

What factor was ultimately more responsible for the deaths in the late 19th centu...

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What Factor Was Ultimately More Responsible For The Deaths In The Late 19th Century Famines-El Nino or Human Choices That late 19th century famines resulted from causal factors related to El Ninos and human choices is beyond question; to be sure, both contributed to deaths and other forms of loss. The more difficult question is an identification of the primary or the predominant cause. This essay will argue that human choices clearly exacerbated the losses, aggravated them as noted by Linden, and that El Ninos alone could never have caused such serious losses without poor and misguided human responses and policies. The human choices which so seriously aggravated these losses were inspired by a dogmatic adherence to popular notions related to free-market economics, to institutionalized tendencies towards corruption, and to an imperial arrogance which preempted more rationale responses to the El Ninos.

As an initial matter, though crop yields were down and though there was an agricultural depression caused by the failure of the monsoons, the British pursued an ideology which exacerbated the losses. As stated by Linden, the imperial British were deeply motivated by notions of Liberal Capitalism and Social Darwinism which inspired them to adopt what they deemed a more scientific response than a more humanistic response (2006: 195). In the Indian famine of 1877-1878, for example, the British continued to encourage grain exports to England, they made it illegal to make donations which might interfere with the setting of free market prices, and they instituted the Temple wage which guaranteed inadequate calories despite availability. As noted by Davis, the problems flowed not so much from the lack of food production as from food availability. This is the central consideration; after

all, El Ninos affected food production whereas human choices and policies affected the subsequent food availability. It is, therefore, given the evidence provided, quite fair to argue that human choices both exacerbated the losses and were, in many ways, more responsible for the total losses suffered.

In addition, there were imperial tendencies towards corruption which contributed greatly to the losses. Where grain was available, for instance, there is evidence that British administrators ordered market reallocations in order to fetch the highest possible prices for the grain. In effect, grain was being diverted in times of famine in order to enrich speculators. In addition, there was a famine fund and a famine fund created in order to moderate the effects of El Ninos; however, in the 1899-1900 famines it was established that the British diverted large portions of the famine funds for a war in Afghanistan. In short, both available grain and available funds for diverted for interests unrelated to famine relief. Human choices again aggravated and caused losses.

Finally, as Davis' work was summarized by Linden, there was an imperial arrogance which both caused and aggravated the suffering. Indeed, Davis is recorded as quoting a prominent British official, Sir John Strachey, as dismissing the losses with "hope and encouragement" because the losses involved only the weakest and the poorest of the populations involved (2006: 198). The British demanded exports, they deemed the suffering to be deserving of their fate, and they enriched themselves without regret.

In the final analysis, as noted by Davis, the El Ninos affected food production whereas human choices affected food availability. Food availability, in turn, was negatively affected by ideology, corruption, and imperial arrogance. The

main causes of such severe suffering were human rather than natural.

Works Cited

Linden E. (2006). *The Winds of Change*. Simon and Schuster: New York, pp. 190-206.