar Pradesh State Archives, Lucknow [hereafter, UPSA], Scarcity Department, file no. 167; and Report of Fraud and Dishonesty, February 1898, UPSA, Scarcity Department, file no. 8.

43. The other tasks included stonemason’s work, carpenter’s work, smith’s work, painter’s work, and thatcher’s work. Proposed Introduction of Schedules of Work for the Public Works Department, November 1863, OIOC, BL, PWD (Bengal), File no. 78.

earthwork, the tasks specified included, “excavating in various soils, wet and dry, moving stuff to various distances and from various depths” and “sinking wells in various soils and to various depths”.⁴⁴ The amount of earthwork to be done was calculated on the basis of the area that was dug out, in cubic feet. In a compilation of manuals on different engineering tasks and operations, which was taught to engineering students at Thomason College, Roorkee, the following was remarked, “on the nature of the soil will depend the amount which a man can execute in a day. In some districts it is difficult to get a coolie to dig more than 50 cubic feet in a day, but a native contractor will generally get few more work than that out of a man”.⁴⁵ Fifty cubic feet seems an underestimation, given that on famine public works the expected number of tasks usually hovered around a hundred cubic feet. Furthermore, on famine public works, tasks were set at a lower requirement (seventy-five per cent) compared to the non-famine works carried out under contractors.

WOMEN LABOURERS ON FAMINE PUBLIC WORKS

The investigation of gendered remuneration and notions around women’s wages and work on famine public works must begin with the question of why women labourers were important to the state in famine relief. Women’s history in different spaces – middle-class homes and colonial institutions – has revealed the colonial state’s anxieties over race, class, and gender in the empire.⁴⁶ Within different labour regimes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the state’s most pronounced interventions have been on the question of the reproductive roles of women – in settling the indenture labour force in plantations and during protective legislation in factories and mines.

On famine public works, the state was the direct employer of women. Various questions of organization of work on famine public works had to take into account the women labourers who came to seek relief on these works in large numbers. The famine codes attempted to standardize the

44. *Ibid.*

45. J.G. Medley, compiler and A.M. Lang, (ed.), *The Roorkee Treatise of Civil Engineering in India* (Roorkee, 1877), p. 247.

46. Stoler, “Making Empire Respectable”; Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Berkeley, CA, 1998); Mytheli Sreenivas, *Wives, Widows, Concubines: The Conjugal Family Ideal in Colonial India* (Bloomington, IN, 2008). For discussions on lock hospitals and cantonment areas, see Philippa Levine, *Prostitution, Race and Politics: Policing Venereal Diseases in the British Empire* (New York, 2003); Sarah Hodges, “Looting the Lock Hospital in Colonial Madras during the Famine Years of the 1870s”, *Social History of Medicine*, 18:3 (2005), pp. 379–398; Ashwini Tambe, *Codes of Misconduct: Regulating Prostitution in Late Colonial Bombay* (Minneapolis, MN, 2009). For a similar discussion on jails, see Satadru Sen, “The Female Jails of Colonial India”, *IESHR*, 39:4 (2002), pp. 417–438.

ideal “work” and the ideal “labourer” on famine public works. In these idealized constructions, all labourers were not equal. Women’s work, wages, strengths, and skills were crucial to how work was defined by the state. The principles of work that were codified in the different famine codes sought to standardize notions around work, task, ration, and wage and inadvertently had to engage with questions of gender. What principles of gendered work and wage became necessary for the state to embody in these codes? This section considers the different instances when the codes had to confront the questions of gender and codify norms around women’s work. The implementation of the public works programme at the provincial level required a departure from the standards set in the code. We study these departures to arrive at the reworked norms of women’s work and wages. This paper argues that one of the reasons for the reworking of norms was the pressure exerted by women workers themselves. Through a set of records from famine public works in NWP, we analyse the response of women workers to the task-gender associations.

