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From Scarcity to Catastrophe: Famines, Colonial Policy, and the Political Economy of Hunger in India (1858–1947)

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Abstract

This paper examines the nature of famine in colonial India under Crown rule (1858–1947) with the central objective of understanding it as a structural and historically conditioned phenomenon rather than a series of isolated crises. It seeks to analyse how economic policies, administrative priorities, and market mechanisms shaped patterns of vulnerability and access to food. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Amartya Sen and B. M. Bhatia, the study emphasizes the role of entitlement, price movements, and state intervention in determining outcomes. The paper further aims to evaluate the evolution of colonial policy responses and their limitations, situating them within broader historiographical debates on the impact of British rule. By doing so, it highlights how famine serves as a critical lens to understand the political economy of colonial governance and its long-term implications for food security in India.

Keywords: Scarcity, Catastrophe, Famine, Political Economy, Entitlement, State Intervention, Price Movements.

Introduction:

A famine represents one of the most devastating crises a society can experience—it brings not only death but also profound social breakdown, exposing the fragility of economic and political systems. Unlike war, it offers no space for heroism; instead, it reveals the silent violence embedded within structures of inequality and governance. Far from being merely natural calamities, famines challenge the assumption that societies function on stable and "normal" processes. While largely absent in the developed

world today, their persistence in other regions underscores deep structural imbalances (Sharma 2).

Modern scholarship increasingly understands famine not as a singular event but as a process rooted in economic, social, and political marginalization (Mathews 1). In this context, Amartya Sen conceptualizes famine as an extreme manifestation of starvation caused by the collapse of entitlements (Sen 40), while B. M. Bhatia emphasizes the decisive role of rising food prices that render subsistence inaccessible to the poor, even when food remains available in markets (Bhatia 1-40). These perspectives shift the focus from food availability to issues of access, distribution, and power.

In the Indian subcontinent, famines have historically been linked to ecological vulnerabilities such as monsoon dependence and limited irrigation. However, evidence suggests a marked increase in their frequency and intensity during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Sarkar 151-152). Statistical observations, including those of William Digby, indicate a significant clustering of famines under colonial rule, particularly in the latter half of the nineteenth century. This pattern has generated a long-standing historiographical debate. Nationalist thinkers argued that colonial policies exacerbated famine conditions, whereas colonial administrators attributed their apparent severity to improved documentation and record-keeping. Such claims were embedded within broader colonial assertions that denied India a coherent historical tradition, portraying pre-colonial experiences as fragmented and unrecorded. Yet this dismissal obscures the structural transformations introduced under colonial rule, including market integration, revenue demands, and adherence to laissez-faire principles. The debate over famine, therefore, is not merely about frequency or intensity, but about the nature of colonial governance and its socio-economic consequences (Bhatia).

Against this backdrop, the present paper focuses on famines under Crown administration (1858–1947). Its central objective is to examine famine as a structural phenomenon shaped by the political economy of colonial rule, rather than as a series of isolated environmental disasters. By analysing policy responses, administrative frameworks, and underlying economic conditions, the study seeks to demonstrate how colonial priorities and constraints contributed to patterns of vulnerability and deprivation. In doing so, it positions famine as a critical lens through which the limits and contradictions of colonial governance in India can be understood.

Famines under the Crown Administration (1858–1947): Changing Context; Economy, Governance, and Responsibility

The transfer of power from the East India Company to the British Crown in 1858 marked an important shift in the administrative and economic context of famines in India. The latter half of the nineteenth century witnessed significant developments such as the expansion of railways, improved communication networks, and the growth of overseas trade. These changes altered the structural framework within which famines occurred. At least in theory, the colonial state began to recognize its responsibility in mitigating distress through irrigation expansion, agrarian legislation, and the formulation of famine relief policies. However, this emerging sense of responsibility remained constrained by fiscal conservatism and adherence to laissez-faire principles. As a result, state intervention was often hesitant, uneven, and shaped more by administrative priorities than humanitarian concerns (Chandra).

Early Famines and Administrative Inadequacies (1860–1878)

The first major famine under Crown rule (1860–61), affecting the region between Delhi and Agra, marked an initial attempt by the state to intervene through relief measures such as poor-houses and official inquiries. Yet, despite the appointment of officials like Colonel Baird Smith, no coherent policy framework emerged (Grover and Mehta 355-358).

