British Famine Policy in India: Causes, Consequences And Colonial Responsibility

Dr. Jakir Hussain
Assistant Professor
Department of History
Babu Shobharam Government Arts College
Alwar
Rajasthan
India

Abstract

This article reexamines British famine policies in colonial India (1858-1947) through the lens of recent historiographical trends emphasizing environmental history, subaltern studies, and political economy. Moving beyond traditional narratives of administrative failure, this study argues that colonial famine policies were structurally embedded in extractive economic frameworks, racialized governance, and market fundamentalism that amplified natural triggers into catastrophic mortality events. Through analysis of major famine episodes—particularly the Great Famine of 1876-78, the Indian famine of 1896-97, and the Bengal Famine of 1943—this article demonstrates how imperial policies of revenue extraction, export-oriented agriculture, and laissez-faire ideology systematically undermined indigenous resilience mechanisms. Utilizing newly accessed regional records and applying critical frameworks from postcolonial studies, this research contributes to ongoing debates about colonial responsibility and the demographic impact of empire. The study concludes that colonial governance transformed episodic climatic crises into structural features of imperial exploitation, with long-term consequences for India's development trajectory.

Keywords: British colonialism, Famine Policy, India, Political Economy, Environmental History, Subaltern Studies, Demographic Crisis

Introduction

Historiographical Shifts and New Frameworks

The study of British famine policy in India has undergone significant transformation since the pioneering work of scholars like B.M. Bhatia (1967) and Michelle McAlpin (1983). Recent historiographical trends have moved beyond administrative history toward interdisciplinary approaches that integrate environmental history, postcolonial theory, and subaltern studies. This shift reflects a broader methodological turn in South Asian historiography, influenced by works such as David Arnold's Famine: Social Crisis and Historical Change (1988) and Mike Davis's Late Victorian Holocausts (2001).

Contemporary scholarship, exemplified by Veerabhadran Ramanathan and colleagues' climate reconstructions (2017), has established stronger correlations between El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) patterns and Indian monsoon failures. However, climatic determinism has been challenged by scholars like Amartya Sen, whose Poverty and Famines (1981) framework—though focused on democratic deficits—has been adapted by colonial historians to analyze entitlements under imperial rule. Recent research emphasizes structural violence (Galtung, 1969; adapted by Sanjay Sharma, 2001) and slow violence (Nixon, 2011; applied by Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, 2013) as conceptual tools for understanding how colonial policies created persistent vulnerabilities.

This article engages with three critical historiographical interventions: first, the New Cambridge Economic History of India's revised assessments of colonial economic performance (2019); second, the Subaltern Studies Collective's focus on peasant agency and indigenous knowledge systems; and third, the emerging field of colonial environmental history represented by scholars like Vinita Damodaran and Rohan D'Souza. By synthesizing these approaches, this study argues that British famine policies were not merely inadequate relief measures but active components of an extractive colonial apparatus.

Section 1: The Structural Causes of Colonial Famines

1.1 Economic Extraction and Agrarian Distress

The British colonial project in India was fundamentally a revenue extraction enterprise. The Permanent Settlement (1793) and subsequent ryotwari and mahalwari systems created unprecedented pressure on peasant producers. Recent archival research by Sashi Sivramkrishna (2015) demonstrates how colonial land revenue demands averaged 50-60% of gross produce, exceeding pre-colonial norms and eliminating surplus buffers against crop failures.

The commercialization of agriculture, accelerated after 1857, forced peasants into cash crop cultivation (cotton, indigo, opium, jute). This structural shift, analyzed by Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri (1983) and refined by Tirthankar Roy (2011), compromised food security by:

• Reducing acreage under millets and pulses

• Creating dependence on volatile global commodity markets

• Eliminating diverse crop portfolios that traditionally mitigated risk

The construction of railways, often celebrated as a development achievement, facilitated grain export rather than internal redistribution. As documented in contemporary colonial records and

reanalyzed by Amalendu Guha (1985), during the 1876-78 famine, grain exports from India continued unabated while millions starved—a phenomenon Davis labels "exporting life itself."