Gender Norms in Famine Codes

Classification of workers on relief works was seen as a necessary step to ensure discipline on the works and to exact work from the labourers. The disorganized body of labourers on famine works, with the “onrush of women and children”, was perceived as the government’s lack of control over relief administration and its inability to distinguish between the “able-bodied” and the “weakly”. In the 1883 provisional famine code, workers were first classified according to the relevant public works “agency”, i.e. civil and professional. The former works were under the control of the district authority and the latter included works carried out by the PWD. Both these agencies had three classes of labourers, divided according to their ability to work.⁴⁷ The classes were further divided internally on the basis of gender and age. The last division complied with the gender- and age-based difference in diet that had been recommended by the FCR 1880 as the basis for wages in famine public works.⁴⁸

In this classification, the famine code considered the work done on large public works under the aegis of PWD on piecework as the ideal type of work. In fact, it was hoped that, over time and with improvements in skill and strength, workers would transition from task work to piecework and increasingly seek work on public works under the PWD. Notably, women were part of each of these classifications, which ranged from “able-bodied” to “weakly”. The question of classification was reconsidered by the

47. FCR, 1898, p. 256.

48. FCR, 1880, p. 59.

Government of India in 1892 and the distinction by work agency was abandoned as it did not reflect the realities on the ground. All types of workers sought relief on the works managed by the PWD. The new classification divided workers into four categories, again dependent on their ability or work, and retained the internal gender-age divisions.⁴⁹

The utility of classification of workers by gender was questioned by the FCR 1898. Cognisant of the provincial famine codes and experiences of administering famine relief all over the country, the FCR 1898 argued for a different scheme of classification. Firstly, the four classes of labourers were reduced to two – diggers and carriers. Secondly, the internal division of classes by gender was abandoned. This change in classification had been officially notified by NWP in 1896, followed by other provinces.⁵⁰ The carrier wage was equated with the minimum wage, which was considered adequate for those engaging in “light and unskilled work”.⁵¹ It was argued that the minimum wage for a large number of workers also restricted the joint earnings of the family groups. While the FCR 1898 did not recommend the minimum wage for carriers, it endorsed the view that the classification of labourers could be based on “able bodied workers who could dig and the weaker and lesser skilled who can only carry a load on their heads”.⁵²

The FCR 1898 pointed out the advantages of this new classification. This proposed classification followed a practice that already existed on the different works, provided for easier accounting, and also obtained a lower wage for women. The latter, it was argued, aligned with what male workers wanted but could not always achieve within the existing internal division of classes by gender. Hence, women doing the higher class of task ended up earning more than the men belonging to the lower class as the differences in diet did not always translate into “appreciable” wage differences between men and women working together in the same gang.⁵³ It was further argued that,

Experience shows that the great mass of relief workers could be *naturally divided* into two great classes – the able-bodied men who are able to dig and the weaker and less expert, including almost all women and children, who are only able to carry a load on their heads. The task for a gang will therefore be the task for diggers, and each gang will have a complement of carriers. On earth work these two classes differ *not in degrees but in kind*, and a rational system of classification and tasking must take account of this fact (emphasis added).⁵⁴

49. FCR 1898, p. 260.

50. Intermediate System of Famine Relief Works, August 1897, UPSA, Scarcity Department, file no. 103; and FCR, 1898, pp. 60–92.

51. *Ibid.*

52. FCR, 1898, p. 262.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 265.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

Even though notions about differences between men and women in terms of capacity or strength to do certain types of work did underlie the earlier classification, now the division of workers was explicitly based on gender. Furthermore, the task of carrying was typified as easier and as less strenuous than digging and closely associated with women. While reinstating the internal gender division within the classification of workers as diggers and carriers, the FCR 1901 reiterated the need for ensuring a lesser wage for women. It was argued that, physiologically, women required a lesser diet than men. The code stated that, “it has been presented that women ought to get the same wages as men because they have household duties, such as grinding and cooking to perform; but the suggestion is refuted because of the custom of the country”.⁵⁵ It was also argued that only through gender distinction was it possible to control the total ration that a family earned on the works.

To analyse the implications of the above-stated changes in the classification of labourers for women’s wages, we consider the rations laid down by the codes (Tables 1 to 3).