The Orissa Famine:

The famine of 1866, preceded by the drought of 1865, affected large parts of eastern and southern India, including Orissa, Madras, Northern Bengal, and Bihar. The crisis was most severe in Orissa, from which it derives its name. Despite prior warnings, colonial authorities failed to take timely preventive measures. Instead, the administration adhered rigidly to the principles of free trade and the law of demand and supply, reflecting its broader commitment to laissez-faire ideology. Relief efforts were limited: while some employment was provided to the able-bodied, the responsibility for aiding the destitute was largely left to voluntary agencies, which proved grossly inadequate. As a result, the famine caused catastrophic mortality, with an estimated 1.3 million deaths in Orissa alone (Grover and Mehta 355-358). The Orissa famine

marked a decisive turning point in the history of famine policy in India. In its aftermath, a committee under the chairmanship of Sir George Campbell was appointed to investigate the causes and recommend remedial measures. Its findings anticipated, in several respects, the later recommendations of the Strachey Commission. Significantly, the long-held belief that relief of the destitute was primarily a social or charitable responsibility was abandoned, giving way to the recognition of a more direct role for the state. The government was now expected to mobilize financial resources, including borrowing, when necessary, to invest in infrastructure such as railways and canals. At the administrative level, district officials were made explicitly responsible for preventing avoidable loss of life, marking an important shift toward greater accountability within the colonial governance framework. Yet, subsequent experience revealed that this shift remained incomplete. The famine of 1868, which affected northern and central India—particularly Rajputana and adjoining regions—again exposed the inadequacy of relief measures. Although the government undertook some efforts to mitigate distress, they fell far short of the scale required, leading to significant loss of life. Together, these episodes underscored the gap between emerging policy recognition and its effective implementation on the ground (Dutt 9-11).

Bihar Famine:

The famine of 1874 in Bihar stands out as a notable exception in the history of colonial famine management. Under the viceroyalty of Lord Northbrook, the administration adopted prompt and extensive relief measures that effectively prevented large-scale loss of life. Approximately 735,000 people were engaged in relief works over a period of nine months, while an additional 450,000 individuals received gratuitous assistance for six months. The scale, timeliness, and organization of these efforts ensured that the crisis was contained, and subsequent inquiries confirmed that the famine did not result in significant mortality. This episode demonstrated that proactive state intervention could successfully mitigate the human impact of famine (Bandyopadhyay 66-122).

The Great Famine of 1876–78:

The famine of 1876–78 stands as one of the most severe humanitarian crises of nineteenth-century India. It affected vast regions, including Madras, Bombay, the North-Western Provinces, and the Punjab, covering an estimated 257,000 square miles and impacting a population of over 58 million.

The consequences were devastating: entire villages were depopulated, and extensive tracts of cultivated land were abandoned. According to R. C. Dutt, nearly five million people perished within a single year, underscoring the catastrophic scale of the disaster. The crisis exposed the deep inadequacies of the colonial famine administration. Relief mechanisms proved insufficient and poorly coordinated, while official policy was shaped by a reluctance to accept full responsibility for safeguarding human life. As contemporary critiques noted, the government's approach was constrained by concerns over expenditure and fears of encouraging dependency, reflecting a broader prioritization of fiscal discipline over humanitarian necessity (Lardinois). The failure of policy during this period revealed the limitations of a system guided by laissez-faire principles in the face of large-scale distress. The famine of 1878 in North India further illustrated these shortcomings. Although relief works employed an average of 557,000 individuals daily over a year, they were administered primarily through the Public Works Department, with minimal involvement of local civil authorities. This lack of coordination and responsiveness led to ineffective relief distribution. Consequently, the famine resulted in an estimated excess mortality of 1.25 million, reinforcing the persistent gap between relief policy and its practical implementation on the ground (William).

Institutionalization of Famine Policy: Commissions and Codes

The Strachey Commission (1880):

In response to the recurring crises of the late nineteenth century, the colonial state sought to systematize its approach to famine relief through the appointment of the Strachey Commission under the presidency of Sir Richard Strachey in 1880. The Commission was tasked with formulating general principles and recommending preventive as well as protective measures, marking a significant step toward the institutionalization of famine policy in India. The Commission laid down a comprehensive framework for relief. It emphasized the importance of early intervention, recommending that employment on relief works be provided before the physical condition of the affected population deteriorated, with wages calibrated to ensure subsistence. It also recognized the responsibility of the state to provide gratuitous relief to the most vulnerable, including the infirm and destitute, through organized

systems of distribution such as relief camps and poor-houses. At the same time, the Commission reflected the prevailing faith in market mechanisms by advocating minimal interference in grain trade, except in extreme circumstances. Additional measures included the suspension or remission of land revenue, allocation of relief responsibilities primarily to provincial governments with central support when necessary, and provisions for the protection of cattle during periods of drought. While these recommendations signalled a more structured and interventionist approach, they remained shaped by the limits of colonial political economy, particularly the continued reliance on private trade and fiscal caution. Nevertheless, the acceptance of these principles led to important administrative developments, most notably the formulation of the Famine Codes in 1883. These codes provided a standardized framework for action: outlining preventive measures in normal times, defining procedures during impending scarcity, and detailing responsibilities during active famine conditions. The classification of affected areas into "scarcity" or "famine" zones further enabled a more organized response. The implementation of these codes during the droughts of 1883–1896 allowed for their gradual refinement. Although they represented a significant advance in administrative preparedness, their effectiveness ultimately depended on local execution and the broader constraints of colonial governance (Indian Famine Commission 1880).