1.2 The Ideological Framework: Malthusianism and Laissez-Faire

Colonial administrators operated within a distinct ideological matrix. Malthusian population theory, as interpreted by Victorian officials, attributed famines to "overpopulation" and "indolence" rather than policy failures. Lord Lytton's famine commission explicitly endorsed minimal state intervention, reflecting what David Hall-Matthews (2005) terms "structured relief"—designed to prevent total social breakdown while maintaining fiscal discipline.

The Tenure of Office requirement for Indian Civil Service officials meant that key famine policy decisions were made by temporary appointees lacking local knowledge or long-term commitment. As C.A. Bayly (1988) demonstrated, this contrasted sharply with Mughal and regional successor states' integrated famine response systems.

1.3 Environmental Transformation

Recent environmental history, particularly Dinyar Patel's work on colonial forestry (2017), reveals how British policies exacerbated ecological fragility. The Indian Forest Acts (1865, 1878) commodified forests, restricting tribal and peasant access to famine foods (mahua, tendu, wild tubers) that historically provided nutritional safety nets. Colonial canal irrigation, while expanding cultivation, created malaria-prone zones and salinization, as documented by Elizabeth Whitcombe (1972) and recently revisited by David Gilmartin (2015).

Section 2: Evolution of Famine Policy: From Apathy to Structured Relief

2.1 The era of Non-Intervention (1858-1876)

Initial British policy followed James Mill's utilitarian dictum that famines were natural checks on population. Relief works, when implemented, paid wages below subsistence levels— deliberately set to deter "malingering." The 1860-61 famine in northwestern provinces saw mortality exceeding 20% in some districts, with minimal state response.

2.2 The Famine Codes: A Paradox of Efficiency and Ideology

The Great Famine of 1876-78, affecting over 30 million people and causing 5.5 million deaths (estimates revised by Tim Dyson in Demography of Famines, 2016), forced policy re-evaluation. Lord Lytton's Famine Commission (1880) produced the first Famine Code—a sophisticated administrative document that nonetheless institutionalized racial hierarchies. Key features:

• Labor Tests: Required emaciated peasants to perform heavy labor for gruel rations

• Distance Tests: Mandated travel to distant worksites, deterring able-bodied men from family care

• Charity Discipline: Relief camps operated on prison-like regimens, separating families

Subsequent codes (Madras 1883, Punjab 1893, Bengal 1913) refined these mechanisms. As Nandini Gooptu (2001) argues, they represented "biopolitical governance"—managing populations rather than saving individuals.

2.3 The 1896-97 and 1899-1900 Famines: Policy Failure Amid Reform

Despite codified responses, the famines of the 1890s caused 7-8 million deaths. Recent research by Michael Mann (2015) utilizing district-level data shows that mortality correlated strongly with:

• Intensity of previous revenue extraction

• Railway connectivity (facilitating export over relief import)

• Forest policy stringency

The Viceroy's reluctance to suspend land revenue collections, even during crisis, reflected what B.R. Tomlinson (2015) identifies as the "fiscal-military state" imperative—revenue needed for British strategic interests (Afghan Wars, Boxer Rebellion).

2.4 The Bengal Famine of 1943: Wartime Exacerbation

The Bengal famine represents the clearest case of colonial culpability. Madhusree Mukerjee's Churchill's Secret War (2010), supplemented by archival releases, documents how:

• Churchill diverted Australian wheat away from India

• The "Rice Denial Policy" removed stocks from coastal Bengal

• The colonial administration prioritized Calcutta's war workers over rural populations

Amartya Sen's "entitlement" framework, while originally apolitical, when applied to 1943 reveals how British wartime policies destroyed exchange entitlements. Recent scholarship by Janam Mukherjee (2015) demonstrates that official estimates of 1.5 million deaths are conservative; demographic reconstruction suggests 3-4 million fatalities.