Table 1. *Ration on famine public works in 1893.*⁵⁶

	Male (<i>chittaks</i>)	Female (<i>chittaks</i>)
Class A	21	19
Class B	19	17
Class C	16	15
Class D (minimum wage)	14	13

Table 2. *Ration on famine public works in 1898.*⁵⁷

	Class	Diet (<i>chittaks</i>)
I	Diggers	20
II	Carriers	15
III	Working children	8
IV	Adult dependents/minimum wage	12
V	Non-working children (above 8 years)	7
	Non-working children (below 8 years)	5

55. Government of India, *Report of the Indian Famine Commission, 1901*, (Calcutta, 1901) [hereafter, FCR 1901], p. 39.

56. FCR, 1898, p. 260.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 273.

Table 3. *Ration on famine public works in 1901.*⁵⁸

Class of labourers		Diet (<i>chittaks</i>)
Class I	Male diggers	18
	Female diggers	14
Class II	Male carriers	14
	Female carriers	13

There was a progressive decline in the amount of ration prescribed for both men and women over the years. In 1893, the male maximum ration was twenty-one *chittaks* and the maximum female ration was set at nineteen *chittaks*.⁵⁹ In the class of “able-bodied” but not professional labourers, males and females earned the ration between 19–16 and 17–15 *chittaks* respectively. The minimum ration was set at fourteen *chittaks* for males and thirteen *chittaks* for females. In 1898, the ration for diggers, presumed male ration was twenty *chittaks* and the same for carriers, the presumed female ration was fifteen *chittaks*. The minimum ration without any internal division by sex was twelve *chittaks*. In 1901, the male labourers received 18–14 *chittaks* of ration depending upon the task and female labourers received 14–13 *chittaks* of ration depending on the task they performed.

Two types of arguments can be identified within the codes that went into setting the differential diet norms for men and women workers. The first type of argument relied on what was considered to be the *natural* or *inherent* differences between men and women, which also had the sanction of *custom*. The second set of arguments was grounded in the amount and kind of work women did on the public works both as individuals and as families. In the 1898 classification, the lower diet prescription for women followed their association with the task of carrying. While the succeeding famine commission reintroduced the gender division, it did not, in principle, oppose the identification of carrying as the female task. This is reiterated by the much wider difference in the diet recommendation in the FCR 1901 for male carriers and diggers (four *chittaks*) compared to that of female carriers and diggers (one *chittak*).

A consistent concern of the various famine codes was to restrict the total earnings of the labouring families on public works. It was argued that giving individual wages to women raised the family earnings. The question of family earning became contentious in the context of the allegation that the government was interfering in the labour market. This allegation came primarily from two quarters – the private companies that built railways, roads, and

58. FCR, 1901, p. 43.

59. One *chittak* was equal to one sixteenth of a *seer*, which was approximately one kilogram.

canals, and the *zamindars* or landed elite.⁶⁰ They stated that it was the attractiveness of wages on the famine public works that led the labourers away from other work – be it other public works or agricultural work on the fields. Why did the state not limit wages on the famine public works in the face of such allegations and despite its own avowed commitment to *laissez-faire*? There were two main reasons. First, that famine public works did not lend themselves to any neat demarcation of the labouring family. The second factor was the rise in grain prices. Any downward adjustment made to wages in times of scarcity was deemed too risky. The logic of systematic famine relief necessitated an individual relief subject.

Gender Norms on Famine Public Works

The Famine Commission in 1898 stated that the intended changes in classification of relief workers corresponded closely to what was happening in the relief works in different provinces. Accordingly, a norm of gendered tasks was set by the famine commissions. How did this norm fare in the provinces? What were the departures from this norm and what do these departures tell us about notions of gendered tasks on famine relief? The large number of women labourers on famine works posed a challenge to officials implementing the digger-carrier classification. Famine officials commented on the pattern of “preponderance” or “excess” of women on the works. This pattern was more pronounced at the beginning and the end of the period during which the works were opened. This corresponded with the availability of “field labour”. Women and children were the first to be let go once the labour demand reduced in agriculture, either due to famine or other reasons. Also, men were the first to be hired once the demand for labour picked up again.

