

Famines, poverty,
government policy,
food supply in
colonial india
assignment



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Topic: Famines, poverty, government policy, food supply in colonial India

Introduction From 1760 till 1943 India was hit by terrible famines on a regular basis. More than 85 million Indians died in these famines which were in reality genocides done by the British Raj. Contrast this to the fact that there have been no famine related deaths since independence. British famine policy in India was influenced by the arguments of Adam Smith, as seen by the non-interference of the government with the grain market even in times of famines.

Keeping the famine relief as cheap as possible, with minimum cost to the colonial exchequer, was another important factor in determining famine policy. Poverty A major characteristic of British rule in India, and the net result of British economic policies, was the prevalence of extreme poverty among its people. While historians disagree on the question whether India was getting poorer or not under British rule, there is no disagreement on the fact that throughout the period of British rule most Indians always lived on the verge of starvation.

As time passed, they found it more and more difficult to find employment or make a living. Different people have different ideas of what poverty means. In his famous study of poverty in York, Seebohm Rowntree (1901) defined families as being in 'primary poverty' if their 'total earnings are insufficient to obtain the minimum necessities for the maintenance of merely physical efficiency'. It is not surprising that biological consideration related to the requirements of survival or work efficiency have been often used in defining the poverty.

Starvation, clearly, is the most telling aspect of poverty. W. Aurther Dowe states that there are four different meanings of poverty, they are: 1. Normal or natural poverty follows laziness or incompetence. It is in individual's concept. 2. Poverty is inflicted on some by crime or misconduct of others as theft, personal injury, property damage, slander or racial discrimination. 3. Poverty as a result of illness, old age or accident 4. Poverty is caused by injustice, oppression, slavery, land conquest, taxation and political corruption. Amartya Sen is an advocate of concept of absolute poverty.

Absolute poverty refers to subsistence below minimum socially acceptable living conditions usually established based on nutritional requirements and other essential goods. Absolute poverty is also referred to primary poverty. Absolute poverty is a state where one cannot raise the income required to meet the expenditure for purchasing specific bundle of basic requirements. According to him poverty is a matter of deprivation. Poverty and inequality relate closely to each other, but they are distinct concepts and neither subsumes the other. What is a famine? Figure 1 Photograph of Famine Victims 1899-1902.

Source: Wikipedia A famine is defined as " A famine is a widespread scarcity of food that may apply to any faunal species. This phenomenon is usually accompanied and preceded by regional malnutrition, starvation, epidemic, and increased mortality. " Famines imply starvation, but not vice versa. And starvation implies poverty, but not vice versa. It is possible for poverty to exist, and be regarded as acute, even when no serious starvation occurs. Starvation, on the other hand, does imply poverty, since the absolute

dispossession that characterizes starvation is more than sufficient to be diagnosed as poverty.

Even though this binary relationship between famine and starvation seems reasonable, this passage seems hardly enough to clarify the notion. Amartya Sen in his book goes on to list certain common characteristics of famines related to declines in food consumption (i. e. the “ time contrast”) and disparities in food consumption between different groups (i. e. the “ group contrast”). This is very helpful indeed, but can only serve as taxonomy because these characteristics need not be true for all famines. A food supply crisis? The most common approach to famines is to propose explanations in terms of food availability decline (FAD).

This FAD approach has been extensively used to analyse and explain the Bengal famine. The Famine Inquiry Commission’s view that the primary cause of the famine was “ a serious shortage in the total supply of rice available for consumption in Bengal” provides the standard explanation of the famine. Droughts are usually the root cause of famines. In turn droughts where there is a scarcity of life giving water for the crops are usually the direct causes of crop failure in India. The failure of the crops in turn leads to a scarcity of food in the affected area. Droughts are themselves usually caused by the failure of monsoons.

The failure of monsoons in turn is due to a periodic natural phenomenon known as ENSO (El Nino Southern Oscillation). ENSO occurs every five to seven years and causes extreme weather such as floods, droughts and other weather disturbances in many regions of the world. So, is the process of

famine in India as simple as sequential steps below? Putting it simply, ENSO is like a natural seesaw which causes the failure of monsoons over India while causing unnatural rainfall over the coast of South America. ENSO causes monsoon failure > Drought > Crops fail > Famine > Millions dead?

