


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Doing ‘coolie’ work in a ‘gentlemanly’ way: Gender and caste on the famine public works in colonial North India

Madhavi Jha 

Centre for South Asian Civilizations, Department of Historical Studies, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada
Email: madhavi.jha@utoronto.ca

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Abstract

The second half of the nineteenth century was marked by regular famines and scarcities in India, and famine public works were one of the chief ways for the colonial state to provide relief. Famine public works involved labourers, including a large number of women, working in the construction of railways, roads, canals, and tanks in return for a subsistence wage. The present article contextualizes the practices of famine public works, especially the segregation of famine public works into large departmental and village works, within the intersecting processes of labour, caste, and gender. Drawing on evidence from North Western Provinces and Punjab, the article makes two arguments. First, it shows that segregation in famine works was driven by a shared understanding of the dominant castes and colonial state regarding labour, property, and caste which ensured that village works were reserved for dominant castes. A relational definition of labour was central to the construction of caste respectability on famine works. Second, by comparing the sex ratio of labourers in the two kinds of famine works, the article argues that women’s labour was not merely a marker of caste, but constitutive of it.

Keywords: Labour; caste; gender; infrastructure; famines

Introduction

In the late-nineteenth century, shifts in the rural economy and techniques of colonial governance concretized caste identity around property and labour in new ways.¹ This was also a period of recurrent famines and

¹ David Washbrook, ‘Law, state and agrarian society in India’, *Modern Asian Studies* [henceforth, MAS], vol. 15, no. 3, 1981, pp. 649–721; David Ludden, *Peasant history in South India* (Princeton:

scarcities² and the state's organized attempts to provide relief through a programme of famine public works. Work, mainly earthwork (digging and carrying earth), was given out in the famine-affected areas in different types of construction work—roads, railways, tanks, and canals—in return for a subsistence wage. This article locates the practices on the famine public works within the interconnected trajectories of labour, caste, and gender in the second half of nineteenth-century India. It makes two main arguments. First, it demonstrates that the segregation of famine public works into large departmental and village works was a result of a shared understanding between the colonial state and dominant castes³ in rural India of the relationship between caste, labour, and property. The demand by dominant castes to secure 'respectable' labour⁴ for themselves within famine relief drove this principle of segregation and resulted in the reservation of village works for dominant castes. Further, in the case of famine public works, respectable labour was defined in terms of where and with whom one had to work rather than the nature of work itself.

Princeton University Press, 1985); C. A. Bayly, *Indian society and the making of the British empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press [henceforth, CUP], 1988), pp. 136–168; Susan Bayly, *Caste, society and politics in India from the eighteenth century to the modern age* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), pp. 123–212; Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, conflict, and ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and low caste protest in nineteenth-century western India* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2010); Neeladri Bhattacharya, *The great agrarian conquest* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2019).

² This article focuses on North Western Provinces and Oudh [henceforth, NWP] and Punjab. In the second half of the nineteenth century, famines were reported from NWP in the years 1860–1861, 1868–1869, 1877–1878, 1880, 1890–1892, 1896–1897, and 1907–1908; and from Punjab in 1860–1861, 1868–1869, 1877–1878, 1896–1897, and 1899–1900. Famines in 1877–1880, 1896–1897, and 1899–1900 affected large parts of India and prompted the setting up of three famine commissions in 1880, 1898, and 1901 respectively. Estimates of famine mortality in this period (1876–1902) range from 12.2 million and 29.3 million. See Mike Davis, *Late Victorian holocausts: El Niño famines and the making of the third world* (London [etc.]: Verso, 2001), p. 6. For a list of famines in this period, see B. M. Bhatia, *Famines in India: A study in some aspects of the economic history of India* (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1967) p. 363. Also see *Report of the Indian Famine Commission, 1880–1885* (London: George Edward Eyre and William Spottswode, 1880) [henceforth, *FCR, 1880*]; *Report of the Indian Famine Commission, 1898* (Simla: Government Central Printing Office, 1898) [henceforth, *FCR, 1898*]; *Report of the Indian Famine Commission 1901* (Calcutta: Government Printing Office, 1901) [henceforth, *FCR, 1901*].

³ This article uses the terms 'dominant' and 'non-dominant' castes. We will see below that within the archival records used for this article these terms specifically refer to *brahmins* and *thakurs* in the NWP and to *jats*, *gijars*, and *rajputs* in Punjab. The oft-used terminologies 'upper' or 'lower' caste do not serve our purpose because of the ambivalent nature of caste hierarchies in different regions. For instance, *jats* in Punjab are described as 'non-servile cultivating people' or 'non-elite tillers' by Bayly, *Caste, society and politics in India*, p. 37. The same cannot be used to describe the caste status of *brahmins* or *thakurs*. The ritual status and socio-economic power exercised by different castes do not always coincide and also vary from region to region. See John D. Rogers, 'Introduction: Caste, power and region in colonial South Asia', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* [henceforth, *IESHR*], vol. 41, no. 1, 2004, pp. 1–6.

⁴ As signposted in the title of this article, the idea of 'gentlemanly' labour found in the records of famine public works is interrogated here. Caste respectability was claimed by the dominant castes working on famine public works through relational notions of labour. The article analyses the arguments around labour that made it possible for dominant castes to claim caste respectability even as they worked on the same type of tasks as others.

The markers of respectable labour—who worked where and with whom—both drew from and reinforced the categories of landed and non-landed, and labouring and non-labouring castes. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the specific alignment of caste, labour, and property contributed to the process of labour control and subordination in rural India, ‘freeing up’ labour for the various factories, mines, mills, and plantations. It also reconstituted caste power over economic resources, including labour, within the changing agrarian order.⁵

Second, the article explores the gendered implications of the segregation of famine public works. It argues that not only were the site and nature of women’s work crucial to the claims of being landed or labouring castes, but that women’s labour and their mobility for labour was central to the very sustenance of rural stratifications, such as caste. The reservation of village works for the dominant castes directly created the conditions of work for women from non-dominant castes who had to seek work outside their villages on large departmental famine works. Notably, the claim of being respectable castes rested on women’s labour being confined to their ‘own fields’. Drawing on the evidence from famine public works, this article argues that the relationship between gender and construction of identity, either through processes of ‘othering’ or self-fashioning, should be located within the power structures of the labour regime. This approach can elucidate the material processes that inform social norms and cultural constructions regarding gender relations and their connections with other identities like caste. In making this argument, the article draws from the existing frameworks of understanding caste, gender, and labour in relation to each other, especially Brahmanical patriarchy in the context of South Asia.⁶ While the significance of gender in the maintenance of caste boundaries, especially through endogamy and hypergamy, has been researched in South Asian scholarship, within the discipline of history the interrelatedness of gender, caste, and labour has not been explored sufficiently.

Famines and scarcities in nineteenth-century India became part of a variety of colonial and nationalist discourses and also impacted on the contours of colonial governance and institutional practices.⁷ Scholars have also shown

⁵ Apart from works cited in footnote 1 above, also see Radhika Singha, ‘Settle, mobilize, verify: Identification practices in colonial India’, *Studies in History* [henceforth, SH], vol. 16, no. 2, 2000, pp. 151–198; Claude Markovits, Jacques Pouchepadass and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (eds), *Society and circulation: Mobile people and itinerant cultures in South Asia 1750–1950* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003); Rupa Viswanath, *The pariah problem: Caste, religion and the social in modern India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

⁶ Brahmanical patriarchy is an important theoretical framework which locates the divergent, caste-specific gender roles and practices within a conceptually singular structure of production and reproduction that informed the caste system in South Asia. Uma Chakravarti, ‘Gender, caste and labour: Ideological and material structure of widowhood’, *Economic and Political Weekly* [henceforth, EPW], vol. 30, no. 36, 1995, pp. 2248–2256; B. R. Ambedkar and Sharmila Rege, *Against the madness of Manu: B. R. Ambedkar’s writings on Brahmanical patriarchy* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2013).

⁷ Famines were part of debates and discussions such as the drain of wealth and the nature of colonial and Indian philanthropy by state and non-state actors in the nineteenth century. See Dadabhai Naoroji, *Poverty and un-British rule in India* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1901); Romesh Chunder Dutt, *Indian famines, their causes and prevention* (London: P. S. King and Son, 1901);

how infrastructural expansion in the second half of the nineteenth century created uneven spaces under capitalism and colonialism, and was central to the making of colonial governance and imperial power in South Asia.⁸ However, scant attention has been paid to the intertwined histories of famines and the expansion of public works in this period.⁹ This article builds on the historiographical departure marking the more recent scholarship on infrastructures that views them as ‘lived artefacts’ producing their own ‘field of power’.¹⁰ In this article, we analyse famine public works as an interrelated set of institutional arrangements and labour regime in their relation to the history of caste power in rural India. Caste and colonial governance is a rich field of historiographical debate with implications for both historicity of caste and the nature of its modernity. One of the strands of the debate—the extent and the process of the role of the indigenous elites—is particularly useful to trace the economic power of caste.¹¹ For the period under consideration—the second half of the nineteenth century—historical investigations into the process of sedentarization have brought together the questions of economic change,

Sanjay Sharma, *Famine, philanthropy and the colonial state: North India in the early nineteenth century* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press [henceforth, OUP], 2001); Georgina Brewis, ‘“Fill full the mouth of famine”: Voluntary action in famine relief in India 1896–1901’, *MAS*, vol. 44, no. 4, 2010, pp. 887–918. In the twentieth century, the Bengal famine of 1945 became part of the discourse on war, hunger, nation-building, and identity formation. See Paul Greenough, *Prosperity and misery in modern Bengal: The famine of 1943–44* (New York: OUP, 1982); Madhusree Mukerjee, *Churchill’s secret war: The British empire and the ravaging of India during World War II* (Chennai [etc.]: Basic Books, 2010); Janam Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal: War, famine and the end of empire* (London: OUP, 2015); Abhijit Sarkar, ‘Fed by famine: The Hindu Mahasabha’s politics of religion, caste, and relief in response to the Great Bengal Famine, 1943–1944’, *MAS*, vol. 54, no. 6, 2020, pp. 2022–2086; Joanna Simonow, ‘The Great Bengal Famine in Britain: Metropolitan campaigning for food relief and the end of empire, 1943–44’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2020, pp. 168–97.