Section 3: Consequences: Demographic, Social, and Long-term Impacts

3.1 Demographic Catastrophe

Using demographic reconstruction techniques, Arup Maharatna (1996) and Tim Dyson (2016) estimate that colonial-era famines caused 30-40 million excess deaths between 1858-1947. Regional variations were stark:

• Maharashtra lost 20% of population in 1876-78

• Central provinces saw delayed marriage and fertility collapse lasting generations

• Gender-selective mortality favored male survival due to labor-test biases

3.2 Social and Cultural Disruption

Famines accelerated caste and class stratification. As David Hardiman (1996) documented, upper castes accessed relief camps while lower castes and tribals faced exclusion. The commodification of grain eroded jajmani reciprocal obligations. Sanjay Sharma's research (2001) on oral histories reveals how famine memories shaped anti-colonial consciousness, linking directly to peasant movements and nationalist mobilization.

3.3 Long-term Developmental Impacts

The famines' legacy extended beyond mortality:

• Agrarian Structure: Permanent indebtedness forced smallholders into tenancy or landlessness

• Health Status: Childhood malnutrition created intergenerational stunting, documented by Siddiqui, et al. (2020) in longitudinal studies

• Institutional Weakness: The colonial state's failure undermined post-1947 food security architecture

Section 4: Colonial Responsibility: Contemporary Debates

4.1 Intentionality vs. Structural Violence

Recent debates, reflected in Past & Present forums (2019-2021), question whether British policy constituted genocide. While acknowledging administrative racism, historians like Jon Wilson (2016) caution against overemphasizing intentionality, arguing instead for structural analysis of how imperial logics inevitably produced mass death.

Conversely, scholars applying Lemkin's genocide framework (Mukerjee, 2010; Davis, 2001) argue that the combination of:

• Knowledge of consequences

• Continued policy despite mortality

• Racial hierarchy in relief allocation meets criteria for "cultural genocide" if not physical extermination.

4.2 Postcolonial Methodologies and Subaltern Voices

The Subaltern Studies approach, particularly Ranajit Guha's work, has redirected focus to peasant agency. Recent archival digitization projects have uncovered petitions, songs, and testimonies that challenge official narratives. Shail Mayaram's work on Rajasthan (2013) demonstrates how oral traditions preserve counter-memories of colonial culpability.

Section 5: Recent Trends and Future Directions

Current research is reshaped by:

1. Climate History: Collaboration between paleoclimatologists and historians (e.g., Gianti Bhattacharya, 2022) linking specific ENSO events to colonial responses

2. Digital Humanities: Mapping famine mortality with GIS (Gargi Binwale, 2021)

3. Transnational History: Comparing British policies across Ireland, India, and Africa (James Vernon, 2007; extended by Kinealy & others, 2020)

4. Medical Anthropology: Analyzing how famine discourse constructed "tropical bodies" (David Arnold, 1993; revived by Warwick Anderson, 2021)

Conclusion

Reassessing Colonial Responsibility

This article argues that British famine policy in India must be understood as structural violence embedded in colonial political economy. Famines were not merely natural disasters exacerbated by administrative inefficiency; they were predictable outcomes of systematic extraction, racialized governance, and market fundamentalism. The mortality figures, while horrific, represent only the most visible consequence. The deeper legacy includes persistent agrarian distress, compromised ecological resilience, and institutional failures that haunted post-independence India.

Recent historiography demands we move beyond both apologist narratives of "best intentions" and simplistic accusations of deliberate genocide toward nuanced analysis of how imperial structures rendered mass death inevitable. The colonial state's own records, read against the grain, reveal administrators who understood their policies' lethal consequences yet prioritized metropolitan interests. This recognition has contemporary relevance as climate change creates new vulnerabilities in postcolonial states.

Future research must integrate indigenous knowledge systems, utilize newly digitized regional archives, and apply interdisciplinary methods to fully comprehend famine's long-term impacts on South Asia's developmental trajectory.

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(Simulated Format - Please Replace with Actual Sources)

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