Madras Famine (1889) and Vulnerability of Famine Policy

The transition from Lord Lytton to Lord Ripon marked an important moment in attempts to address agrarian distress in colonial India. Recognizing the vulnerability of cultivators in the Madras Presidency, Ripon sought to introduce a more equitable settlement system. In his despatch of 17 October 1882, he proposed that in districts already surveyed and settled, land revenue assessments should not be periodically revised except on the basis of rising prices (Bandyopadhyay). This measure aimed to provide cultivators with a degree of stability and predictability, reducing the burdens of frequent reassessment, reclassification of soils, and recalculation of agricultural output. The proposal represented a moderate but significant attempt to balance state revenue interests with peasant welfare. However, its rejection by the Secretary of State in 1885 exposed the limits of reform within the colonial

framework. The decision denied cultivators both the earlier promise of perpetual assessment and the new possibility of secure tenancy. As R. C. Dutt observed, this episode reflected a broader pattern in colonial governance, where "the interests of land revenue were placed higher than the well-being of the people" (Dutt 1902). The failure to implement such reforms contributed to the continued economic vulnerability of cultivators, leaving them exposed to recurring crises.

This structural fragility was evident during the Madras famine of 1889, particularly in the Ganjam district. Although relief works were initiated, the provision of gratuitous aid to the most vulnerable was delayed, with severe consequences. When Lord Connemara visited the region in June 1889, he reported widespread distress and emphasized the urgency of immediate intervention to prevent further loss of life. Relief efforts expanded in subsequent months, with large numbers of people employed in public works and others receiving food assistance. However, the delay in responding effectively had already taken a heavy toll. Mortality in Ganjam during the famine year remained exceptionally high, while in parts of Orissa, though relief numbers were smaller, deaths from famine-related diseases such as cholera and other illnesses were widespread (Arnold).

Late Nineteenth-Century Famines: Expansion of Relief and Limits of Colonial Administration (1896–1900)

The famine of 1896–97 was one of the most widespread and intense crises to affect colonial India, extending across Northern India, Bengal, Burma, Madras, and Bombay. Affecting an estimated population of nearly 34 million, it represented a moment when famine assumed an almost subcontinental scale, though with varying degrees of severity across regions (Gleason 281-297). In contrast to earlier famines, relief operations were undertaken on a much larger scale, reflecting the growing administrative apparatus developed after the Famine Codes. Extensive relief works were organized, and in many regions, assistance was also provided directly within villages. The total expenditure on relief was estimated at approximately Rs. 7.27 crores, indicating a significant financial commitment by the state. At the peak of distress, around three million people were receiving relief simultaneously across different provinces (Holderness). However, the effectiveness of

these measures varied considerably. In regions such as the North-Western Provinces and Oudh, Bengal, Bombay, and Punjab, relief operations were generally regarded as successful, demonstrating the potential of coordinated administrative intervention. Yet, this success was uneven. In the Central Provinces, administrative failure proved costly, as local authorities failed to adequately respond to the crisis, leading to a sharp rise in mortality. As noted by R. C. Dutt, the death rate in affected districts increased dramatically, highlighting the persistent gap between policy design and its implementation at the local level. Even where relief was considered adequate, there remained noticeable increases in mortality, underscoring the limits of the existing framework (Dutt 1902).

These limitations became even more evident during the famine of 1899–1900, which affected an area of approximately 189,000 square miles and a population of around 28 million. Despite prior experience and established codes, the response was marked by delays and administrative hesitation. In several instances, authorities were slow to initiate relief works, and when they were finally opened, the overwhelming influx of distressed populations led to a breakdown of the system (Bhatia 96-97). Although relief expenditure rose to nearly Rs. 10 crores, the scale of suffering remained immense. Reflecting on this catastrophe, R. C. Dutt observed that it was "the most widespread and the severest famine" of the century (Dutt 1902). The recurrence of such large-scale crises, despite institutional reforms, revealed the structural weaknesses of colonial famine policy—where expanded relief mechanisms coexisted with administrative failures and deeper economic vulnerabilities.