⁸ Ravi Ahuja, *Pathways of empire: Circulation, ‘public works’ and social space in colonial Orissa (c.1780–1940)* (Hyderabad: Orient Black Swan, 2009); and Manu Goswami, *Producing India: From colonial economy to national space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). For a recent review of the conceptual frameworks used to study histories of infrastructure, see Aditya Ramesh and Vidhya Raveendranathan, ‘Infrastructure and public works in colonial India: Towards a conceptual history’, *History Compass*, vol. 18, no. 6, 2020, pp. 1–10. For a similar argument regarding the centrality of energy infrastructure in the political economy of colonial and post-colonial South Asia, see Matthew Shutzer, ‘Energy in South Asian history’, *History Compass*, vol. 18, no. 12, 2020, pp. 1–18.

⁹ Exceptions include Jocelyn Kynch, ‘Some state responses to male and female need in British India’, in Haleh Afshar (ed.), *Women, state and ideology. Studies from Africa and Asia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1987), pp. 130–151; Jocelyn Kynch, ‘Famine and transformations in gender relations’, in Cecile Jackson and Ruth Pearson (eds), *Feminist visions of development. Gender, analysis and policy* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 110–138; Madhavi Jha, ‘“Men diggers and women carriers”: Gendered work on famine public works in colonial North India’, *International Review of Social History* [henceforth, IRSH], vol. 65, no. 1, 2020, pp. 71–98; Amal Shahid, ‘Re “constructing” informality. Famine labour in late 19th century colonial North India’, *Journal of Labor and Society*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2021, pp. 16–43; Chakali Chandra Sekhar, ‘Famine, caste differences and Christianity: Burning hunger’, *South Asia Research* (forthcoming).

¹⁰ Ramesh and Raveendranathan, ‘Infrastructure and public works in colonial India’, p. 4.

¹¹ For a recent review of the different positions in this debate, see Rosalind O’ Hanlon, ‘Caste and its histories in colonial India: A reappraisal’, *MAS*, vol. 51, no. 2, 2017, pp. 432–461.

colonial governance, and the reconstitution of caste power. The intensification of agriculture in the wet zones, extension of agriculture in the dry zones, increasing production of cash crops, and decline in the older forms of rural industry and services concomitant with the colonial construction of the ideal agrarian (the 'village'¹² with secured property rights and a settled itinerant population) had far-reaching consequences for caste in both rural and urban areas. It is not just that caste claims of being 'customarily' propertied or increasingly exclusionary definitions of labouring castes were made, but that through legal, bureaucratic, and ethnographic means property and labour became constitutive to caste categorizations. Historians have elaborated the role, agency, and collusion of the rural elites in this process in both maintaining and extending their access over resources and subjugating and controlling labour.¹³ This article traces the making of caste power in the process of segregation of famine public works through claims over respectable labour.

Analysing the labour regime on the famine relief works allows us to explore the ways in which the practices of segregation reiterated caste-based claims of being *essentially* propertied, or its obverse, that is, *essentially* non-labouring. The very negotiation of segregation of famine public works into village and large departmental works between the colonial state and the dominant castes was a claims-making process.¹⁴ These claims, we shall see below, were sought to be settled within the framework of rights over land and labouring 'habits' and 'customs'. The ownership of land or rights over land and the definition of agricultural labourer has been principal to the question of free and unfree labour in South Asia.¹⁵ Accounting for caste in the definitions and connotations of agricultural labourers has further complicated the question. For instance, Rupa Vishwanath challenges both Dharma Kumar and Gyan

¹² The changing colonial constructions of the ideal 'village' reflected the economic and political exigencies of both Company rule and the British Raj. See Bernard Cohn, *An anthropologist among historians and other essays* (Delhi: OUP, 1987); David Ludden, 'Orientalist empiricism: Transformations of colonial knowledge', in Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (eds), *Orientalism and the postcolonial predicament: Perspectives on South Asia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), pp. 250–278; Bhattacharya, *The great agrarian conquest*.

¹³ Bayly, *Caste, society and politics in India*; Viswanath, *The pariah problem*.

¹⁴ Scholars have pointed to the different ways in which British and Indian interests came together to produce caste within the realms of colonial governance and knowledge production. As Nobert Peabody has pointed out, an appreciation of the asymmetries of power in both the late pre-colonial period as well as the colonial period and between the different groups and interests among the British and Indians is required to understand caste power and colonialism. See Nobert Peabody, 'Knowledge formation in colonial India', in Douglas M. Peers and Nandini Gooptu (eds), *India and the British empire* (Oxford: OUP, 2012), pp. 75–99. The phrase 'claims-making process' has been used in this article to reflect both the process and power inherent in the interaction between the colonial state and the dominant castes.

¹⁵ For the debate on the percentage of agricultural labourers in colonial India, see Surendra J. Patel, *Agricultural labour in modern India and Pakistan* (Bombay: Current Book House, 1952); Dharma Kumar, *Land and caste in South India* (Cambridge: CUP, 1965); J. Krishnamurthy, 'The growth of agricultural labour in India—a note', *IESHR*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1972, pp. 327–332. The mode of production debate is revived in Tom Brass and Marcel van der Linden (eds), *Free and unfree labour: The debate continues* (Berne: Peter Lang GmbH, 1997).

Prakash on whether partial rights over land or ownership of homesteads justified the blurring of distinctions between the Untouchable landless labourers and tenants. She argues that, as far as control over labour of *pariahs* was concerned, rights were circumscribed by punitive and extra economic measures that were exclusively applied to Dalit labourers.¹⁶ While this argument serves well the purpose of delineating Dalit labourers from others within the universe of agrarian labour and proving the case of agrestic slavery in Madras presidency,¹⁷ it does not fully exhaust the ways in which caste aligned with property and labour claims in colonial India. This article argues that dominant castes' claims of being essentially property-owning were made not only through subjugation and control over the labour of those below them in the caste hierarchy, particularly Dalits, but also through a *relational* definition of their own labour. Hence, the self-fashioning by the dominant castes as property owning was contiguous with their demand for respectable labour on the famine public works.

Earthwork on public works construction was strenuous, tedious, and often hazardous. Combined with low wages and low 'skill',¹⁸ the shifting nature of work, and the caste background of those who were engaged in digging and carrying on public works¹⁹ contributed to earthwork being perceived as low status work.²⁰ Both the nature of work (usually the wages and conditions) and the identity of the workers (gender, caste, race, ethnicity, migrant status) determine the low status associated with certain kinds of work: more often than not both these markers of low status work coincide. Labour historians have directed our attention to the historical shifts within not just low status work, but also 'stigmatized' labour. Hence, in municipal sanitation and leather

¹⁶ Viswanath, *The pariah problem*, pp. 25–32.

¹⁷ In a recent roundtable on Viswanath's *The pariah problem*, Joel Lee reflects that the findings of the book with respect to the 'pariah-missionary alliance' is resonant with what was happening in NWP and Punjab during the same period. See 'A roundtable on Rupa Viswanath's *The pariah problem: Caste, religion, and the social in modern India and the study of caste*', *MAS*, vol. 56, no. 1, 2021, pp. 1–64, pp. 40–48; doi:10.1017/S0026749X2000028.

¹⁸ Skill is ideologically constructed in different labour regimes. Even as digging and carrying was classified as 'unskilled' work, in the famine and Public Works Department [henceforth, PWD] records, the engineers recognized the skill and importance of certain castes as earthworkers. See Ian Kerr, 'On the move: Circulating labor in pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial India', *IRSH*, vol. 51, S14, 2006, pp. 85–109.

¹⁹ Within the colonial ethnographic accounts as well as in the PWD records, certain castes were identified with construction work and were called the 'navvy castes'. In NWP, these castes included *luniyas*, and in Punjab, the *changars* and *ods*. The most common term to denote castes undertaking construction work in North India and Bengal was *bildar* or *beldar*. This term was used for both endogamous caste groups as well as for general labouring groups. See William Crooke, *The tribes and castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh. Vol. II* (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1896), p. 391; Denzil Ibbetson, *Panjab castes* (Lahore: Superintendent, Government Printing, Punjab, 1916), p. 275. For a history of a similar caste—the Wudders in the Madras presidency—see Kerr, 'On the move'.

²⁰ Further, public works construction was also associated with convict labour, especially in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Chitra Joshi, 'Fettered bodies: Labouring on public works in nineteenth-century India', in Marcel van der Linden and Prabhu Mohapatra (eds), *Labour matters: Towards global histories* (Delhi: Tulika Books, 2009), pp. 8–12.

work associated with Dalit labour, caste was reinscribed in the 'modern' work spaces through shop floor division of work, industrial training, labour control measures such as contractual work, and the mediated use of technology.²¹ It has also been possible for upwardly mobile peasant castes to claim that the manual labour of ploughing was respectable work that did not necessarily hinder their ascent in the caste hierarchy.²² This article unravels the question of caste, labour, and respectability to interrogate the different factors that made it possible for the dominant castes to simultaneously disavow famine labour as 'coolie' work and reserve the same type of work for themselves in village famine works. In other words, how was the relational definition of labour constructed in the context of famine public works to claim caste respectability?

