UNIT 11 FAMINES AND EPIDEMICS*

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1 1.1 INTRODUCTION

The history of disease, epidemics, famine and scarcity has been linked to natural and human causation. There are very few countries in the world which may actually claim to have escaped the vagaries of nature or the trail of misery left behind by famines and epidemics. The political economy also plays a crucial role in determining the response in such a situation. This Unit will look at the intertwined nature of famines and epidemics, explore the idea whether famines were caused by dearth of resources or was it a matter of uneven or skewed distribution of the same. Failure of rains and consequently of crops was not a new phenomenon and occurred in India in the ancient period as well. There are hymnal references found in *Rig Veda* to invoke rain in order to prevent drought from damaging the crops and produce. In medieval times, the rulers made several provisions for the affected subjects to deal with the effects of the famine. So the question arises whether the policies formulated during the colonial period differed in any fundamental way from the interventions made by the erstwhile rulers? The role played by the British imperial state in preventing, salvaging or at times perpetuating the situation will be the subject matter of this Unit.

After reading the Unit, you will be able to understand the co-relation between colonial political economy and famine; know about the role of the state in perpetuating or preventing famines; learn about famine commission, reports, codes and relief measures; and understand the link between famine and epidemics.

11.2 FAMINES

The word ‘famine’ is derived from the Latin word ‘fames which implied hunger or a condition of ‘extreme general scarcity of food’ resulting in excess mortality from starvation or hunger induced illness. The etymology and meaning of words signifying famine vary by language. In Italian the word for famine, *carestia*, is derived from *caritas*, and signifies dearness. This alludes to the intensity of a famine. If the price of basic foodstuffs increases for a prolonged period, then it’s a serious famine. In German, *hungersnot* connotes hunger associated with a general scarcity of food. The most common terms for famine in the Irish language are *gorta* (starvation) referring to the infamous 1840s *drochshaol* (the bad times). In pharaonic Egypt, the standard word for famine (*hkr*) was derived from “being hungry” (Srivastava, 2014: 1; Grada, 2009: 4-5).

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11.2.1 Famines: Causation and Culpability

According to Morris D Morris, there is no one way to ‘formulate a definition that would be adequate for all policy purposes’. Famines are also associated with droughts but it is neither a direct nor an inevitable consequence of drought even though these words are synonymously used in administrative practice (Morris, 1974:1855). Sanjay Sharma affirms that in the earlier accounts of colonial state in India terms like ‘drought’, ‘scarcity’, ‘distress’, ‘dearth’ and ‘famine’ were used interchangeably but over a period of time ‘their meanings became more specific and the state evolved a set of criteria’ to ‘comprehend and classify a situation as a ‘scarcity’ or a ‘famine’ (Sharma, 2001: 6). The causation of famine may be attributed to natural phenomena like acute shortage of rainfall, attack by pests, etc. or political and economic factors like wars, economic depression and government policies resulting in heavy taxation, financial crisis etc.

The famines occurred at frequent intervals in the Indian subcontinent but the policies implemented to deal with it differed under each political regime. Many texts belonging to ancient period including Vedas and Jatakas allude to famines occurring during those times. A severe famine was reported in Bihar in 298 BCE under the reign of Chandra Gupta Maurya which lasted for 12 years and Kalhan’s Rajatarangini also mentions about a terrible famine that occurred in Kashmir. One of the most important accounts of dealing with such a calamity comes from Kautilya’s Arthashastra, a treatise on statecraft composed during the Mauryan rule. It recommended that in times of famine, the king should provide the subjects food from his own stores, encourage migration of people to sea shores, banks of rivers or lakes and levy additional revenue apart from taking contributions from the rich. Kautilya, in the fourth century BCE also recommended employment creation and redistribution to the poor as parts of a sound administrative system to defeat famines (Dreze & Sen, 1991: 123).