Are famines then a natural follow on from the droughts caused by ENSO? Not at all, for the last two steps where there is a food scarcity leading to a famine and consequent deaths are completely avoidable. Even a severe drought can be stopped from developing into a killer famine by Government policies such as: banning export of food grains, rushing adequate food supplies to the famine affected parts and ensuring equitable distribution, reducing the burden of taxation on people and in general making sure that there are enough reserves to tide through the crises. Famines always give advance notice as they are following on from droughts.

With correct policy and timely government intervention it can be ensured that there are no famine related deaths nor the immense human suffering that precedes a famine. In all the famines which took place under the British Raj, there never was a shortage of food in the country overall. In fact during the worst famines, surplus food grains were being exported from India. Nothing illustrates this point better than the graphs below which show that records amount of rice and wheat were being exported out of India, while millions of Indians were dying of starvation. Figure 2 Food Exports during the years 1872-1879.

Source: Famines in Bengal 1770-1943, K. C. Ghosh The famine of 1876-79 was spread out across nearly the whole of southern, western and northern

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India (Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh). The most realistic estimate of deaths is nearly 10 million. Those who survived the starvation of the famine were finished off by outbreaks of cholera. During the famine of 1876-79 rice and wheat exports continued more or less as usual. Close to a million tonnes of rice were exported each year while millions of Indians were dying of starvation. As can be seen from fig. in the peak famine year of 1877-78 a record three lakh tonnes of wheat were exported. The worst affected area by far was South India, particularly the states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra (what used to be Madras Presidency and Bombay Presidency). The British Government did not provide the food for starving people, unless they had done some work in relief camps. Figure 3 Photograph of Famine Victims of 1877, their bodies are skeletonised and are very near to death. Source: Wikipedia Temple went one step further and instituted relief camps which were not very different to Nazi concentration camps.

People already half dead from starvation had to walk hundreds of miles to reach these relief camps (fig 3 above illustrates a typical famine sufferers condition). Lord Lytton who was the Viceroy of India additionally instituted a food ration for starving people working in the camps, which was less than that given to the inmates of Nazi concentration camps. The rations given to prisoners by the Nazis at Buchenwald concentration camp in 1944 had a calorific value of 1627 calories, while the " Temple" ration for famine victims was 1500 calories. Half dead Indians were expected to work nine hours with only 450 grams of rice per day.

Temple's policy was specifically designed to discourage people from using the relief camps and thus lessen the financial burden on the British government. Horrible scenes such as this were enacted throughout the country: " Scores of corpses were tumbled into old wells, because the deaths were too numerous for the miserable relatives to perform the usual funeral rites. Mothers sold their children for a single scanty meal. Husbands flung their wives into ponds, to escape the torment of seeing them perish by the lingering agonies of hunger. Amid these scenes of death the Government of India kept its serenity and cheerfulness unimpaired. The same dismal story is repeated again in the terrible famines of 1896-1902. Rice and wheat exports soared to record levels in the years where the famine was at its peak. The most conservative estimates of Indians who died in these two killer famines are 8.4 million while the more realistic estimate is about 19 million. Figure 4 Food Exports during the years 1892-1901. Source: Famines in Bengal 1770-1943, K. C. Ghosh Famines and epidemics went hand in hand. One of the main killers during famines was the high prices of food grains which made it impossible for a majority of affected Indians to buy food.

This same cause was responsible for the millions of deaths occurring during the epidemics. Exploitative Land Tax The British attitude towards tax and revenue extraction remained virtually unchanged till they left India. Bengal was the first to feel the devastating effects of the British rule after East India Company became virtual rulers of the province post Battle of Plassey in 1757. A devastating famine in 1768 killed off nearly ten million people in Bengal and Bihar. Figure 5 Gross Revenue Collected during the Bengal

Famine of 1768. Source: R C Dutt, The Economic History of India Under Early British Rule.

From the Rise of the British Power in 1757 to the Accession of Queen Victoria in 1837-Vol. I The British tyrants and the Indian traitors who collaborated with them forced farmers to sell seeds required for the next harvest and made immense profits by manipulating the prices of life saving grain. Thus on one hand farmers were deprived of their sole source of future sustenance and on the other hand the high prices of food made it impossible to buy life saving food grains. Farmers were forced to grow cash crops such as cotton, opium, indigo simply to keep paying off the demands of the British.