Respectability and gender have been studied by historians of South Asia in relation to identity formation under colonial rule. Women's sexuality, education, work, and practices of conjugality have all been central to the ways in which different classes, castes, and religious communities have fashioned their identity in relation to others as well as the colonial state.²³ However, the processual link between labour, gender, and caste has been most illuminating in the research on women's work, especially rural work.²⁴ Caste and kinship networks determined the kind of work women did and the site of

²¹ Vijay Prashad, *Untouchable freedom: A social history of a Dalit community* (New York: OUP, 2000); Ramnarayan S. Rawat, *Reconsidering Untouchability: Chamars and Dalit history in North India* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011); Vidhya Raveendranathan, 'Constructing the scavenger: Caste and labour in colonial south India 1860–1940', MPhil thesis, University of Delhi, Delhi, 2011; Shahana Bhattacharya, 'Rotting hides and runaway labour: Labour control and workers' resistance in the Indian leather industry, c. 1860–1960', in Ravi Ahuja (ed.), *Working lives and worker militancy* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2013), pp. 47–96; Tanika Sarkar, "'Dirty work, filthy caste": Calcutta scavengers in the 1920s', in Ahuja (ed.), *Working lives and worker militancy*, pp. 174–206.

²² Eugene F. Irschick, *Dialogue and history. Constructing South India, 1795–1895* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); William R. Pinch, *Peasants and monks in British India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 107–110; Bayly, *Caste, society and politics in India*, pp. 187–232; Malavika Kasturi, *Embattled identities: Rajput lineages and the colonial state in nineteenth-century North India* (New Delhi: OUP, 2002), pp. 53–63.

²³ Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu wife, Hindu nation: Community, religion and cultural nationalism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); Sanjay Joshi, *Fractured modernity: Making of a middle class in colonial North India* (New Delhi: OUP, 2001); Anshu Malhotra, *Gender, caste and religious identities: Restructuring class in colonial Punjab* (New Delhi: OUP, 2002); Swapna M. Banerjee 'Subverting the moral universe. "Narratives of transgression" in the construction of middle-class identity in colonial Bengal', in Crispin Bates (ed.), *Beyond representation. Colonial and postcolonial constructions of Indian identity* (New Delhi: OUP, 2006), pp. 77–100; Charu Gupta, 'Domestic anxieties, recalcitrant intimacies: Representation of servants in Hindi print culture of colonial India', *SH*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2018, pp. 141–163.

²⁴ Caste is also important within the history of sex work, an occupation where women predominated. See Kunal M. Parker, "'A corporation of superior prostitutes": Anglo-Indian legal conceptions of temple dancing girls, 1800–1914', *MAS*, vol. 32, no. 3, 1998, pp. 599–633; Ramya Sreenivasan, 'Drudges, dancing girls, concubines: Female slaves in Rajput polity, 1500–1850', in Indrani Chatterjee and Richard M. Eaton (eds), *Slavery and South Asian history* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), pp. 136–161; Ashwini Tambe, *Codes of misconduct: Regulating prostitution in late colonial Bombay* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2009).

their work. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the consequence of mechanization of rural industries and the low returns from labour and craft-based work on women's socio-economic lives was differentiated by caste.²⁵ In urban areas, caste-marked practices of marriage, sexuality, motherhood, and domesticity contributed to particular forms of working class femininity that were instrumental in maintaining class divisions.²⁶ For instance, in the jute mills of Calcutta in the early twentieth century, the livelihood and cohabitation strategies of men and women (particularly single migrant women) from labouring households were constructed as promiscuous and immoral.²⁷ In the industrial context, the narratives that folded caste and class hierarchies into specific constructions of working class families were useful to employers in dealing with economic exigencies, as well as in responding to the various labour legislations that sought to control the working hours and working conditions of women.²⁸ The growing influence of the male breadwinner ideology on the working classes as well as the decline of women in the workforce throughout the twentieth century has been noted in phenomena like effeminization, housewifization, and the domesticity of women, which were aligned to the prevalent wider gendered notions of work that, in turn, conformed to the dominant caste norms.²⁹ Chitra Joshi has shown that the degree of seclusion of women depended on the caste of the labouring households.³⁰

In both the rural and urban context, the space of women's work (for example, working on family owned or other's fields) and visibility (the different adoptions and adaptations of purdah and seclusion as well as withdrawal of women from the workforce) was fundamental to the self-fashioning of respectability. However, these very markers of respectability were subject to change, especially under the economic pressures that were exerted on labouring

²⁵ Mukul Mukherjee, 'Impact of modernisation on women's work', *IESHR*, vol. 20, no. 1, 1983, pp. 27–45; Mitchell Maskiell, 'Gender, kinship and rural work in colonial Punjab', *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1990, pp. 35–72; Prem Chowdhry, *The veiled women: Shifting gender equations in rural Haryana* (New Delhi: OUP, 1994); Samita Sen, *Women and labour in late colonial India: The Bengal jute industry* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), pp. 54–89.

²⁶ Radha Kumar, 'City lives: Women workers in the Bombay cotton textile industry 1911 to 1947', PhD thesis, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 1991; Sen, *Women and labour in late colonial India*, pp. 142–212; Anna Lindberg, 'Class, caste, and gender among the cashew workers in the South Indian state of Kerala 1930–2000', *IRSH*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2001, pp. 155–184; Chitra Joshi, 'Notes on the breadwinner debate: Gender and household strategies in working-class families', *SH*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2002, pp. 261–274; and Jonathan Parry, 'Sex, bricks and mortar: Constructing class in a central Indian steel town', *MAS*, vol. 48, no. 5, 2014, pp. 1242–1275.

²⁷ Sen, *Women and labour in late colonial India*, pp. 142–212.

²⁸ These legislations included the Indian Factories Act of 1881 and its Amendment in 1891 that restricted the working hours of women and children; the prohibition of night work for women in the 1920s; the Maternity Benefit Act, 1929; and the Indian Mines Act, 1929.

²⁹ For effeminization, see Lindberg, 'Class, caste, and gender among the cashew workers'; for housewifization, see Maria Mies, *The lace makers of Narsapur: Indian housewives produce for the world market* (London: Zed Press, 1982); for domesticity and seclusion, see Sen, *Women and labour in late colonial India*, pp. 142–212.

³⁰ Joshi, 'Notes on the breadwinner debate', pp. 269–270.

households. Famines and scarcities of the late nineteenth century represented such moments of economic crisis for large sections of the rural labouring population. This article analyses the ways in which the deployment of women's labour as a response to economic hardships was incorporated into the formations of caste. While women comprised nearly 50 per cent of the total labouring population on the famine public works by the end of the nineteenth century,³¹ there was considerable difference in the sex ratio of labourers in large departmental and village works. There were close to equal numbers of women and men working on the large departmental works, while in the case of village works, the number of women was very low in comparison to men. This article presents this reversal of the sex ratio on large departmental works and village works as a consequence of the reservation of village works for the dominant castes which not only separated the work done by women belonging to different castes, but also reiterated caste order in rural India.

This article mainly relies on famine records from North Western Provinces [henceforth, NWP] and Punjab. The official archive on famine public works can be found in the Public Works Department [henceforth, PWD] and the Revenue and Agriculture Department.³² While the accounts of the famines of the late nineteenth century are also present in non-official sources like newspapers and missionary records, the substantial amount of information on famine public works comes from official and semi-official sources, including reports. The Famine Commission reports [henceforth, FCR] of 1880, 1898, and 1901, along with their province-specific evidence volumes, are of immense value when read critically. The article has also used material from colonial ethnographies and vernacular and English-language newspapers and journals.

Classification of famine works: Large departmental works and village works

The emphasis on famine public works within the colonial relief system in the second half of the nineteenth century³³ reflected the dominant understanding of the causes of famines as primarily due to a shortage of agricultural work.³⁴ Further, famine public works were congruent with the extant and emerging

³¹ FCR, 1898, p. 267.

³² NWP had a separate Famine Department, but in most of the other provinces it was part of the Revenue and Agriculture Department.

³³ While relief measures were carried out during famines in the early part of the nineteenth century too, the period under study in this article was marked by a more systematic approach by the colonial state. 'Saving lives' was recognized as a matter of policy for the first time after the government's much-critiqued handling of the Orissa famines in 1866. A conscious attempt to devise a famine policy that would reflect the various financial and governance concerns of the state and also distinguish it from the earlier piecemeal approach to relief measures resulted in the various famine codes. Although specific to the different British provinces, the famine codes followed the prescriptions (with varying degrees) of the three famine commissions set up in 1885, 1889, and 1902. For a study of the famine relief measures in the early nineteenth century in NWP, see Sharma, *Famine, philanthropy and the colonial state*.

³⁴ The other implication of this understanding of the causes of famines and scarcities was the policy of non-interference in the grain market.

ideals of the ‘useful poor’ and colonial charity.³⁵ The organization of famine public works responded to two imperatives of the colonial state—economy of governance and efficiency of governance.³⁶ Consequently, famine works represented a particular kind of labour regime that sought to bring together the principles of *laissez-faire* with the aim of mitigating the effects of famines and scarcities and creating the ideal labouring relief subject. This labour regime was not unmediated. The interests of rural elites, the private employers of rural labour in agriculture as well as public works, and the labourers themselves shaped the practices of famine public works.³⁷ For the purpose of our analysis of caste, labour, and gender in famine public works, the present section looks at one particular aspect of this labour regime—the spatial organization of famine works, especially their division into large departmental works and village works.