During the medieval period, there is a reference to a severe famine during Alauddin Khalji’s reign (1296-1316) whereby the Sultan and the nobles did whatever was possible in their capacity to provide relief to the people. Barani, the court chronicler, mentions that he introduced a new economic policy by establishing grain stores in mohallas of Delhi. During the reign of Muhammad bin Tughluq, the failure of rains (1326-27) affected several parts of the Doab and the suffering was worsened due to the enhanced revenue assessment. Another famine from 1334-35 lasted for seven years and the state advanced loans, encouraged migration, allowed sinking of wells, etc. Various Indian rulers (such as Muhammad bin Tughluq in the fourteenth century) made extensive use of work projects and income creation for rebuilding lost entitlements (Dreze & Sen, 1991: 123). The Mughal rule was also not left untouched by the famine. Among many incidents of scarcities, the court historian Abul Fazl mentions one which occurred in 1583-84 during the reign of Akbar. It is believed that the ruler laid the foundations of an embankment, opened alms houses and free kitchens in cities and recruited soldiers in the army in order to provide employment to the affected populace. The other kind of administrative arrangements included dalseri tax of ten seers per bigha in kind from tilled land as famine insurance (Srivasatva, 2014: 17).

The causation, severity and the strategy of dealing with famines may have varied under different regimes but the misery associated with it and large scale mortality was quite pervasive. However, the famines were mostly local in character and not as widespread as those documented in the nineteenth century. The general cause of famine was often attributed to failure of rains followed by floods or wars. The suffering from scarcity intensified under the East India Company (henceforth EIC) owing to the systematic over-assessment of land revenue and economic exploitation. Initially there were no unified or well defined rules for famine relief and administration. Although the EIC politically gained foothold in the Indian subcontinent, yet it largely functioned as a corporate body focussed on trade and commerce unlike earlier rulers who felt obligated to provide for their subjects who suffered owing to the natural calamities. The policies followed by the erstwhile rulers were more sympathetic towards famine relief than the EIC whose primary aim was to reap economic gains than save people’s lives (Srivasatava, 2014: 28, Meena, 2016: 3). The context of famines occurring in nineteenth century was different in scope, incidence and policy outcome from the famines of the earlier times. However, the widespread changes brought about in the colonial period exacerbated the effects.
11.2.2 Impact of the Colonial Political Economy

The issue of famine cannot be seen in isolation to the changes brought about by the colonial political economy. In the eighteenth century internecine warfare ensued with the disintegration of the Mughal Empire resulting in the rise of provincial states. The absence of paramount power gave East India Company a foothold to interfere in the internal political scenario. Though it was a trading company, yet its ambitions were not limited to commerce as they made political alliances to promote their economic interests. The competition from British machine made goods, destruction of indigenous crafts, exemption or concession given to foreign merchants from the payment of customs and transit duties, company’s complete monopoly of Indian trade, heavy duties imposed by the British government on Indian goods imported to England was a setback to the indigenous textile, carpet making, fine embroidery metal work industries. The people employed in these industries had no option but to fall back upon their land. The weavers, spinners were reduced to penury and the pressure on agrarian land could not supplement their income (Srivsatava, 2014: 10).

In the domain of foreign trade, India became a supplier of raw materials instead of exporting finished goods. The peasants were initially engaged as independent contractors and later as indentured workers cultivating tea, coffee and indigo for European planters. This coercive exercise reduced the food crop area to make way for cash crops. The land revenue policy of East India Company and later the British Government of India (Permanent Settlement of Cornwallis, Zamindari system in North West Provinces, Ryotwari Settlements) were characterized by excessive assessments, disregarded the occupancy rights of the tenants and led to insecurity of rents and tenures (Srivsatava, 2014: 11-12). The growing and widespread penury had a direct co-relation to mounting indebtedness as the peasants found themselves at the mercy of money lenders who aided by the new laws of registration could easily dispossess them from their lands. Indian political leaders like Dadabhai Naoroji and economists like RC Dutt, blamed the British administration and particularly its system of taxation for the deteriorating condition and widespread poverty among people (Naoroji, 1901: 36). Dutt attributed famines to the constantly soaring land revenue which left no surplus with the cultivator nor permitted him to invest in agricultural improvement (Dutt, 1909: 2; Srivastava, 2014: vi). Thus, British rule resulted in general impoverishment which was aggravated by the occurrence of famines. The next Section will discuss the famines that occurred during the colonial period from eighteenth to mid-twentieth century.

11.2.3 Reports, Commissions and Relief Measures

It is difficult to estimate the number of famines that have occurred in India. Paul Greenough gives an approximate figure of famine that occurred between 298 BCE and 1943-44 CE. He identified four famines before 1000 CE, twenty-four between 1000 CE and 1499 CE, eighteen in the sixteenth century, twenty-seven in the seventeenth, eighteen in the eighteenth, and thirty in the nineteenth century. India experienced a declining trend in the overall number of excess death between the 1870s and the 1900s, followed by four famine-free decades. According to Sourabh from 1850 to 1899 itself, India suffered ‘24 major famines’ which resulted in a death toll crossing millions (Sourabh, et al., 2015).

