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Grievance and Reform: The Deccan Riots, Famine Commission, and Arms Act

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Grievance and Reform: The Deccan Riots, Famine Commission, and Arms Act

A famine killed millions and a riot burned account books — and the same government that whipped Indians with the Arms Act slowly learned to fight hunger.

The late 1870s and early 1880s brought recurring famine, rural debt, and discriminatory laws to British India. The government's responses were part repressive, part reformist. This article follows both sides of that story: the grievances, and the reforms that followed them.



Robert Bulwer-Lytton, 1st Earl of Lytton, Viceroy of India 1876-1880, whose government passed the Arms Act and Vernacular Press Act. Photo by Nadar, public domain.

1875 Indebted farmers rise up in the Deccan Riots, burning moneylenders' account books.
1878 The Arms Act bars Indians, but not Europeans, from carrying arms without a licence.
1879 The Deccan Agriculturists' Relief Act gives peasants their first legal safeguard.
1880 The Famine Commission recommends a standard Famine Code for future relief.

Deccan Riots: the 1875 uprising by indebted Maharashtra farmers against moneylenders who controlled their debts and land.
Famine Code: the 1883 rulebook that told officials exactly how to declare famine and run relief works.

1. Riots, Relief, and a Reckoning with Debt

1.1 What were the Deccan Riots of 1875?

- In **May 1875**, indebted peasants in the Bombay Deccan (Maharashtra) rose against moneylenders.
- They burned account books, looted grain shops, and attacked moneylenders' houses. This became the **Deccan Riots**.
- Years of debt, failed crops, and a collapsing cotton boom pushed the peasants past endurance.
- The trouble began in villages like **Supa in Poona district**, then spread through the Deccan.
- The riots were spontaneous and local, not organised by any political leader, but they forced the government to notice a debt crisis it had ignored for years.

1.2 Why did the peasants target account books?

- The account books, called bahi khatas, recorded every rupee a farmer owed.
- To the peasants, burning the books felt like erasing the debt itself.
- A moneylender's real power lived in his records, not in his house or his person.
- Historians now read the Deccan Riots as a targeted peasant protest, not a random mob.

> **Quick check 1.** The Deccan Riots of 1875 mainly targeted the British government itself, not local moneylenders. *(True or False?)*
>
> See answer ↓

1.3 What was the Deccan Agriculturists' Relief Act of 1879?

- The government answered the riots with the **Deccan Agriculturists' Relief Act of 1879**.
- It restricted the sale of peasant land to outside, non-agriculturist moneylenders.
- This made it harder for a moneylender to strip a defaulting farmer of his land.
- The Act was limited and did not end the debt trap, but it was a first legal safeguard for the peasant.

1.4 How does this fit a longer chain of rural revolts?

- The Deccan Riots sit in a line running from the **Indigo Revolt of 1859** to the later Munda and Moplah uprisings.
- Each revolt reacted to the same pressures: heavy revenue demands, debt, and the moneylender-tenant squeeze.

- Peasants would act collectively against economic exploitation, even without political leadership.
- Over time, these local revolts fed into the wider nationalist demand for rural justice.

> **Quick check 2.** The Deccan Agriculturists' Relief Act of 1879 restricted moneylenders' power to seize peasant land through debt. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Now you try: The Deccan Riots (a local, contained protest) got a legal response within four years. The 1876-78 famine killed millions, yet took longer to produce a real government response. Why might that be?
A riot was visible, sudden, and threatened property and order right away, so the government had to act fast. A famine unfolded slowly across a huge area, and the ruling "laissez-faire" belief held that the market would correct itself — so officials kept waiting even as deaths mounted, until the scale of the disaster made inaction impossible to defend.

2. Famine Becomes a State Responsibility

2.1 What was the Famine Commission of 1880?

- The famine of **1876-78** killed millions across British India.
- The government's own policy of standing aside had made the disaster worse.
- In response, it set up the **Famine Commission of 1880**, chaired by **Richard Strachey**.
- The Commission recommended relief works: paying people for useful work to prevent starvation.

2.2 What was the Famine Code of 1883?

- The Commission's ideas were turned into a working rulebook, the **Famine Code**, finalised in **1883**.
- The Code set clear rules: how to declare a famine, organise relief works, and distribute food.
- It used "test work," relief tied to public labour, so aid reached the starving without breaking the budget.
- Later famines, in 1896-97 and 1899-1900, still killed many, but the Code reduced the worst horrors.

> **Quick check 3.** Before 1880, the British followed an active relief policy that prevented mass famine deaths. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

2.3 What is the Famine Commission's legacy today?

- The Commission and Code together set a lasting pattern: relief works, imported grain, a standing system.
- They turned famine from a natural disaster into a problem the state had a duty to manage.
- India's modern food-security system, including the Public Distribution System, descends from this beginning.

Remember:

- 1875: the Deccan Riots. 1879: the Relief Act follows directly.
- 1876-78: famine kills millions. 1880: the Famine Commission, chaired by Strachey. 1883: the Famine Code.
- 1878: the Arms Act and the Vernacular Press Act. 1882: Ripon repeals the Press Act.

3. The Arms Act and the Racial Double Standard

3.1 What was the Arms Act of 1878?

- Viceroy **Lord Lytton** passed the **Arms Act of 1878**.
- It barred Indians from carrying arms without a licence, while Europeans in India were exempt.
- The British feared an armed Indian population after the revolt of 1857.
- The racial exemption made the double standard plain: a European could carry arms freely, an Indian could not.