A number of factors influenced the spatial distribution of famine public works. One of the major concerns was to ascertain the ‘genuine’ relief seekers. Famine public works were chiefly aimed at ameliorating the conditions of out-of-work agricultural labourers who were ‘able-bodied’ but weakened due to the lack of sustenance, both because they could not find employment during famines and due to the high prices of food grains.³⁸ Thus rules of work and wages on the famine public works (more on this below) were contrived to allow this category of relief seekers to earn an ‘honest’ living. However, famine

³⁵ For the history of the ideological influences on famine relief, see Srinivas Ambirajan, ‘Political economy and Indian famines’, *South Asia: Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1971, pp. 20–28; Srinivas Ambirajan, ‘Malthusian population theory and Indian famine policy in the nineteenth century’, *Population Studies*, vol. 30, no. 1, 1976, pp. 5–14; L. Brennan, ‘The development of Indian famine codes: Personalities, politics and policies’, in Bruce Currey and Graeme Hugo (eds), *Famine: As a geographical phenomenon* (Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1984), p. 91–111; and David Hall-Matthews, ‘Inaccurate conceptions: Disputed measures of nutritional needs and famine deaths in colonial India’, *MAS*, vol. 42, no. 6, 2008, pp. 1189–1212. Works that engage specifically with the different aspects of philanthropy during famines, both state and non-state, include Sharma, *Famine, philanthropy and the colonial state*; Hall-Matthews, ‘Inaccurate conceptions’; and Brewis, “‘Fill full the mouth of famine’”.

³⁶ The conflicting nature of these two imperatives were reflected in the debates on the minimum required ration for those working on famine public works. The minimum ration, derived from jails and the diets of the labouring classes not involved in famine works, was the basis for calculating the wages of labourers. The ration had to be just enough to stave off starvation, but not enough to attract labourers who could find work outside the famine public works. For a discussion on the infamous ‘Temple ration’ of one pound of grain per person per day recommended in the Bombay and Madras presidency by Richard Temple in 1877, see Brennan, ‘The development of Indian famine codes’; David Arnold, ‘The “discovery” of malnutrition and diet in colonial India’, *IESHR*, vol. 31, no. 1, 1994, pp. 1–26; and Hall-Matthews, ‘Inaccurate conceptions’.

³⁷ For the gendered implications of the division of labour on famine public works and the role of women labourers in shaping the practices on famine public works, see Jha, “‘Men diggers and women carriers’”.

³⁸ People who lived off their labour in rural areas were recognized as those mainly affected by famine by the famine commissions. *FCR, 1880*, p. 41 stated that the loss of employment for this class of people resulted ‘in part directly from the fact that field labour has become useless or impracticable, and to some extent indirectly from the fact that the employers of labour lose their ordinary means of paying wages, which are derived from their produce in possession or in prospect’.

officials feared that 'professional' labourers (that is, labourers who were accustomed to the type of work given out on construction sites), labourers who were not weakened by famines, and those who could easily find work in the non-famine public works or as field labourers would all be attracted to famine public works because of what was perceived as the laxer conditions of the nature of the work required on the famine public works.³⁹ Consequently, different types of 'tests' were devised to ensure the authenticity of the relief seekers on the famine works. One of these tests was the distance test.⁴⁰

The distance test was based on the belief that only those people who were in actual need during times of famine and scarcity would travel a certain distance from their home to access the relief provided by famine public works. Those who did not pass the distance test were deemed to be not in real need of relief. However, all the famine commissions were of the view that distance between the residence of the labourers and the famine public works was not a good test of distress as it did not account for the general enfeebling effect of famines and scarcities on the labourers. While famine officials agreed that works need not be provided very close to the labourers' homes, it was also apparent that the distance tests could not be applied practically. In fact, it was found by the *FCR, 1898* that the distribution of famine public works varied from one province to another and was affected by a different set of factors in each of the provinces.⁴¹

The higher density of population in the Bengal province as opposed to NWP and Punjab meant that the famine public works had to be closer to each other in Bengal. The type of terrain also determined the nature of the works and subsequently its density. The feasibility of opening large famine public works at any given distance from the affected villages was also a consideration. For instance, in 1897, the works opened in NWP usually served villages within a diameter of 16 km; the figure for Central Provinces was 24 km and for Bengal it was 10 km. The complaints of private employers also affected the selection of projects for famine relief. In response to allegations by the East India Railway Company and the Bengal North Western Railways that famine public works drew labourers away from nearby railway line construction, the chief

³⁹ It is not possible within the scope of this article to discuss in detail the invalidity of this claim, chiefly made by private employers, that conditions of work were 'laxer' on famine public works. Evidence from various provinces records the reluctance of private employers to match the wages on their construction works with the rise in prices of food grains during famines. This had many implications. For example, the allegation of the 'lazy coolie' who preferred the 'easily' earned wages on famine public works needs to be seen in the context of the piecework system on private construction sites where payment was based on the unit of work turned out. In case of famines, when the prices of grains could possibly double, in the absence of a revision in the rate of work, the piecework system implied that the labourers had to double their workload to earn enough to live at the pre-scarcity subsistence level. Hence, it can be argued that it was the tardiness of private employers in raising the piecework rate that made the famine works 'attractive' for labourers.

⁴⁰ Apart from a distance test, there was also the labour test (willingness to work), wage test (willingness to accept a wage just above or close to bare subsistence), and cooked food test (willingness to eat food outside caste restrictions). The last was mainly applied to poorhouses.

⁴¹ *FCR, 1898*, p. 121.

engineer of the Bengal PWD recommended that the government refrain from opening relief works within eight or ten miles of any private works.⁴²

In 1898 famine public works were divided into village and large departmental works. This was a shift from the earlier classification of large and small works, depending on the number of people working on the construction site.⁴³ Famine public works were also classified according to the agency which carried out the works—PWD or the civil administration.

The large departmental works, which mostly included construction of roads, railways, and canals, were under the supervision of the PWD and were governed according to the rules set out in the various famine codes and by the Famine Departments of the respective provinces. Labourers were usually employed on earthworks, which was considered to be familiar work for those who sought relief by working on the famine works. According to the famine codes, the work had to be set at a lesser quantum than the usual work given out in the non-famine public works. Labourers were organized into gangs, with mates from among them and a set of famine officials⁴⁴ to supervise the work and payment of wages. There was extensive discussion on setting the wages for famine public works, with the diet of prisoners, labourers, and emigrant labourers to plantations used as the terms of reference. Wages were calculated on the basis of the minimum required diet for every person working in the gang and was differentiated according to the age and sex of the labourer. The careful calculation of the wages, which were subject to further cuts by the famine officials on the construction site as well as to the vagaries of the market price of grains, arose out of the concern that famine works should not be too 'attractive' to labourers not affected by the vicissitudes of famines and scarcities.

While non-famine construction work relied on a complex system of contractors and sub-contractors,⁴⁵ the famine codes warned against the use of contractors in famine public works as it was suspected that their presence

⁴² *Report of the Indian Famine Commission 1898 being Minutes of Evidence, 1898. Vol. I, Bengal* (London: Darling and Son, 1899), p. 147. In 1897, *Indian Engineering* observed that 'local officers of the government' were 'instructed not to retain or open any relief works which, being close to the railway, would compete with it'. *Indian Engineering. An Illustrated Weekly Journal*, Vol. XXI, January–June 1897, p. 444.

⁴³ For instance, in 1878, the range for small works was taken to be those employing 300 to 500 labourers. Almost all provinces reported to the famine commissions that small works were suitable for the beginning and end of the famine period.

⁴⁴ The famine establishment in NWP included the officer-in-charge who was assisted by the sub-overseer or work agents. The officer-in-charge reported to the district engineer/surveyor, who then reported to the chief and superintending engineer. Department of Public Works, *Appendices to the Resolution on the Administration of Famine Relief in North West Provinces and Oudh in 1896–1897*, 3 vols (Allahabad, 1897), Vol. III, p. 27 and pp. 107–130.

⁴⁵ For contract system in railways construction in the second half of the nineteenth century, see Ian Kerr, *Building the railways of the Raj, 1850–1900* (New Delhi: OUP, 1995). For different aspects of labour mobilization and control on various types of public works, see Ian Kerr, 'Labour control and labour legislation in colonial India: A tale of two mid-nineteenth century acts', *Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2004, pp. 7–25; Jan Lucassen, 'The brickmakers' strikes on the Ganges canal in 1848–1849', *IRSH*, vol. 51, S14, 2006, pp. 47–83; Joshi, 'Fettered bodies'; Ahuja,

would depress the wages that ultimately reached the labourer.⁴⁶ Both piecework and wage work was given out on the famine works, though a minimum wage was usually stipulated in the case of piecework so that the labourers could earn a subsistence wage as directed in the famine codes. It should be noted that these code prescriptions were applied to varying degrees in the provinces. Nonetheless, all these features of large departmental works—individual calculation of diet, absence of contractors, task work, and minimum wage—were criticized by both private employers and government famine officials. The former argued that the wages given on the famine works raised the overall wages of rural labour and amounted to labour market ‘interference’ by the state.