A large number of women at the works meant that the classification of men as diggers and women as carriers had to be reworked, or at least reinterpreted. We find a discussion on this issue spanning all the provinces. The discussion originated in the clarification sought on the question of classification of workers in Central Provinces (CP) in 1900. The Famine Secretary to the Chief Commissioner, CP wrote to all the commissioners of the province clarifying that the famine code directive to not include women in the digger class must not be interpreted to mean that “women *are not to be employed* as

60. Detailed discussion on these allegations is beyond the scope of this article. Allegations of labour market interference can be found in the evidence volumes of the Famine Commission Reports. See also, Department of Public Works, *Appendices to the Resolution on the Administration of Famine Relief*; Rate of Wages to be Paid to Relief Workers for Earthwork on Wet Days, 1897, UPSA, Scarcity Department, file nos 151–166.

diggers” (emphasis original).⁶¹ Furthermore, that the women so employed should be made to do half the tasks of the digger class and paid the wage of the carrier class. The question pertaining to women’s tasks and wages was put to a wider discussion in all the provinces. It was found that Bombay, Madras, Punjab, and Berar concurred with the CP formula of women diggers doing half the tasks of the digger class and being paid the wage of the carrier class. Ajmer and NWP disagreed with this majority view.

In the discussion on the wages and tasks of women diggers in NWP, various aspects of allocating work were stressed. It was considered wasteful to allow women only half of a digger’s tasks, as it was “only exceptionally strong women would ordinarily be employed as diggers”.⁶² Further, it was argued that the Famine Commission stated “that women who are *capable* diggers maybe admitted into Class I” (emphasis original) and doing half of a digger’s tasks could not be classified as capable.⁶³ They argued that perhaps women were reluctant to dig in other provinces because of the unfavourable wage scale, where both the digging and carrying done by women were remunerated by the same number of *pice*. NWP opined that CP could increase the amount of work done by the women diggers by reforming the wage scale, which would allow a woman digger to receive more wages than a woman carrier. Hence, the NWP rejected the CP formula and stated that this arrangement “deprived women diggers of incitement to industry and requires of them too small a task”.⁶⁴ Linking women’s willingness to dig to the remuneration given, NWP proposed a female digger wage where undertaking two thirds of a digger’s task earned women two *chittaks* more than the carrier class wage.

The female digger task wage in NWP underwent revisions in different regions of the province. In 1905, the question of women diggers was revisited in United Provinces following criticism that the United Provinces Famine Code of 1905 did not sufficiently clarify how male and female diggers tasks had to be differentiated. It was found that, in the districts of Allahabad and Banaras, women diggers were receiving full diggers wages for half the work. This was done in order to recruit more diggers. In Agra, two thirds of the task were exacted as per the code. In 1908, the Famine Commissioner, J. S. Campbell, made the case for a full digger’s task for women. “A strong woman of the regular labouring class can easily do the Code digger’s full

61. Tasking and Wage of Women Employed as Diggers, in Class I of Relief Workers, June 1900, NAI, Department of Revenue and Agriculture [hereafter, R and A] (Famine), file no. 67–72. The issue of women workers and their specific task had been raised on a previous occasion in 1894 in Central Provinces. Predominance of Women and Children on Relief Works in Saugor and Damoh, July 1894, NAI, R and A, file no. 24.

62. Task and Wage for Women Employed on Relief Works, May 1900, UPSA, Scarcity Department, file nos 20–22.

63. *Ibid.*

64. Tasking and Wage of Women Employed as Diggers, June 1900, NAI, R and A, file nos 67–72.

task. If she does less than that, I would pay her by results, with the proviso that she should get the full carrier's wage if she does two third of the task". He conceded, however, that this rule would not "popularise digging among women". The PWD engineers recommended the continuation of the system as it ensured the continued supply of women diggers. The opinion of the engineers was that "the present arrangement is the most economical from the work point of view, and most of the works are really good and useful works which will prove to be of subsequent benefit".⁶⁵

Hence, we see that the famine officials were compelled, in practice, to confront the norms around women's association with the task of carrying. The regional diversities in the views on women's tasks and wages reflected the different proportion of men and women seeking work as well as the nature of the task provided for relief. The economy of works required an optimum balance of diggers and carriers.