The Manchester Chamber of Commerce dictated and controlled the growth of cotton in fertile areas such as Berar (Vidarbha in Maharashtra). The entire social system of Vidarbha was destroyed so that the British could put in place their own system known as khatedari which was implemented in 1877. The old landlord families were either destroyed or pauperized and the British government became the supreme owner of the farm lands. Crops such as cotton grew readily in the fertile black soil of Deccan but had the side effect of destroying the fertility of the soil.

In addition the British even turned cow dung which had acted as a natural fertilizer, into a taxable revenue source. The Manchester Chamber of Commerce pushed for the introduction of railways in Vidarbha so that it could have a vast captive cotton growing plantation. The capitalists of Britain wanted a secure source of raw cotton which they could turn to in case of any fluctuations in cotton supply from America. The poor farmers of Vidarbha

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were instantly exposed to the fluctuations in the world markets and had absolutely no share in the massive profits made by the British.

Thus when famine hit the impoverished farmers died in their lakhs. Also increasing indebtedness forced the farmers to sell their plots of land to sahkars (money lenders). This led to the concentration of fertile lands in the hands of a few thousand very rich nonresident landlords. The previously self sufficient farmer was forced to work as a laborer on his own land. Even those farmers who managed to hold on to their land, the acreage under their ownership was for most part between 5-6 acres, which was not sufficient to support the farmer and his family.

Added to this was an influx of artisans, craftsmen etc who had been thrown out of work due to the British murder of Indian industry. They had no option but to work as laborers on bigger farms with virtually no resources to withstand a famine. The grim story of Vidarbha was repeated in Bihar, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu etc. The amount of tax traditionally paid by the farmer under the Maratha Empire (or previously the Mughal regime) was between 16-17% of the gross produce. Again this was flexible depending on the conditions prevailing, i. . if crops had failed the demand by the state would be reduced or in some cases suspended for the time being. What this used to do was to leave farmers with enough reserves to tide them over though difficult times. eg under the Maratha Empire tax collection was flexible and kept in line with the circumstances of the day. But under the British Raj there was no such humanitarian response to the life threatening crises faced by the Indian farmer. The tax itself came to about 33% of gross produce. But this tax was not the end of things.

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On top of this basic tax were different taxes for roads, schools, post offices, dispensary, water tax etc. Taxes were levied on the most flimsy of excuses and the poor farmer had no protection against the brutal force exercised by the British rulers. All these miscellaneous taxes added up to nearly 100% of the farmers real assets. The worst thing was that the British government would confiscate food stocks at the time of revenue collection. The ryots (farmers) had no option but to borrow money at rip off interest rates from money lenders to release their grain stocks.

The way taxes were raised was extremely arbitrary and without any basis in reality. The rise was based on the value of the land, so called "public works" done by the British Raj (which included railways, roads, schools, dispensaries etc). The tax was raised irrespective of the fact whether the farmer was getting better prices for his produce or not. This inevitably led to the situation of the already beggared farmer paying over 100% of his earnings in tax. Also, the arbitrary rise in taxes could not be appealed in the courts in Bombay Presidency. Thus there was not even the illusion of justice.

Quite a few examples are given of the unsustainable level of debt burden carried by Indian farmers in R. C. Dutts "Famine and Land Assessments". To quote one of these, "Murar the Patel, a young man, farms sixty acres, but there has been no produce this year. The farm is mortgaged to the extent of about 3000 rupees. He estimates his last year's produce at 375 rupees, of which he paid 104 rupees to Government. He had to buy four bullocks for 100 rupees, and pay 40 rupees for servants, and was therefore unable to pay anything to the money-lender. The other expenses of cultivation amounted to nearly 60 rupees.

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He kept the rest for himself, his wife, uncle, and two children. He has been served with notice of assessment. He had six bullocks, and has lost four”.

The net effect of this crushing taxation was to strip away any saving capability of the farmers in years when the harvests were good. The following observation by A K Connell illustrates this point well, “ Against this calamity (drought) the cultivator, when unable to get a permanent water-supply from wells, tanks, canals, or rivers has provided from, time immemorial by the storage of grain in air-tight pits or earthen?? ware jars.