Village works included the construction of wells and tanks within a village or group of villages and were carried out by the Revenue Department, private individuals, or both. The emphasis in village works was on the utilization of local resources and agencies, which included work being carried out through middlemen like zamindars⁴⁷ and headmen. For instance, the *FCR, 1898* recommended construction and repair of wells, tanks, and reservoirs for storage of drinking water and irrigation purposes, irrigation channels, embankment of fields, the weeding of noxious weeds from fields, and improvement of village roads as tasks that could be carried out as village works.⁴⁸

The role of the PWD was limited in the case of village works. To illustrate, in 1906 earthen embankments or *bandhs* had to be constructed in Banda district of the United Provinces⁴⁹ as part of village works. They were carried out under the Ken River canal division and the sub-engineer was ordered by the Irrigation Department to give advances to zamindars and *lambardars*⁵⁰ identified by the Collector and the *naib tehsildars*⁵¹ of the district for the construction of embankments and *bandhs*. The sub-engineer had to carry out a topographical survey of the area and identify suitable projects. It was recommended by the Irrigation Department that ‘unpretentious projects’ of simple earthwork should be chosen for famine relief. The rate to be paid to the *lambardars* had

Pathways of empire; and Alexander Bubb, ‘Class, cotton, and “woddaries”: A Scandinavian railway contractor in western India, 1860–1869’, *MAS*, vol. 51, no. 5, 2017, pp. 1369–1393.

⁴⁶ The *FCR, 1880* recommended the prohibition of contractors on famine public works as it undermined the principles of ‘direct supervision’ and ‘free communication’ between the labourers and famine officers. See *FCR, 1880*, p. 43. The *FCR, 1898*, however, found that while the provincial codes had generally followed this recommendation, some exceptions had been made. The case of Central Provinces and NWP were specially mentioned. In NWP, for example, an ‘intermediate system’ had been introduced in the Bundelkhand region in 1896 which allowed petty contractors on famine works. However, it was found that the wages of labourers were ‘screwed down’ and the system of contractors was done away with. See *FCR, 1898*, p. 60; and Intermediate System of Famine Relief Works, Scarcity Department, File no. 103, August 1897, Uttar Pradesh State Archives, Lucknow [henceforth, UPSA]. The *FCR, 1898* was of the view that the contract system was not suitable to the aims of famine relief. See *FCR, 1898*, p. 247.

⁴⁷ Landlord.

⁴⁸ *FCR, 1898*, Vol. VII, Appendix Miscellaneous, p. 45.

⁴⁹ NWP was renamed as United Provinces in 1902.

⁵⁰ Village headman.

⁵¹ Village accountant or revenue officer.

to be officially communicated from time to time. The sub-engineer was instructed not to concern himself with what the *lambardar* paid his labourers.⁵² Hence, the PWD's contribution to the village works was mainly in the form of the technical expertise of its engineers. In this scenario, the question of labour mobilization became heavily dependent on the local elites.⁵³

Divergent opinions were expressed by famine officials over the relative usefulness of large departmental works and village works. It was the opinion of the *FCR, 1898* that large departmental works should be the 'backbone' of famine relief and village works should be opened either during times of lesser or decreasing distress or when the public works were threatened by epidemics. While agreeing with the view expressed in the *FCR, 1898*, the *FCR, 1901* reiterated the advantages of village works (more economical and useful, less exposed to dangers of cholera and other epidemics, and easier to supervise) drawing special attention to two advantages—first, that village works were less open to accusations of labour market 'interference' and neglect of agricultural dwellings and stock, and were a hindrance to the early resumption of agricultural activities; and second, that village works were less likely to loosen moral and domestic ties. These two points, it was reported in *FCR, 1901*, were much appreciated in non-official circles. Despite this, the *FCR, 1901* upheld large departmental works 'not only as an alternative, but also as a *safeguard*' [emphasis added].⁵⁴ The greater dependence on large departmental works meant that labourers had to travel some distance outside their villages to access relief work. Who travelled outside the village to work on large departmental works managed by the PWD and what factors impelled the higher reliance on large departmental works?

Caste respectability and the labour regime on the famine works

The spatial organization of famine public works and their division into departmental and village works was driven by a number of factors that addressed one of the core concerns of famine public works—determining the legitimate relief subject. One of the principal ways to ascertain the legitimacy of the relief subject was their ability and willingness to labour on the public works construction within the parameters set by the colonial famine relief programme. This section will show that caste was an important qualifier to this 'labour test' and moulded the practices on famine relief—more specifically the rationale and application of the segregation of relief works into village and large departmental works. The voices of dominant castes from NWP and Punjab arguing for the segregation of famine works by caste are strongly registered in the famine records. The rationale for famine public works segregation can be found in the claims-making process by the dominant caste over the relief provided

⁵² Proceedings for January 1906, Scarcity Department, File no. 59-67, 1906, UPSA.

⁵³ Notably, the famine codes emphasized the need to recruit local labour for such works and also recommended that their recruitment should be made a condition for giving advances to the local elites for village works.

⁵⁴ *FCR, 1901*, p. 35.

through village works and the colonial state's consideration or refashioning of these claims. The main terms of reference for both the dominant castes and the colonial state were labour and property. We see below that the demand made by the dominant castes for providing avenues for respectable labour was based on their claims of being essentially non-labouring. These claims were relational in nature, that is, they served the function of separating the dominant castes from others. Notably, the arguments of being essentially non-labouring were made on the grounds of both the nature and site of their labour as well as claims of being property owing.⁵⁵

The following discussion first provides the rationale found in the famine records for why the dominant castes required a different kind of famine relief works. The main arguments the dominant castes used for the segregation of famine works included their cultivator status; their affinity to 'home' and aversion to migrate for work; their non-association with the non-dominant castes in the normal course of their work; and, finally, the nature and site of women's work belonging to these castes. Second, it shows, through evidence from the NWP, that this understanding of caste, property, and labour led to a conscious policy of 'selection' by the colonial state and village works were reserved for the dominant castes.

Rationale for segregation

The nature of the practices that embodied the village works resonates in the uncharacteristically ambivalent tone of the *FCR, 1898* regarding the utility and place of village works in the relief system. Even as it introduced the classification of the relief system into village works and large departmental works, the *FCR, 1898* cautioned,

When it is necessary to open village works on an extensive scale in consequence of widespread or acute distress, they (village works) should, as far as possible be managed professionally on the same principles, as near as may be, as public relief works. Detached village works, or works carried out by means of advances from Government, will be carried out by the Collector with the aid of his assistants and the relief circle staff under the rules to be framed for such works. When such works are to be numerous, they should if possible be supervised by a Civil Works inspector, appointed by the Public Works Department under the orders of Government, but working entirely under the orders of the Collector.⁵⁶

The wariness stemmed from the ground reports on the composition of labourers on large departmental and village works. In 1896, in Banda district of NWP, the engineer made enquiries regarding the caste of labourers working on the large departmental works. It was found that the bulk of those present

⁵⁵ Hence, some of the other demands made by the rural elite and dominant castes during famines and scarcities included land revenue remission or suspension, measures for agricultural improvement, supplying fodder at cheaper rates, and taccavi loans.

⁵⁶ *FCR, 1898*, p. 252.

belonged to castes such as *chamars* and *kols*.⁵⁷ The report noted the absence of *brahmins* and *thakurs* on these works.⁵⁸ In Etawah in NWP, 50 village works had been sanctioned. It was stated that while these works were sufficient for the employment of 'high caste labourers', it was necessary to provide large departmental works for *chamars* and other 'low caste men'.⁵⁹ Similarly, in Bara (Allahabad Division, NWP), the Collector commented on the problems in making the village relief system work in this district. He reported that the zamindars did not give employment to those 'most in need of it and excluded the low castes and non residents'.⁶⁰

What, then, was the vision behind village works? Did the colonial relief system simply buckle under the pressures exerted by rural elites or was it a result of a shared understanding of social stratification and its bases in colonial rural India? It was not as if the colonial administration did not see the merits of village works. Hence, in 1896, in Ambala district of Punjab province, one of the stated advantages of digging tanks was that it could provide relief to the 'land owning classes'. This was in response to the reluctance of certain castes to work on large departmental works. Relief officials identified three castes that attached the notion of shame to digging work in this region—*rajputs*, *jats*, and *gujjars*. The experience of famines in Karnal in 1869 was cited to argue that these castes had refused to work on roads even when famines had been severe.⁶¹ Further, it was stated that their refusal to work was linked to these castes' strong bond with their homes. This was contrasted with the non-dominant castes' tendency to emigrate for work: 'in famine time kamin and kangal has no particular home'. These caste distinctions were also used to justify the division of work provided as relief. Hence, the idea of digging tanks as being appropriate for village works was mooted.

The tank system finds great favour in my mind, and in order to render it acceptable to zamindars, and in order to prevent this class of labour from quickly giving out, I am inclined to let it be known—that 'tanks' are for the zamindars and for kangals the 'roads'. There is no great hardship to the labourer in this. He is accustomed to seek work and can take his family with him and has no home of value to leave behind. On the other hand, zamindars will shy away from work if they are to be mixed up with 'kangals'.⁶²

Further evidence for this attitude was provided from Lukhi, a village in this district. In this village, *rajputs* agreed to work on tanks if they were assured

⁵⁷ The report remarked that a large number of women, including widows, were working on these sites. Scarcity in the Allahabad Division, Scarcity Department, File no. 13-64, May 1896, UPSA.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Scarcity in Agra Division, Scarcity Department, File no. 50-104, February 1897, UPSA.

⁶⁰ Scarcity in Allahabad Division, Scarcity Department, File no. 186-292, January 1897, UPSA.

⁶¹ In fact, the willingness of the *jats* to work alongside *chamars* on famine works was seen as proper evidence by the colonial state that famines had arrived. Cited in Bhattacharya, *The great agrarian conquest*, p. 60.