Gender Norms and Women Labourers

Evidence from the sites of famine public works reveals women workers's own response to the norms set in the code and the tasks allocated to them by the relief officials. This evidence comes from official correspondence regarding women famine labourers working in the Bhognipur and Ghatampura areas of Kanpur (United Provinces) (Figure 3) in February and March 1906. Uneven rains in 1903 were followed by heavy rains during sowing season in 1904 and frost in 1905 led to the scarcity in 1906 in United Provinces.⁶⁶ In 1905–1906, 30,000 labourers were working on the works managed by the PWD. The number increased to 90,000 in 1906–1907.⁶⁷ For the months that we examine below, the number of men and women working on famine works was almost equal.⁶⁸

We have seen in the previous section that the large numbers of women labourers on famine public works required a reworking of the task-gender association in digging and carrying. For the famine officials, the existing proportion of men and women on a work site determined the allocation of tasks.

65. Women Diggers on Public Relief Works, March 1908, UPSA, Scarcity Department, file no. 49.

66. Bhatia, *Famines in India*, p. 263.

67. Estimates of Famine Expenditure, February 1906, UPSA, Scarcity Department, file nos 122–144.

68. In the fortnight ending on 10 February 1906, the total of daily returns to work included 28,168 men and 27,733 women. On 24 February 1906, the figures were 40,008 for men and 41,846 for women. On 24 March 1906, the total was 13,779 men and 13,609 women. Progress Report of the Relief Operations in Kanpur District, February 1906, UPSA, Scarcity Department, file nos 78–91; and Progress Report of the Relief Operations in Kanpur District, May 1906, UPSA, Scarcity Department, file nos 134–153.

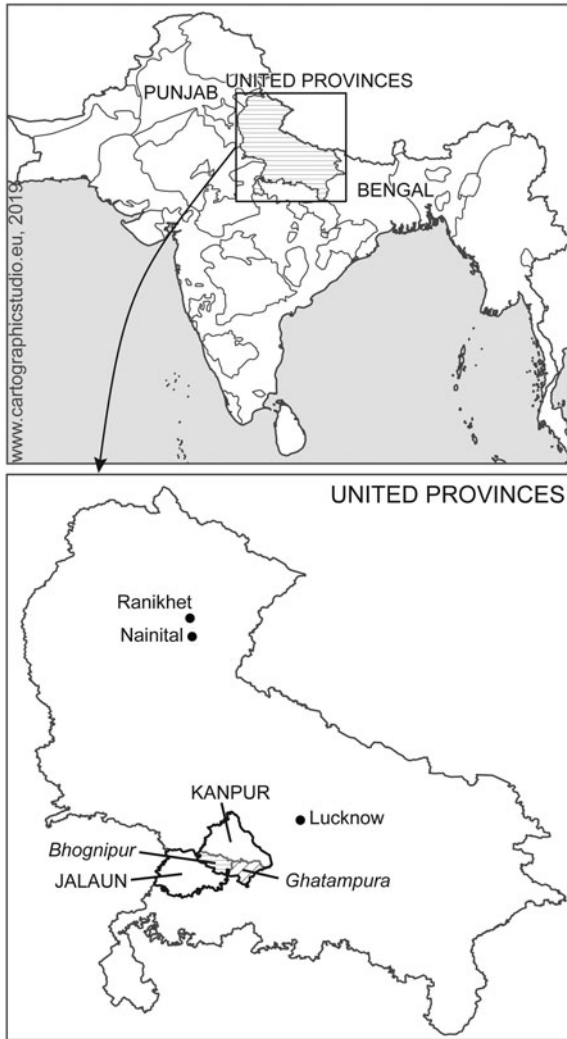


Figure 3. Location of Kanpur and the United Provinces.

The response of women labourers to task allocation is found in the discussion that followed the question of fining in the context of famine relief works in Kanpur. Fining for short work (incomplete task) was seen as a way of ensuring discipline on the works. However, there was some confusion regarding exactly who should be fined – the diggers or the carriers. In a letter to the Collector of Kanpur, the District Engineer, PWD sought clarification on the matter: “if the

digger does not do the full task the carrier does not get the opportunity of doing one. Under these circumstances, it seems unjust to fine the carriers".⁶⁹ He further sought orders on what to do with the surplus carriers who were forced to be employed on clod breaking, a task that was considered wasteful for an adult.⁷⁰ In another letter, the Collector's attention was brought to the lesser number of women diggers on the relief works in Kanpur. It was inquired whether "the advantages of digging have been explained to all able-bodied women on the works and whether a fine of one *pice* each is levied on those able to dig but refused to do so".⁷¹