If war or taxation, levied in excess, or at times of distress, has depleted these stores, then the worst horrors of famine have swept over the land;” The farmers were permanently in deep debt to money lenders just to keep paying the extortionate tax demands. They had to sell even their reserve food stocks just to stay afloat. This left the farmer with no buffer when famines hit him. With every passing year the farmers sank deeper into desperate poverty and further into the clutches of money lenders.

Every year lakhs of farmers were dispossessed of their small plots of land. In fact in the Bombay and Madras Presidencies the land tax demands kept on increasing every thirty years by an extortionate amount. For example, when the remnants of the Maratha Empire were finally conquered by the British in 1817 CE the revenue from those parts was 80 Lakhs, within a year it went up to 115 lakhs and in a few more years it was 150 lakhs. So between 1817 and 1818 in a span of one year there was a jump of nearly 43% in the actual revenue collected.

The drain of wealth to Britain and a backward agrarian structure leading to the stagnation of agriculture and the exploitation of the poor peasants by the zamindars, landlords, princes, money lenders merchants and the state gradually reduced the Indian people to extreme poverty and prevented them from progressing. India's colonial economy stagnated at a low economic level. The poverty of the people found its culmination in a series of famines which ravaged all parts of India in the second half of the nineteenth century.

“ Breakup of the Total Deaths”:

Name ofFamine	TimeSpan oftheFamine	Areas Affected bythe Famine	MaximumEstimate ofDeaths	MinimumEstimate ofDeaths	Most likelyEstimate ofDeaths
BengalFamine of 1770	1769-1772	Bengal (east and west), Bihar, parts of Orissa and Jharkhand	10 million	-	10 million
MadrasFamine of1782 ; ChalisaFamine	1782-1783, 1783-1784	Chennaiand parts ofKarnatakaUttarPradesh, parts ofRajasthan, Delhi andKashmir	11 million	-	11 million
Doji Bara (Skull Famine)	1791-1792	Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan	11 million	-	11 million
Famine in Bombay Presidency	1802-1803	Maharashtra	High mortality but number of deaths not known	-	High mortality but number of deaths not known
Famine in Rajputana	1803-1804	Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan	Low mortality but number of deaths not known	-	Low mortality but number of deaths not known
Famine in Madras Presidency	1805-1807	Tamil Nadu	High mortalitybut number ofdeaths not known	-	High mortalitybut number ofdeaths not known
Famine in Rajputana	1812-1813	Rajasthan	2 million	1.5 million	2 million
Famine in Bombay Presidencyof	1813-1814	Maharashtra	High mortalitybut number ofdeaths not known	-	High

mortality but number of deaths not known | Famine in Madras Presidency | 1823 | Tamil Nadu | High mortality but number of deaths not known | - | High mortality but number of deaths not known | Guntur Famine / Famine in Madras Presidency | 1833-1834 | Modern day Guntur and related districts of Andhra Pradesh which formed the Northern part of Madras Presidency during British Rule | High mortality but number of deaths not known | 2 lakhs this estimate is only for Guntur | 2 lakhs this estimate is only for Guntur | Agra Famine of 1837-38 | 1837-1838 | Uttar Pradesh, parts of Rajasthan, Delhi, parts of Madhya Pradesh, parts of Haryana | 1 million | 8 lakhs | 1 million | Famine in Madras Presidency | 1854 | Tamil Nadu | High mortality but number of deaths not known | - | High mortality but number of deaths not known | Famine in Northern India | 1860-1861 | Uttar Pradesh, Punjab | 2 million | - | 2 million | Orissa Famine of 1866 | 1865-1868 | Orissa, Parts of coastline of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, parts of Bihar and Bengal | 1.8 million | - | 1.8 million | Rajputana famine of 1869 | 1868-1870 | Rajasthan | 2.7 million | 1.2 million | 2 million | Bihar Famine of 1873-74 | 1873-1874 | Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh | no recorded deaths | - | no recorded deaths | Great Indian Famine of 1876-78 | 1876-1879 | Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh | 10.3 million | 6.1 million | 10.3 million | Famine of 1880 | 1880 | Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh | Famine was severe but number of deaths not known | - | Famine was severe but number of deaths not known | Famine of 1884-1885 | 1884-1885 | Punjab, Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, parts of Karnataka | 7.5 lakhs | - | 7.5 lakhs | Madras Famine of 1888-1889 | 1888-1889 | Orissa, parts of Bihar | 1.5 million | - | 1.5 million | Famine of 1892 | 1891-1892 | Old Madras Presidency, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Bengal, Upper Burma | <https://assignbuster.com/famines-poverty-government-policy-food-supply-in-colonial-india-assignment/>