⁶² *Report on the Famine in the Punjab, 1896-97, Appendix 1* (Lahore: Punjab Government Press, 1898), p. 30.

that the work would be reserved for the zamindars. It was reported that the *rajputs* were agreeable to the idea that the 'kangals would go and work like coolies on roads, while they would be asked to dig *together at home in a gentlemanly way*' [emphasis added]. Moreover, it was argued that in the absence of such an exclusive arrangement of relief for these castes, they would resort to borrowing which would lead to further indebtedness in Punjab province.⁶³

This understanding of the objectives of the village works was reiterated by the *FCR, 1898* in a 'Note on Village Works For the Relief of Distressed Agriculturists'.⁶⁴ The *FCR, 1898* recognized that large departmental works served a bigger population of labourers who were not only accustomed to the type of work provided in the large departmental works, but were also used to going a certain distance from their homes to earn their livelihood. Hence, there was 'no special hardship involved in this so far as the majority of the workers are concerned'.⁶⁵ However, there was another class of people in the villages who would not avail themselves of the work provided in large departmental works. This class was identified as 'self-cultivating owners and tenants living on the profits of their cultivation'. Further, this class, 'though poor and leading a simple village life and accustomed to labour in their own fields, belong to a much higher *stratum* [emphasis original] of society than the ordinary labourers. Their women in most places work in association with their male relations, but they do not hire themselves out to other cultivators, *far less go out of their villages* [emphasis added] in quest of employment.' It was pointed out that this class of people could not be expected to work in large departmental works with its 'privations and inconveniences, its enforced companionship of strangers and exposure of their womankind to the familiarities of all manner of men gathered together at a relief camp'.⁶⁶

Clearly, in the view of the British administrators, a uniform 'labour test' failed to ascertain the relief requirements of those affected by famines and scarcities. It was suggested that the landowning cultivators, 'whom perhaps it is much more important to help than the majority of those who crowd the relief works',⁶⁷ be relieved through a different class of works that required labour, but removed the necessity of association with the non-dominant castes. Village works were considered ideal for this purpose.

Policy of 'selection' on village works

The understanding that village works were meant for the relief of what were considered to be non-labouring castes in the villages led to a conscious policy of 'selection'. This policy meant that the dominant castes (as we will see below

⁶³ *Ibid.* Notably, this was also a period of growing concern in Punjab over land dispossession owing to indebtedness which culminated in the enactment of the Punjab Alienation of Land Act, 1900. This act restricted the transfer of land from the 'agricultural tribes' to the groups that were identified as non-agriculturalist.

⁶⁴ *FCR, 1898, Vol. VII, Appendix Miscellaneous*, pp. 43–45.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

this meant *brahmins* and *thakurs* in the case of NWP/United Provinces) were the preferred subjects of relief through village work. In 1906, it was reported from Karwi and Banda in United Provinces that efforts were being made to induce zamindars and *lambardars* to take petty contracts for small amounts of work near their villages.⁶⁸ If the zamindars and *lambardars* did not agree, contractors would have to be employed, with the condition that they would engage only local labour. This was the last resort, as employing contractors on the famine public works was not seen as suitable as a matter of policy. Fifty thousand rupees had been allotted in this district for carrying out agricultural works, which primarily included constructing *bandhs*. There were 23 such works in this district in the month of January and 3,241 persons were employed on it. Labourers coming from any village within five miles of the work were given relief with this type of work. It was noted that 'special arrangements' had to be made for *thakurs* and *brahmins* who would not work on the 'ordinary terms on large works'.⁶⁹ It was concluded that small works close to their villages was a suitable form of relief for these castes.⁷⁰

A similar arrangement was made for the *thakurs* in Bhoginipur, in Kanpur district in 1906. Advances were paid for building eight tanks in this area to *thakurs* who 'would not come on to work on ordinary relief works'.⁷¹ By 24 February 1906, the number of such tanks had increased to 19 and instructions had been issued to 'not allow low caste people to work on them'.⁷² The number of tanks increased to 20 the following month and it was reported that 'thakurs and brahmins are generally employed on them'. By April, the overall numbers on all types of works went down with the beginning of the *rabi* harvest season. In Bhoginipur, *thakurs* declined to work on the 20 tanks after the revision of famine rates by the commissioner. He remarked that, 'if the thakurs of Bhoginipur will not work at the tanks below the maximum allowed by the Code, they cannot be in very great trouble'. In May 1906, work of this kind stopped completely in Bhoginipur.

In a neighbouring region—Ghatampur in the same district—there was work being done on six tanks, with the same condition that 'low caste people are not allowed on this work'. In Unao too there was special selection in village works expressly for the *thakurs* and *brahmins* 'who will not resort to regular works.

⁶⁸ Scarcity in Banda District, Scarcity Department, File no. 93-104, March 1906, UPSA.

⁶⁹ Ibid. In this district, portions of famine relief work on the Ken canal had been reserved for them. It was suggested that they could be induced to work in special gangs on large departmental works.

⁷⁰ 'When these village works are started, these will be run as civil works under non-official agency. A manager will be selected and given an advance, which will be recouped after work done has been measured up. The rate to be paid will be fixed by the Collector with the approval of the Commissioner. Pending the opening of test works and declaration of famine, a list of works that may be required to give relief to the Thakur and Brahmin communities should be made. It was estimated that on such *bandhs* a digger and carrier would be able to earn up to 3 annas.' Scarcity in Banda District, Scarcity Department, File no. 93-104, March 1906, UPSA.

⁷¹ Progress Report of Relief Operations Kanpur District, Scarcity Department, File no. 78-81, February 1906, UPSA.

⁷² Fortnightly Progress Statement of Famine Relief Operations Kanpur District, Scarcity Department, File no. 134-153, May 1906, UPSA.

Efforts are being made to induce them to work on these themselves and send the lower classes of residents of their villages to the public works.’⁷³ In Hamirpur too, the village works were restricted to ‘higher castes’.⁷⁴ In Jhansi a large number of village works (between 44 and 46) were ‘opened for the employment of better classes’.⁷⁵ There is similar evidence from United Provinces in succeeding years.⁷⁶ Hence, we see that the policy of selection implied that the village works were to be reserved for the dominant castes and excluded others. In reserving village works for the dominant castes, the colonial state had not only secured relief for them during famines, but also reproduced caste through hierarchies of famine public works.

Who worked where and why: Gender, caste, and labour

Dominant castes used two main features of women’s work to buttress their claim of being respectable. First, that women belonging to these castes worked in their own fields. Consequently, they did not hire out their labour and worked alongside their ‘own’ men, that is, men to whom they were related through ties of kinship and family. Second, that they did not go out of the village to seek work. Labouring on large departmental works would violate both of these conditions associated with respectable labour. On the other hand, it was precisely such conditions of work that were created for the women from non-dominant castes due to the segregation of famine works by caste. Hence, the labour of women was constitutive of caste and not merely its signifier. The following pages first delineate some of the ways in which gender and caste characterized famine relief and then present the gendered effects of the segregation of relief works on village and large departmental works by comparing the sex ratio on these two kinds of famine relief works in five districts of United Provinces.

As mentioned earlier, most of the women working on the public works belonged to castes that either specialized in construction work or were generally involved in field labour. We do have evidence of women from dominant castes like *brahmins* and *thakurs* working on the famine public works. For instance, in March 1874 the Government of India set up an inquiry to verify the claims made in *the London Daily News* that ‘hundred[s] of high caste women are to be seen labouring on the government relief works with common coolies’.⁷⁷ This news had been reported from Tirhut and Champaran districts

⁷³ Monthly Famine Statement Submitted to the Government of India, Scarcity Department, File no. 92-114, February 1906, UPSA.

⁷⁴ Monthly Famine Statement Submitted to the Government of India, Scarcity Department, File no. 69-81, June 1906, UPSA.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ For instance, in Etawah in 1914 it was reported that ‘the thakur will not work on roads with ordinary labourers. He has not the same objection in village work.’ Scarcity in Etawah District, Scarcity Department, File no. 70-84, March 1914, UPSA.

⁷⁷ Cited in Letter from A. P. Howell, Esq. Deputy Secretary to the Government of India, Department of Revenue, Agriculture and Commerce, to the Secretary to the Government of

from the Bengal province. The subsequent inquiry concluded that while the presence of certain 'high' caste women on the famine public works was not out of ordinary in this region, the conditions of scarcity were not severe enough to 'drive the better classes to great extremities'.⁷⁸ Similarly, in Punjab, the plight of 'well connected women who had never been even to the doors of their houses' in Hissar is presented in a particularly emotive register in the newspaper *Wakil*. These women are described as labouring on the famine relief works with 'eyes fill [ed] with angry tears', 'repress [ing] their feelings'.⁷⁹ In Etawah (United Provinces) the case of one *thakur* widow was mentioned separately in 1906. She was reported as the only woman on that particular site who was of a 'good caste' and special care was taken to transfer her to a nearby canal works.⁸⁰ A caste census in the same year on a canal works in the same province showed that out of the 428 women working on the construction of the canal, two women were *brahmins*, five were *thakurs*, 102 women were from *kori* caste, and 171 were reported to belong to *chamar* caste.⁸¹ Women from dominant castes present on the famine public works in small numbers were notably described as exceptions in the famine records. In fact, in case of the example from Bengal province cited above, we see that the very presence of women from these castes is taken as a proof of the severity of famines.

The distinction in famine relief based on the caste of women relief seekers also becomes apparent from the type of work given out to *pardanashin* women.⁸² These women were allotted work that they could do within their houses in order to maintain their 'respectability'. They were either given doles or put to tasks such as spinning cotton and grinding grains. Missionaries also gave work to women at home as part of their own famine relief initiatives and differentiated such type of work (spinning, weaving, lace making) from that done on the famine public works, describing the latter as 'rough work'.⁸³ The division of women relief recipients between 'gratuitous'

Bengal, dated 4th March 1874, Revenue, Agriculture and Commerce Department (Famine), File no. 189, 1874, National Archives of India, New Delhi [henceforth, NAI].