On the question of fining, the Commissioner wrote to all the Collectors stating that both the digger and the carrier needed to be fined as, "in the great majority of cases the diggers wife is his carrier, and even when she is not, both benefit from the average reduction in the amount of earth dug. Practically, therefore the wages of the carrier tend to become a minimum wage, if it is given irrespective of the amount done".⁷² As for the surplus carriers, it was suggested that,

When carriers are too many, it almost always means slackness and laziness on the part of the officer in charge. If he exerts himself to explain to the women the advantage of digging, to make a complete list of all able-bodied women who will not dig and fines them regularly, he should have no difficulty in getting as many female diggers as he can find carriers for. As a general rule, female diggers should not form less than 1/4th of the total number of diggers.⁷³

Later in the month, the District Engineer of Kanpur reported that women had been explained the advantage of digging by the staff on the works, by the Assistant Engineer, the visiting Inspector, and the District Engineer himself. Women who refused to dig were fined one *pice*.⁷⁴ We also have information from the diaries of the visiting Inspector, who toured some of the road works in this area. Regarding the Kamlapur Bhognipur road works, the visiting Inspector noted that,

[...] there is a great dearth of carriers. One reason is that digging is very popular here and the women clamour to dig, though the task is higher than any other work. Over a third of diggers are women. It happens that the earth is very soft

69. District Engineer PWD Cawnpore to the Collector of Cawnpore, 19 February 1906, Regional State Archive, Uttar Pradesh, Allahabad, [hereafter, UPRSA], Allahabad Commissioner Records [hereafter, ACR], box no. 284/13.

70. *Ibid.*

71. Letter to the Collector of Cawnpore, 2 March 1906, UPRSA, ACR, box no. 284/13.

72. Commissioner of Allahabad District to the Collectors of Cawnpore, Jalaun, Jhansi, Hamirpur, Banda and Allahabad, 9 March 1906, UPRSA, ACR, box no. 284/13.

73. *Ibid.*

74. District Engineer PWD Cawnpore to the Collector of Cawnpore, 14 March 1906, UPRSA, ACR, box no. 284/13.

and therefore digging is easy. On the other hand, carrying which is not affected by the hardness of the ground is harder than usual.⁷⁵

Women, it is reported, left the work when they were forced to carry instead of digging. To resolve the situation, the Inspector directed that men were to carry, at least till the number of women diggers could be reduced. Conditions were reversed in other works in the area where a large number of men and women carriers were observed. The Inspector noted that the gangs of workers were too small. He suggested that,

The number of carriers should be rigidly cut down to exactly the number of diggers and the balance of the gang should be dependents of the workers in the gang who are physically incapable of either carrying or digging. This will let free a very large number of the present carriers who will consist of only 2 classes – those capable of digging and those not capable. By adopting this system, a large number of women will be induced to dig and more work found for carriers.⁷⁶

This series of records from Kanpur allows us a glimpse of how women negotiated work at these sites and what could be the possible considerations for their refusal or acceptance of certain kinds of work. Women refused or negotiated the allotted work in three ways: Firstly, there was an outright refusal of the assigned work; secondly, women subverted the task to be carried out by throwing away the soil instead of depositing it in the designated place; and thirdly, women deserted the work site. Another example of desertion in the same period comes from Jalaun, where “fining of women has caused a considerable exodus of women with their husbands”.⁷⁷ We see that the reasons for refusal of work did not have to do with the kind of work – digging or carrying – but rather the difficulty of it. Hence, the hardness of soil and insufficient remuneration for working on that kind of soil was an important reason for women’s refusal to dig. It is also safe to say that fining of both carriers and diggers for short work would also have influenced women’s choice of work. Finally, in one case, a different set of causes led to a complete reversal of the famine code’s task-gender association and women were allowed to dig, and men were put to the task of carrying earth.

CONCLUSION

This article analyses the norms and practices around women’s work and wages on famine public works. Most of these women belonged to rural labouring

75. Collector of Cawnpore to Commissioner of Allahabad District, July 1906, Inspection Notes on Relief Works, UPRSA, ACR, box no. no. 45/167.