It is difficult to give an exact official number of famines and scarcities that occurred during the colonial rule but it is important to distinguish the policies followed by the East India Company to mitigate the effects of famine from those which were formulated under the British crown. The famine in Bengal province in 1769-70 claimed one third population of the province. At that time instead of providing relief to the victims, there was widespread black-marketing of rice which added to the existing woes. Initially there was no ethical or obligatory sense of providing relief to people as the Company servants continued to make windfall profits even during a crisis. However, during the 1803 famine in North Western Provinces and Oudh, the state granted revenue remissions, gave loans to landowners and offered a bounty on grain imported to Allahabad, Benaras, Kanpur, etc. In the year 1837, there was a severe famine in upper India which prompted the government to open public works at several centres but the work of providing relief to the victims, needy and infirm was left to philanthropic individuals. Hence, the EIC officials did not work actively towards...
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preventing the recurrence of famines nor did they formulate any robust system of relief to ameliorate the situation.

In the aftermath of the 1857 rebellion, the rule of East India Company ended and the political administration passed on to the British Crown (1858-till middle of 20th century). Apart from the transfer of power from Company to the Crown, it was also a period of economic development like extension of railways and other means of communication and transport which connected remote areas to bigger towns. However, many parts of the Indian subcontinent were reeling under heavy financial burden when the famine of 1860 occurred in North West Provinces. In the 19th and 20th century, the famines became more frequent and took a heavy toll on human lives resulting in starvation, disease outbreak and malnutrition. It was difficult to ‘distinguish between starvation deaths caused by hunger and those caused by diseases like dysentery and fever’ which were believed to be indirect results of famine (Srivastava, 1914: 47). The policy of relief organized by the government included providing work to the able-bodied and gratuitous distribution of food to other who could not take care of themselves.

The government set up an enquiry committee and appointed Colonel Baird Smith (Superintendent of Irrigation) on 2nd February 1861 to enquire into the causation of famine and suggest remedial measures. In his recommendations, Colonel Smith stated that there was a vital connection between the revenue demand of the government and famines and therefore an oppressive revenue claim worsened the situation. He recommended that land revenue should be reduced and permanent settlement be made at least in those parts which were not irrigated by canals. He also suggested the extension of irrigation system that would act as a protective measure to prevent recurrence of famines or lessen the severity of crop failure in those areas (Srivastava, 2014: 52-53). His famine report was the first in the history of famine policy of India and is remarkable for considering Indian famines as ‘rather famines of work than of food; when work can be had and paid for, food is always forthcoming’ (sic) (Srivastava, 2014: 54). He also suggested improvement of internal communications, extension of railway lines and extension of roads to connect villages that could help prevent the rise in prices. However, the government did not implement any of these recommendations as they were only concerned with setting up an enquiry and not investing in relief measures.

The hardship’s caused by famines continued every year. In the case of Orissa famine, the government appointed a committee under the chairmanship of George Campbell who submitted the report after examining the affected areas. The Famine Commission 1866-67 recommended tenure of land for agriculture, liberal assessments, legislation to remove vested interest and definite rights in land (Srivastava, 2014: 90). However the task of gratuitous relief was left to social philanthropy and government’ role was limited to providing public works to the able-bodied people. It also recommended better communication through extension of railways to connect important places and promote use of canals for navigation. The thrust on stepping up irrigation was considered crucial to prevent future famines but the government did not implement the recommendations.

The worst famine in that decade took place in Rajasthan, North Western provinces, Punjab and Central provinces in 1868-70. Rajasthan was badly affected where the death toll swept away one third of the total population. There was increase in the number of petty thefts and crime rate. In the next few years from 1870-80, Bengal was affected by a famine twice followed by Punjab and a severe famine occurred in South India from 1876-79. The Famine Commission of 1880 was constituted under Sir John Strachey as President. Its report outlined the geography, population and climate of British India indicating the degree to which each part of the country was susceptible to famines. It gave a historical overview of famines occurring since 1770 and provided measures to be adopted for providing relief during such calamities. The Commission affirmed the responsibility of the state to prevent famines and deaths resulting from want of food or due to limitation of expenditure (Srivastava, 2014: 168). It recommended that large works of permanent utility carried out under Public Works Department should be the basis of famine relief and proposed remission of revenue. The children who had become orphans were to be given away to well to do persons of their own religion to prevent their conversion by Christian missionaries. In order to improve the administration of famine relief, it ordained the formation of famine code and suggested the creation of a separate agricultural department to keep records of
all past famines and agricultural/economic statistics of the country. It also suggested legislation to be passed to protect the cultivator’s rights, gave ideas for cultivation of special crops, improvement in agricultural implements, cattle breeding, promotion of agricultural education, extension of railways, conservation of village forests, etc. The framing of region-specific ‘Famine Codes’ embodying ‘authoritative guidelines’ to the local administration on the measures needed to anticipate and deal with the threat of famine was an important recommendation among many others (Dreze & Sen, 1991: 123).