⁷⁸ Letter from C. Bernard, Esq., Officiating Secretary to the Government of Bengal, to the Deputy Secretary to the Government of India, Department of Revenue, Agriculture and Commerce, dated 25th March 1874, Revenue, Agriculture and Commerce Department (Famine), File No. 254, 1874, NAI.

⁷⁹ 'The Famine', *Wakil*, 19 March 1900, Selections from the Vernacular Newspapers Published in the Punjab, 1900, Oriental and India Office Collections, British Library, London [henceforth, OIOC, BL].

⁸⁰ Opening of Test Works Etawah District, Scarcity Department, File no. 41–45, February 1906, UPSA.

⁸¹ This proportion of women belonging to different castes corresponded to the ratio of men from these castes on the same works. From Manager, Irrigation Department, Tanks Division and Dhassan Canal to the Commissioner of Allahabad, Statement III, dated 12th November 1906, Allahabad Commissioner's Records [henceforth, ACR], Box no. 284/13, Regional State Archives, Uttar Pradesh, Allahabad [henceforth, UPRSA].

⁸² *Pardanashin* literally translates as 'the veiled' and referred to women from 'upper' castes and classes who lived under varying levels of seclusion.

⁸³ Report of the London Missionary Society, North India, Box no. 1/1, 1867–1897, OIOC, BL.

relief and famine public works was for all purposes based on caste.⁸⁴ In 1906, the commissioner of Kanpur observed the following about the people listed on gratuitous relief: 'there are not a large number on the village gratuitous relief list, but they are nearly all *pardanashins*, and I am extremely doubtful if they should remain. I directed further inquiry. There is a tendency to pile on these *pardanashin*, and omit the miserable *chamars*, *dhanuks* and similar castes.'⁸⁵

What did the policy of segregation of famine relief works according to caste mean for women? A closer look at the relief statistics on different types of works suggests some patterns. The number of women and men on the famine public works was almost equal in most parts of the country, but in some cases, the number of women was higher than men. Further, if we take the example of one famine circle⁸⁶ (Famine Relief Works, Second Circle) from NWP, in the two famines years of 1896–1897 and 1897–1898, seven out of 11 districts returned more women on the famine public works than men.⁸⁷ However, in order to map the gendered consequences of segregation of famine works, we have to examine the gender segregated data on different types of works. We have this type of data from five districts in United Provinces—Etawah, Agra, Kanpur, Muttra, and Hamirpur—for the year of 1906. These data have been collated from the fortnightly reports from these districts that were submitted as part of routine famine reporting. While the exact numbers were sometimes subject to revisions, the data are interesting in the pattern of sex ratio that they reveal. The numbers of men and women relieved by working on large departmental and village works are provided.⁸⁸ We have calculated the sex ratio—by which we mean number of women working per hundred men—in both types of relief work (see Table 1).⁸⁹

⁸⁴ In the famine records, gratuitous relief referred to famine relief given in poor houses and orphanages, and relief to the *pardanashin* women. Labour was central even in these kinds of relief work.

⁸⁵ Fortnightly Progress Statements of Famine Relief Operations Kanpur District, Scarcity Department, File no 134-153, May 1906, UPSA. Caste was an important organizing principle on large departmental works in terms of food and water distribution, residence, and sanitation. For example, in NWP only *brahmin* and *kahar* mates were employed for distributing water to the labourers. Water distribution on famine public works was a matter of great concern to the relief administrators since one of the major fears was the spread of cholera in the relief camps. Notably, the rules formulated to reduce the chances of the spread of cholera among relief labourers also ensured the maintenance of caste prescriptions and proscriptions. See Intermediate System of Famine Relief Works, Scarcity Department, File no. 103, August 1897, UPSA.

⁸⁶ Famine circles were famine administrative units. In the second circle of the famine relief works in the NWP in 1896–1897 and 1897–1898 the following districts were included: Lucknow, Unao, Rae Bareli, Sitapur, Hardoi, Kheri, Fyzabad, Gonda, Sultanpur, Pratapgarh, and Bara Banki.

⁸⁷ Statement no. V, 'Statement showing number of persons employed and expenditure incurred on famine relief works, 2nd Circle, Provincial Works, during 1896–97 and 1897–98 by R. R. Pulford, Superintendent Engineer, 2nd Circle, Provincial Works, NWP and Oudh', in *Appendices to the Resolution on the Administration of Famine Relief in North West Provinces and Oudh*, Vol. III, p. 195.

⁸⁸ For some districts, numbers are provided for two types of village works—those conducted wholly through private means and those conducted under civil agency, with or without the formal intervention of local elites.

⁸⁹ These figures have been collated from the fortnightly and monthly reports from five districts in United Provinces—Etawah, Agra, Kanpur, Muttra, and Hamirpur—by the Scarcity Department, 1906, UPSA.

Table 1: Sex ratios on large departmental works and village works, United Provinces, 1906

District	Month	Departmental works			Village works		
		Males	Females	Sex ratio	Males	Females	Sex ratio
Etawah	14 April	1,160	919	79	–	–	
	28 April	1,288	1,358	105	–	–	
	12 May	2,031	2,165	107	–	–	
	26 May	3,834	4,284	112	5,646	2,080	37
	9 June	6,127	6,798	111	9,539	3,325	35
	23 June	3204	3812	119	–	–	
	7 July	–	–		3,765	1,241	33
Agra	31 March	–	–		3,443	1,725	50
	14 April	737	1,970	267	183	216	118
	28 April	684	1,956	286	3,848	1,650	43
					6,278	2,508	40
	12 May	956	1,890	198	9,643	3,393	35
					7,432	2,868	39
	26 May	1,260	2,660	211	10,572	3,198	30
					9,078	3,816	42
9 June	–	–		22,343	8,376	37	
				10,889	4,378	40	

	23 June	–	–		29,966	13,910	46
					5,335	5,607	105
	7 July	–	–		6,944	4,039	58
					1,000	255	26
Kanpur	27 January	807	774	96	–	–	
	10 February	28168	27,733	98	3015	448	15
	24 February	40,008	41,846	105	9,882	2,087	21
	24 March	13,779	13,609	99	6,977	2,767	40
	7 April	5,264	5,133	98	5,991	2,212	37
	21 April	3,352	2,664	79	3,050	762	25
	5 May	4,257	3984	94	1,367	293	21
	19 May	3,093	3,246	105	582	168	29
	2 June	2,470	2,795	113	673	347	52
	18 August	759	871	115	52	48	92
Muttra	3 February	29,387	30,677	104	–	–	
	17 February	38,156	41,085	108	–	–	
	3 March	49,062	47,300	96	–	–	
	17 March	49,237	49,314	100	1,338	55	4
	31 March	37,108	40,255	108	665	37	6
	14 April	15,519	18,598	120	55	11	20

(Continued)

Table 1: (Continued.)

District	Month	Departmental works			Village works		
		Males	Females	Sex ratio	Males	Females	Sex ratio
	28 April	15,961	19,293	121	65	11	17
	12 May	16,740	19,388	116	–	–	
	26 May	17,134	19,309	113	73	13	18
	9 June	16,774	18,584	111	65	5	8
	23 June	17,515	20,321	116	75	25	33
	7 July	6,700	6,313	94	–	–	
Hamirpur	24 February	61,197	78,573	128	–	–	
	10 March	77,770	104,136	134	–	–	
	24 March	129,744	179,980	139	301	70	23
	7 April	173,875	236,426	136	666	332	50
	21 April	183,003	248,942	136	900	443	49
	5 May	158,842	211,415	133	765	694	91
	19 May	136,985	194,529	142	1,522	1,098	72
					2,440	1,986	81
	2 June	127,825	189,983	149	3,297	2,130	65
					3,890	3,830	98

16 June	128,572	203,811	159	4,062	3,938	97
				2,427	2,109	87
30 June	105,635	184,838	175	11,894	9,038	76
				2,007	1,355	68
14 July	20,814	52,637	253	1,628	938	58
				434	367	85
28 July	14,058	40,640	289	253	108	43
				406	362	89
18 August	6,098	10,652	175	411	242	59
25 August	2,209	3,243	147	463	321	69
8 September	1,468	1,276	87	282	199	71
22 September	907	321	35	18	16	89

In Etawah, in the days from 14 April to 7 July 1906, the number of women was higher than men on large departmental works, with the exception of one fortnight. The sex ratio in large departmental works ranged from 79 to 119. The numbers for village works in this district were provided for two fortnightly periods and the sex ratio was unfavourable to women in both cases. In Agra, from 31 March to 26 May, the sex ratio in large departmental works ranged from 198 to 286. Hence, there was no unfavourable sex ratio in large departmental works. The data on village works in this district are available from 31 March to 7 July and the range for the sex ratio was 26 to 118, with only two out of 14 entries showing a sex ratio favouring women. In Kanpur, the data are available from 27 January to 18 August and the sex ratio on large departmental works ranged from 115 to 79. The range of the sex ratio on village works from 10 February to 18 August was 15 to 92. In this district, the sex ratio was unfavourable in large departmental works in six out of ten entries. However, in all cases bar one, the sex ratio was above 90. In contrast, on village works, where the sex ratio was unfavourable in all cases, it was usually below 50. In Muttra, the data for large departmental works are available for the period from 3 February to 7 July and the range for the sex ratio in these works in this district was 94 to 121, with two out of 12 figures not favouring women. The village works numbers are available for the period between 17 March and 23 June in this district and the sex ratio range was from four to 33. In Hamirpur, the figures are available for the period between 24 February and 22 September with the female to male ratio ranging from 35 to 289 in large departmental works. Hence, here the sex ratio is unfavourable in two out of 16 cases. The ratio was more than 200 in two cases. The sex ratio in village works ranged from 23 to 97.