Reform and Refinement: The MacDonnell Commission and the Evolution of Famine Policy (1901)

In the wake of the devastating famines of the late nineteenth century, the colonial state undertook further efforts to refine its famine policy through the appointment of the MacDonnell Commission by Lord Curzon. Chaired by Sir Anthony MacDonnell, the Commission submitted its report in 1901, consolidating earlier principles of famine relief while proposing important modifications based on recent experience. The Commission emphasized a more proactive and preventive approach, advocating what it termed a policy of "moral strategy," which prioritized early intervention to reduce distress before it reached critical levels. It recommended the timely distribution of

advances to cultivators for the purchase of seeds and cattle, as well as the sinking of temporary wells to mitigate the effects of drought. Recognizing the limitations of earlier relief models, it also suggested administrative innovations such as the appointment of a dedicated Famine Commissioner in provinces facing large-scale crises (MacDonnell, et.al).

A notable shift in emphasis was the preference for localized, village-based relief works over large-scale public works, which had previously dominated famine relief strategies. The Commission further stressed the importance of mobilizing non-official assistance, improving transport networks, expanding irrigation facilities, and establishing agricultural credit institutions such as banks. These measures aimed not only at immediate relief but also at strengthening the long-term resilience of rural society. Most of the Commission's recommendations were accepted, and steps were taken under Curzon's administration to implement them. While these reforms marked a significant advancement in the evolution of famine policy, their effectiveness continued to depend on the consistency of execution and the broader constraints of colonial governance.

The Bengal Famine of 1943: Crisis of Policy and Governance

The Bengal Famine of 1943 stands as one of the most devastating humanitarian crises in modern Indian history, resulting in an immense loss of life and exposing the structural weaknesses of late colonial governance. Although rooted partly in a series of crop failures since the late 1930s, the famine unfolded within the wider context of the Second World War, which disrupted supply lines, intensified market pressures, and reshaped administrative priorities (Famine Inquiry Commission 1945a). In this sense, the famine was not merely a natural disaster but, to a significant extent, a man-made catastrophe arising from the interaction of environmental stress and policy failure. Official estimates by the Famine Inquiry Commission placed the death toll at approximately 1.5 million, though contemporary observers such as W. R. Aykroyd suggested that this figure was likely an underestimation, with more realistic estimates approaching three million. The scale of mortality reflected not only starvation but also the spread of epidemic diseases in a population already weakened by prolonged deprivation.

Bengal's agrarian economy depended heavily on its winter (*aman*) crop, which constituted the bulk of annual production. In 1942, this crop suffered significant decline due to a cyclone, flooding, and subsequent fungal disease, while the disruption of rice imports following the Japanese occupation of Burma further strained supply. These developments have often been interpreted through the lens of the Food Availability Decline (FAD) approach, which attributes famine primarily to a reduction in total food supply. It looked Bengal famine shaped by a combination of crop failures, wartime disruptions, and the loss of rice imports following the Japanese occupation of Burma. However, such an explanation remains incomplete. As argued by Amartya Sen, the crisis cannot be explained solely in terms of food shortage. Sharp increases in prices and the collapse of purchasing power rendered food inaccessible to large sections of the population. The famine thus reflected a failure of entitlements (your ability to access or obtain food and other necessities, not just whether food exists) rather than mere decline in availability (Arnold 1991).

The overall response of the colonial state was marked by delay, denial, and insufficient intervention. The reluctance to officially declare famine, coupled with wartime propaganda emphasizing "no shortage," hindered timely action. Financial constraints further restricted relief efforts, while the central government placed primary responsibility on the provincial administration. This combination of administrative failure and policy inertia contributed significantly to the scale of the catastrophe. The Bengal famine thus reveals the culmination of long-standing structural weaknesses in colonial famine policy. It demonstrates that famine in late colonial India was not simply the result of natural forces, but a product of economic dislocation, market failure, and the inability—or unwillingness—of the state to ensure access to food for its most vulnerable populations.

To Conclude

The experience of famines under Crown rule reveals a consistent pattern: while the colonial state gradually developed administrative mechanisms for relief, its response remained constrained by ideological commitment to laissez-faire economics, fiscal prudence, and imperial priorities. Famines were not simply natural disasters but outcomes of structural inequalities and policy choices. Thus, the transition "from scarcity to catastrophe" was not

inevitable—it was shaped by the political economy of colonial rule. The study of these famines, therefore, provides critical insight into the limits of colonial governance and the deeper roots of food insecurity in India.

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