This report was a landmark in the history of Indian famines as it influenced most of the policies later. CA Elliot, Secretary to the Commission, drew a model draft of Famine Code. The provisional famine code consisted of eleven chapters dealing with organization of village relief, duties of civil officers, professional agencies works, poor houses, measures for the protection of cattle, duties of police and medical officers, wages and rations, etc. (Srivastava, 2014: 174). The famine relief policy including Famine Codes instituted by the Government of India from 1858-1880 was an experiment based on trial and error. In every famine they were issued or improved according to the needs and circumstances. While the famine codes recorded the lessons learnt from earlier famines, yet they did not resolve the systemic problems related to poverty, irrigation, land revenue, etc. Later Agricultural Loans Act (XII of 1884) and the Land Improvement Loans Act (XIX of 1883) were formulated where loans were given free of interest for seed, cattle and subsistence (Srivasatva, 2014: 263). Thus the famine Codes were lengthy documents and established a complex administrative system that local administrators had trouble following in detail. After the last colonial all India Famine Commission of 1901, the provincial governments continued to introduce changes to the famine codes in their regions (Simnonow, 2023: 27).

During 1880-90, many local and regional famines occurred. The severity and distress caused by famines were determined by a variety of social and economic factors such as the quantity of existing food stocks in the affected areas, the facility of transport, the extent of rise in prices, the availability of employment, etc. In 1900 a Famine Commission under the Chairmanship of Sir AP MacDonnell was appointed which submitted its report in 1901. The report brought out the frequent nature of calamity and unpreparedness of the government to deal with the scenario. It was advised to grant liberal advances in the early stages of the distress and take timely action with regard to the suspension of revenue. The creation of an efficient audit and account system was advised. The commission recommended abolition of the minimum wages for the able bodied and compulsory daily payments for work done under the purview of public works. For the preservation of cattle, it was encouraged to cultivate fodder crops and loans to be granted to purchase the same. They emphasized on the ‘moral strategy’ as a weapon to alleviate the misery caused to the masses (Srivastava, 2014: 290).

The famines continued in the twentieth century though the severity reduced but the 1943 famine in Bengal stands out in the public memory even today. It was devastating in terms of its scale, causing three million deaths and occurred during the midst of World War II (Mallik, 2023: 3219). The reasons behind the causes of the Bengal famine have been widely scrutinized. The Family Inquiry Commission (FIC) was appointed by the Government of India in 1944 to investigate the causes of famine. They concluded that there was a serious shortage in the total supply of rice available for consumption in Bengal. The Commission blamed natural calamities along with the tendency of Indians to breed excessively. Scholars working on the region have debunked this theory and among many other reasons have demonstrated how colonial bio-politics unfolded during that period ‘where the laws, and policies were implemented only to serve the British government’s priorities’ (Mallik, 2023: 3219). Amartya Sen analyzed the impact on mortality and the moral economy of sharing of food within families. Goswami has argued that the famine of 1943 in Bengal was a problem of distribution and price not of production and supply. Mukherjee asserted that the history of the Bengal famine is also the history of power and disempowerment. Though the policies of the colonial rulers were to a large extent responsible for the making of the Bengal famine, the nationalist leadership was also guilty. Mukherjee rightly noted that as the end days of the Empire was within sight, ‘the national leadership circled around the pie of independence, failing even to notice that … the population in Bengal were beginning to starve’ (2015: 252). Hence there were many theories to explain
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the cause and effect of famines in a region. The following table (indicative not an exhaustive list) gives an overview of some of the major famines that occurred in India.