A clear pattern emerges from the above description. Women worked in large numbers and often in larger proportions than men on the PWD projects. Their presence in village works was very low. This meant that women moved out of villages far more than men to seek employment on large departmental works and, further, that these women belonged to the non-dominant castes. The higher numbers of women than men working on large departmental works can be explained by the fact that there were fewer opportunities for these women to find work than men from the same castes even during times of famine. Overall, women were not the preferred workforce by the private employers, whether inside or outside the villages during famine or non-famine times. However, what is interesting is the reversal of the sex ratio between village works and large departmental works. Village works were clearly reserved for dominant caste men.

Despite the growing scholarship on women's long-distance migration and work,⁹⁰ the overwhelming picture of migration and circulation in nineteenth-

⁹⁰ Rhoda Reddock, 'Freedom denied: Indian women and indentureship in Trinidad and Tobago, 1845–1917', *EPW*, vol. 20, no. 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', *SH*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1995, pp. 227–260; Samita Sen, 'Unsettling the household:

and early twentieth-century India is gendered—the mobile, urban, labouring man and his counterpart, the rural woman with limited mobility and a decreasing role in wage labour.⁹¹ An examination of women’s labour on the famine public works challenges the view that women were immobile and non-labouring.⁹² Not only did women from labouring castes travel to work on the famine public works, their labour signified a number of other movements which can be mapped on a matrix of season, space, and activity. In agriculture’s lean months women moved out of the fields to work on roads, tanks, railways, and canals. The nature of their work also changed in these new spaces from a number of agricultural and allied activities (including food and fuel preparation) to digging and carrying earth. This was, however, a circular movement and women returned to working on the agricultural fields once work was again available for them. The labour of women from non-dominant castes on large departmental works can be located in a continuum of the rather ubiquitous, though not well researched, short-distance migration of women for agricultural work. As Samita Sen has pointed out, the latter did not challenge authoritarian familial structures in the ways that long-distance and overseas migration of women did in colonial India. Such migrations were part of the household’s livelihood strategies.⁹³ This article has shown that the deployment of women’s labour as part of such strategies was crucial in defining and reproducing caste boundaries.

Act VI (of 1901) and the regulation of women migrants in colonial Bengal’, *IRSH*, vol. 41, supplement 4, pp. 135–156; Charu Gupta, “‘Innocent’ victims/‘guilty’ migrants: Hindi public sphere, caste and indentured women in colonial North India’, *MAS*, vol. 49, no. 5, 2015, pp. 1345–1377; Anjali Bhardwaj Datta, “‘Useful’ and “‘earning’” citizens? Gender, state, and the market in post-colonial Delhi’, *MAS*, vol. 53, no. 6, 2019, pp. 1924–1955; and Arunima Datta, *Fleeting agencies. A social history of Indian coolie women in British Malaya* (Cambridge: CUP, 2021)

⁹¹ A recent intervention to question this trope was made by Nitin Sinha, who shows that without being mobile themselves, women are part of labour and migration histories. See Nitin Sinha, ‘The idea of home in a world of circulation: Steam, women, and migration through Bhojpuri folk songs’, *IRSH*, vol. 63, no. 2, 2018, pp. 203–237. Also see Samita Sen, “‘Without his consent?’: Marriage and women’s migration in colonial India’, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 65, Spring 2004, pp. 77–104; Joya Chatterjee, ‘On being stuck in Bengal: Immobility in the “Age of Migration”’, *MAS*, vol. 51, no. 2, 2017, pp. 511–541.

⁹² Famine records are most voluble on the subject of migration in two context—when migrants crossed over from princely states into British provinces (or vice versa) and during fodder famines. People’s movement between different regions during famines was guided by the availability of resources and work, and caste and kinship networks. For the colonial state it was important to identify and differentiate between the ‘organized’ movement of labourers and the ‘aimless’ wandering of people. The employability of migrants, the circularity or seasonality of migrants, the customary or habitual paths of migration, numbers of people migrating, their caste, and the unit in which they migrated (family or single) were all taken into account to determine the state’s action and attitude towards different types of migration. The colonial state’s intervention in the form of famine public works also became an occasion for the state to demarcate between what they considered to be ‘good’ and ‘bad’ movement of people. Long-term emigration had failed as a method of famine relief and one of the solutions to control ‘good’ migration of the labouring population evidently lay in an efficient programme of famine public works. Affirmation of this policy can be found in all the three Famine Commission reports: see *FCR, 1880*, p. 61; *FCR, 1898*, p. 365; and *FCR, 1901*, pp. 55–58.

⁹³ Sen, “‘Without his consent?’”.

Conclusion

'Coolie' is a historically layered term with meanings and implications that are best understood within specific labour regimes and practices.⁹⁴ While this term was used, along with others,⁹⁵ on the famine and non-famine public works construction to describe the labouring population, this article has unravelled the ways in which the term was employed by the dominant castes and the colonial state to give specific meanings to labour and caste in rural India. Two seemingly opposing principles governed the practices on the famine public works that sought to reinforce caste power within the existing labour regime—the principle of segregation and the principle of relational labour. The article shows that the demand by dominant castes to reserve village works for themselves was made on the basis of particular connotations of their own labour, which needed to be contrasted with 'coolie' labour. Resonating with other contexts of 'coolie' labour, where their mobility and immobility was central to production and labour processes,⁹⁶ we see that on the famine public works, too, the mobility of non-dominant castes was used to reify their identity. Hence, labour performed on the famine public works by different castes was constructed differently—while the dominant castes were attributed a strong sense of 'home' and their labour was considered 'respectable', the mobility of the non-dominant castes for work was characterized as a dislocation. This article argues that this relational definition of labour can be seen as contiguous with other kinds of claims that were being made in this period to reinforce different caste-based claims of being propertied or labouring. One implication of this process for the labouring castes was the very definition as 'labouring': while caste-based extraction of labour (including forced labour) intensified, they were divested of their customary ownership and usage claims over land. In the case of Dalits, this contributed to the erasure of their agrarian history.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Originating in the Tamil term for payment for menial labour and the Gujarati term that denoted a particular caste that engaged in menial labour, the English word 'coolie' incorporated both the connotations of 'lowly' work/worker and low payment. At its broadest, the term denoted Asian labour engaged in manual work throughout the globe sustaining imperial production of goods. In the South Asian context, the term has been used most extensively to write the histories of indentured labour in plantations. In all its different usages, 'coolie' labour implies several levels of unfreedom and coercion while being nominally free. See Jan Breman and E. Valentine Daniel, 'Conclusion: The making of a coolie', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 19, no. 3–4, 1992, pp. 268–295; G. Balachandran, 'Making coolies, (un)making workers: "Globalizing" labour in the late-19th and early-20th centuries', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2011, pp. 266–296; Sabine Damir-Geilsdorf et al. (eds), *Bonded labour. Global and comparative perspectives* (Bielefeld: Verlag transcript, 2016).

⁹⁵ The other terms included workers, labourers, relief-seekers, bildars/beldars, or sometimes in the wage tables, simply as man, woman, and boy.

⁹⁶ For instance, the mobility and immobility of indentured labour were regulated through coercion and contracts in response to the changing requirements of plantation economies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Breman and Daniel, 'Conclusion'; Balachandran, 'Making coolies, (un)making workers'.

⁹⁷ Prashad, *Untouchable freedom*; Rawat, *Reconsidering Untouchability*.

This article has focused on processes and material practices that reveal the ways in which labour, gender, and caste intersected on the famine works. Even as the nature of women's labour was presented by dominant castes as markers of caste respectability, their demand to reserve village works for themselves, which had a specific impact on the labour of women from non-dominant castes, demonstrates that women's labour was not simply a product of social norms governing their seclusion or mobility.

Famine records are silent on the counter claims by non-dominant castes on the question of segregation of famine relief and its implications for caste order. This is in contrast to the assertions and contestations by labourers that we find in other contexts of famine works, which include strikes, desertions, as well as the refashioning of rules on the famine works.⁹⁸ The fact that we do not find counter claims by labouring castes on the question of respectability reflects not only the power inherent in official archives to silence and obscure, but also indicates the caste power of dominant castes who could negotiate with the colonial state.⁹⁹ Further, it strengthens the argument that the understanding of caste, labour, and property was a shared one between the colonial state and dominant castes.

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⁹⁸ Some of the major reasons for desertion, despite the high prices of grains, were fining for short work, abolition of minimum wage, and imposition of maximum task. For women labourers' refashioning of gendered norms of work, see Jha, "Men diggers and women carriers".

⁹⁹ It should be noted that in other contexts and time periods we do find non-dominant and Dalit caste assertions around respectability within religious and political movements, including reclaiming pasts of dignified labour within caste histories and oral narratives authored by the non-dominant castes. See Gyan Prakash, 'Reproducing inequality: Spirit cults and labor relations in colonial eastern India', *MAS*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1986, pp. 209–230; Badri Narayan, 'Inventing caste history: Dalit mobilisation and nationalist past', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 38, no. 1–2, 2004, pp. 193–220; Rawat, *Reconsidering Untouchability*. Giving up demeaning and stigmatized labour can also be added to this list. See Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella, *Social mobility in Kerala. Modernity and identity in conflict* (London: Pluto Press, 2000); Bhattacharya, 'Rotting hides'.

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