> **Quick check 4.** The Arms Act of 1878 exempted Europeans from the licence requirement that applied to Indians. *(True or False?)*
>
> See answer ↓

3.2 Why did the Vernacular Press Act matter alongside it?

- Lytton also passed the Vernacular Press Act of 1878, aimed at Indian-language newspapers.
- It let magistrates demand security deposits and seize press equipment, with no right of appeal.
- English-language papers were exempted, so the law was read as targeting Indian opinion specifically.
- **Lord Ripon**, the more liberal Viceroy who followed Lytton, repealed the Act in **1882**.

3.3 What were the three registers of grievance?

- The riots, the famine, and the Arms and Press Acts hit Indians on three fronts at once.
- Economic distress came from debt and famine. Civil humiliation came from laws like the Arms Act. Political silencing came from press curbs.
- Together, these three registers fed the discontent that grew into organised nationalism.

4. Two Viceroys, One Pattern, and the Exam Angle

4.1 What did the swing from Lytton to Ripon reveal?

- Lytton, Viceroy from 1876 to 1880, passed the Arms Act and the Vernacular Press Act, and staged a grand Delhi Durbar.
- Ripon, who followed him from 1880 to 1884, repealed the press act and started local self-government.

- Lytton’s rule leaned on control and display. Ripon’s leaned on reform and conciliation.
- Both Viceroys, in their own ways, pushed Indians closer to demanding real self-rule.

> **Quick check 5.** Lord Ripon, the Viceroy after Lytton, repealed the Vernacular Press Act in 1882. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Explain it back: In two or three sentences, explain why the Deccan Riots got a legal fix within four years, while the far deadlier 1876-78 famine took longer to produce a real government response.

Practice MCQs

1. The Deccan Riots of 1875, in which indebted farmers in Maharashtra attacked moneylenders' account books and property, were driven mainly by which grievance?

A. Restrictions on grazing land access

B. Forced conversion attempts by missionaries

C. High land revenue demands from the government

D. Years of debt bondage under exploitative moneylenders

See answer ↓

2. The Deccan Riots of 1875 led directly to which piece of legislation, passed in 1879 to give indebted farmers some legal protection against moneylenders seizing their land?

A. The Punjab Land Alienation Act

B. The Land Acquisition Act

C. The Deccan Agriculturists' Relief Act

D. The Bengal Tenancy Act

See answer ↓

3. The Famine Commission of 1880, set up after a devastating famine, was chaired by whom, and recommended a Famine Code laying out standard relief measures?

A. Herbert Risley

B. Richard Strachey

C. William Hunter

D. Charles Wood

See answer ↓

4. The Arms Act of 1878, widely seen as racially discriminatory, barred Indians from carrying arms without a licence while exempting which group?

A. Europeans in India

B. Village watchmen

C. Retired soldiers

D. Princely-state armies

See answer ↓

5. The unpopular Vernacular Press Act of 1878, which restricted Indian-language newspapers, was repealed in 1882 under which more liberal Viceroy?

A. Lord Ripon

B. Lord Lytton

C. Lord Curzon

D. Lord Dufferin

See answer ↓

6. The 1878 Vernacular Press Act, a severe colonial press-censorship measure targeting Indian-language newspapers, was introduced by which Viceroy?

A. Lord Lytton

B. Lord Ripon

C. Lord Curzon

D. Lord Canning

See answer ↓

7. Consider the following statements:

1. In the 19th century, peasants in various parts of India rose in revolt against moneylenders and grain dealers.

2. In May 1875, at village Supa in Poona District in the Bombay Deccan, peasants attacked shopkeepers, burnt the bahi khatas (account books), looted grain shops and set fire to the houses of Sahukars.

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **D.** The Deccan Riots were driven by years of debt bondage under exploitative moneylenders, pushing indebted farmers in Maharashtra to attack account books and property. ↑ Q1
2. **C.** The Deccan Agriculturists' Relief Act of 1879 followed directly from the 1875 riots, giving indebted farmers legal protection against moneylenders seizing their land. ↑ Q2
3. **B.** Richard Strachey chaired the 1880 Famine Commission. It recommended a Famine Code standardising relief measures for future famines across British India. ↑ Q3
4. **A.** The Arms Act of 1878 barred Indians from carrying arms without a licence, while exempting Europeans in India, making the law widely seen as racially discriminatory. ↑ Q4
5. **A.** Lord Ripon's government repealed the Act in 1882. Ripon was the more liberal Viceroy who followed Lytton. The 1881 date in some books marks the promise to repeal. ↑ Q5
6. **A.** Lord Lytton proposed the Vernacular Press Act. The Viceroy's Council passed it on 14 March 1878. It let a magistrate demand a bond and a deposit from an Indian-language paper. A repeat offence could cost the press itself. ↑ Q6
7. **C.** Both statements are correct: 19th-century peasants across India rose against moneylenders, and the May 1875 Supa (Poona) events - burning bahi khatas and attacking moneylenders - describe the Deccan Riots exactly. ↑ Q7

Quick-check answers

1. **False.** ↑ 1
2. **False.** ↑ 2
3. **False.** ↑ 3
4. **False.** ↑ 4
5. **False.** ↑ 5

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