Table 1: A List of Some Major Famines in Colonial India

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Famine Year</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Causation and outcome</th>
<th>Relief measures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1770</td>
<td>Bengal</td>
<td>Bad season and scantly spring harvest. Prices rose four to ten times, slavery grew and even children were sold.</td>
<td>Embargo on food grain export, steps to prevent hoarding put in place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1773</td>
<td>North West Provinces, Oudh, Kashmir, Punjab, Madras, Bengal, parts of Rajputana and Bombay</td>
<td>Rain, excessive revenue assessments, war, locusts, etc.</td>
<td>Officers asked to monitor grain prices, people were encouraged to migrate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1783-84</td>
<td>Known as the Chalisa (fortieth year according to Hindu calendar), it reached near the then Company territories but did not penetrate them.</td>
<td>The 1783-4 famine followed a crop failure over a wide area.</td>
<td>Relief measures that were introduced were insufficient and delayed to prevent its effects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1802-4</td>
<td>Bombay, Hyderabad, North West Provinces, North Madras.</td>
<td>Failure of rains, Anglo Maratha war</td>
<td>Grain export prohibited, public work employment opened up, hospitals were set up, taqavi loans granted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1812-15</td>
<td>Bombay, Gujarat, Rajputana</td>
<td>Lack of rain, several years of crop loss due to attacks by locusts and rats.</td>
<td>Some people employed for work and wages paid in kind.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1837-38</td>
<td>Allahabad, Kanpur, Lucknow, Meerut, Bareilly Delhi, Jaipur, Doab (Land between river Ganga and Yamuna)</td>
<td>Failure of rains, excessive revenue demand, villages deserted, children sold, violent agrarian disturbances, riots, robberies, widespread crime and looting</td>
<td>Oppressive fiscal system remained, work provided on low wages, gratuitous relief left to private charity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860-61</td>
<td>North West Provinces</td>
<td>Orphans had to be looked after by relief committees, The landless agricultural labourers and weavers were reduced to penury. Migration of people to areas where food was available.</td>
<td>Rule had shifted from EIC to Crown Work provided to able bodied, gratuitous relief and grants for seed, grain and cattle given. Colonel Baird Smith’s Report on the famine of 1860-61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1865-67</td>
<td>Orissa, parts of Bengal Bihar, Eastern Ghats, some districts of Madras</td>
<td>Failure of rains, poor crops and high revenue assessment. It is estimated one third of the population in Orissa succumbed to the famine and disease.</td>
<td>Government initially followed a policy of non-interference and it led to delayed response in providing relief. Private effort or aid is unrecorded. The Orissa Famine Commission 1866-67 headed by George Campbell submitted its report.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1876-70</td>
<td>Marwar, Bikaner, Ajmer, states of Rajputana, central India, NW provinces</td>
<td>Failure of monsoon, loss of crops, spread of cholera, malarious fever, locusts, the number of crimes increased.</td>
<td>Houses for poor organized. Non-interference in trade continued, famine fund collected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1870-80</td>
<td>Decade of famine in different parts of the country including Punjab and South India</td>
<td>Intense drought resulting in crop failure in Deccan plateau, El Nino and Indian Ocean Dipole effect.</td>
<td>The Famine Commission of 1880 (Sir John Strachey as its Chair) In 1880, the Secretary to the Commission drew up a Draft Indian Famine Code. These along with provincial famine codes were the basic doctrines of famine relief until the 1970s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1896-97</td>
<td>Bundelkhad, United Provinces, Central Provinces, Bombay, Madras, Punjab</td>
<td>Drought, poor monsoon rains</td>
<td>Sir James Lyall Commission 1896 recommended development of irrigation facility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1899-1900</td>
<td>Western and Central India</td>
<td>Failure of monsoons</td>
<td>The Indian Famine Commission of 1901 (led by Lord MacDonnell)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1943</td>
<td>Bengal Province of British India</td>
<td>Food diversion, disruption and mismanagement during World War II, 3 million deaths</td>
<td>Fourth Famine Inquiry Commission set up in 1944.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table complied by the author (Source: Srivasatva 2014: 20-26 and Tirthankar Roy 2016)
Famine was a regular feature in the history of India. However, from 1760 to 1943 India faced terrible famines on a regular basis in which approximately 85 million Indians died mercilessly. Renowned scholar Mike Davis has termed this phenomenon as “Late Victorian Holocaust.” The introduction of railway infrastructure in India proved to be catalyst in the occurrence of famines, due to which magnitude of casualty reached its numerically deadliest peak in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Indian export of food grains (primarily rice and wheat), opium, jute, indigo and cotton were prominent component of the British economy, which aimed to generate vital foreign currency. Export of agricultural products led to food crises. Members of the British administrative machinery also exposed that the larger market created by railway transport encouraged poor peasants to sell off their last reserve stocks of grain (Meena, 2016: 13-14). The following section gives an analysis of the theories relating to the cause and effects of famine.