1. 62 million| -| 1. 2 million| Famine of 1896-1897 ; Famine of 1899-1902 | 1896- 1897 ; 1899- 1902 | Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Maharashtra, Punjab, Gujarat, Rajasthan, parts of Orissa, Sindh, Karnataka| 19 million| 6. 1million| 19 million| Famine of 1907-1908| 1907-1908| Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand| 3. 2 million| 2. 1 million| 3. 2 million| Bengal Famine of 1943| 1942-1944| Bengal| 7 million| 1. 5 million | 7 million| TotalDeaths| -| -| -| -| 85 millionapprox. | Figure 6 Breakup of the Total Deaths. Source: Digby, William, " Prosperous British India" and Dutt, R. C. " Famines and Land Assessments in India". These famines and the high losses of life caused by them indicate the extent to which poverty and starvation had taken root in India. Many English officials in India recognized the grim reality of India's poverty during the nineteenth century.

For example, Charles Elliott, a member of the Governor General's Council, remarked: " I do not hesitate to say that half the agricultural population do not know from one year's end to another what it is to have a full meal" William Hunter, the compiler of the Imperial Gazetteer, conceded that " forty million of the people of India habitually go through life on insufficient food. " The situation became still worse in the twentieth century. The quantity of food available to an Indian declined by as much as 29 per cent in the 30 years between 1911 and 1941. There were many other indications of India's economic backwardness and impoverishment. Colin Clark, a famous authority on national income, has calculated that during the period 1925-34, India and China had the lowest per capita incomes in the world. The income of an Englishman was five times that of an Indian.

Similarly, the average life expectancy of an Indian during the 1930s was only 32 years in spite of the tremendous progress that modern medical sciences and sanitation had made. In most of the West European and North American countries, the average age was already over 60 years. India's economic backwardness and poverty were not due to the niggardliness of nature. They were man-made. The natural resources of India were abundant and capable of yielding, if properly utilized, a high degree of prosperity to the people. But, as a result of foreign rule and exploitation, and of a backward agrarian and industrial economic structure in fact as the total outcome of its historical and social development India presented the paradox of a poor people living in a rich country.

Conclusion The poverty of India was not a product of its geography or of the lack of natural resources or of some 'inherent' defect in the character and capabilities of the people. Nor was it a remnant of the Mughal period or of the pre-British past. It was mainly a product of the history of the last two centuries. Before that, India was no more backward than the countries of Western Europe. Nor were the differences in standards of living at the time very wide among the countries of the world. Precisely during the period that the countries of the West developed and prospered, India was subjected to modern colonialism and was prevented from developing.

All the developed countries today developed almost entirely over the period during which India was ruled by Britain, most of them doing so after 1850.

Till 1750 the differences in living standards were not wide between the different parts of the world. It is interesting, in this connection, to note that

the dates of the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution in Britain and the <https://assignbuster.com/famines-poverty-government-policy-food-supply-in-colonial-india-assignment/>

British conquest of Bengal virtually coincide. The basic fact is that the same social, political and economic processes that produced industrial development and social and cultural progress in Britain also produced and then maintained economic underdevelopment and social and cultural backwardness in India.

The reason for this is obvious. Britain subordinated the Indian economy to its own economy and determined the basic social trends in India according to her own needs. The result was stagnation of India's agriculture and industries, exploitation of its peasants and workers by the zamindars, landlords, princes, moneylenders, merchants, capitalists and the foreign government and its officials, and the spread of poverty, famines, disease and semi-starvation. References 1. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Famine> 2. A. Sen: "Poverty and Famines" 3. S. G. Bhanushali: "Poverty- scenario in Indian Subcontinent" 4. K. C. Ghosh: "Famine in Bengal 1770-1943" 5.

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