76. *Ibid.*

77. Progress Report of the Relief Operations in Jalaun District, March 1906, UPSA, Scarcity Department, file nos 55–61.

families.⁷⁸ A large number of these women were also part of the labour gangs that worked on non-famine public works. It has been argued that women fared better than men during famines in terms of both mortality and relative wage.⁷⁹ During famines, women benefit from temporary changes in social mores and institutional support. A closer look at these institutions and mechanisms reveal gendered labour processes that cast women as specific types of labourers and relief seekers.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the colonial state standardized certain norms of work and wages for women on famine public works. We have seen above that the famine administration increasingly associated the task of carrying with women. This task was typified as less strenuous and less skilled than digging. The need to standardize a lesser wage for women was one of the explicitly stated reasons for the changes brought about in the organization of work that associated women with the task of carrying. The principle of differential wages for men and women was hence embodied in the codes.

However, this history of differential wages was not uncontested. The practical application of the norms required not only a reworking of the norms themselves, but the reorientation of the work distribution and organization. The large number of women on famine public works strengthened the category of “female digger” and women negotiated their tasks depending on the different types of soil, fining, and remuneration. This provides a counter-narrative to the gendered difference standardized through the codes. Even as the broader understanding of gender and work tended to move towards essentialist stereotypes of strength and skill, women in the course of work and as wage earners contested these norms through demands for a just remuneration. Contrary to the more common picture of the invisibilized history of women’s work, this article has not only presented the history of women’s work in the context of famine public works, but has also demonstrated that women have challenged the existing notions around women’s work and wages. However, despite the distance between the standardization of norms around gender

78. It is difficult to estimate the exact percentage of women working as agricultural labourers using the colonial census. According to J. Krishnamurty’s estimates, the female agricultural workforce fluctuated between 30.8 million and 35 million from 1901 to 1931. In the same time period, the population of female agricultural labourers ranged from 12.8 million to 18.1 million. See J. Krishnamurty, “The Growth of Agricultural Labour in India: A Note”, *IESHR*, 9:3 (1972), pp. 327–332, p. 330.

79. For a review of the demographic literature across countries and time periods, see Kate Macintyre, “Famine and Female Mortality Advantage”, in Tim Dyson and Cormac Ó Gráda (eds), *Famine Demography: Perspectives from the Past and the Present* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 240–258. For colonial India and specific literature on famine mortality and gender, see J. K. Lynch, “Some State Responses to Male and Female Need in British India”, in H. Afshar (ed.), *Women, State and Ideology* (London, 1987), pp. 130–151; and Tim Dyson, “Famine in Berar, 1896–97 and 1899–1900: Echoes and Chain Reactions”, in Dyson and Gráda, *Famine Demography*, pp. 93–112.

and work by the state and the eventual application of these norms, the power of the state lay in the very exercise of moving towards these ideals. These ideals complemented the understanding of the labouring families and women's labour within these families that was extant in the labour market. These included both the typification of women with certain tasks and with equating the equal number of women in the labour force as "excess women".⁸⁰

In the context of penal colonies, Clare Anderson has shown the importance of reading labour histories with the imperial practices and processes of population management.⁸¹ Women's work on famine public works was located within the context of "useful relief seekers", who were conceptually contiguous with other "useful" imperial subjects like the poor and convicts. In exploring labouring regimes within imperial practices of governance, the dynamism of gender norms and the differing impulses of the colonial state are revealed. The emphasis on useful labour in the colonial context made women visible as labourers. We have seen above that women's visibility on famine works resulted in a reworking of the dominant understanding of gender and work. However, the impermanence of colonial relief and seasonality of public works did not sustain these reworked visions of women and work.

80. One of the objections to the employment provided under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 (MGNREGS) has been that it has raised the cost of agricultural labour. Notably, a large number of women sought employment under this scheme (close to fifty percent nationally) and gender wage parity far exceeded any other agricultural operation. The act stipulates a minimum wage.

81. Clare Anderson, "Transnational Histories of Penal Transportation: Punishment, Labour and Governance in the British Imperial World, 1788–1939"; and *idem*, "The Andaman Island Penal Colony: Race, Class, Criminality, and the British Empire". See also Christian G. de Vito, Clare Anderson, and Ulbe Bosma, "Transportation, Deportation and Exile: Perspectives from the Colonies in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries", *IRSH* 63: SI26 (2018), pp. 1–24.