11.2.4 Outcome and Analysis: Crime, Altruism and the Moral Economy of a Famine

The theories regarding causation and culpability of famine are manifold and equally varied are its consequences. David Arnold suggests that famine as a ‘concept’ and a ‘historical phenomenon’ represents both an ‘event’ and a ‘structure’ (Arnold, 1988: 6). There may be many opinions as to when the famine began or ended but there is usually a consensus regarding a ‘finite span of historical time and human experience’ of the event. The proximate cause may be a natural disaster (flood) or a man made calamity (civil war, invasion) but they only act as precipitating factors exposing the inherent contradictions or existing vulnerability of a particular society. In fact the experience of famine by peasants in India and the British being responsible for the misery of the agrarian class provided agenda to the national movement leaders to demand for freedom from the colonial misrule (Arnold, 1988: 117).

Tirthankar Roy contemplates whether famines were natural (geographical, ecological) or manmade (political or cultural) in their origin. Even though occurrence of famines was quite common in the past, yet its systematic documentation is found in the colonial period (1700-1947) under the rule of East India Company and later the reign of the British Crown. According to him, the geographical account of famines ‘diminishes’ the role of the state in its ‘occurrence and retreat’ whereas a political account ‘overstates’ it. Hence he locates the third factor in the domain of knowledge suggesting that ‘limited information and knowledge constrained state capacity to act during the nineteenth century famines’. It became rarer once the statistical information and scientific knowledge to predict famines improved (Roy, 2016: 1).

An alternate explanation of ‘natural’ was given by Thomas Malthus who interpreted ‘nature’ to imply ‘natural carelessness’ where some regions experienced unchecked reproductive and hence demographic growth. Therefore according to Malthus, the occurrence of famines in an overpopulated country like India resulted in undue pressure on limited resources leading to malnutrition and deaths. The ecological explanation for famines absolved the imperial state of its role to prevent the event. The Doji Bara famine (also Skull famine) of 1791-1792 was attributed to a major El Niño event lasting from 1789-1795 and producing prolonged droughts. On the other hand, one of the first enquiries conducted by the Indian Famine Commission of 1880, concluded that, ‘the devastating famines’ in some provinces were a result of ‘unusual drought’. This ecological explanation of famines implied that that it was beyond the control of state to anticipate or resolve the issue definitively.

Among the political factors the probability of famine occurrence went up under an authoritarian regime or when the state machinery visibly declined. Mike Davis, in his research on the nineteenth century tropical famines uses the word ‘manmade’ to indicate ‘made-by-the-colonial-state’. Davis attributed the mass death and human misery that followed the late nineteenth century famines to politics, specifically, adherence to capitalist ideology by the imperial states (Davis, 2000).

In a similar vein, the decision to wage wars was another major reason which led to the diversion of food as evident in the case of Bengal Famine (1943) where it was believed
that the market declined or state failed to restore supplies and redistribute food. Whether British Prime Minister Churchill or the civil supplies minister in Bengal Huseyn Suhrawardy was responsible for this debacle remains debatable. According to Amartya Sen, the Bengal famine of 1943 was caused by the apathy of the imperial government along with the market failure. He argued that there is an implicit social contract between the citizens and the rulers and timely famine relief is a political obligation on the part of the state to provide during a humanitarian crisis. He stated that the ‘Ownership relations are one kind of entitlement relations’ within which the problem of starvation has to be analysed. In the case of poverty and famines ‘an entitlement relation’ applied to ‘ownership’ works through ‘certain rules of legitimacy’ which broke down under that regime (Sen, 1981: 1).

Sen also established the nationalist theory of famine which explains causation and the degree of exposure of population groups through the concept of ‘entitlement’. It is linked to the decision as to who suffers the most during famines, and the answer varies depending on whether the famine is caused by supply shock or price shock without supply shortfall. According to him, the price shocks can occur independently of supply shocks, leading to sharp fall in real wage in terms of food prices, and thus, famine. In August 1942, the Japanese occupation of Burma led to demand spike in Bengal and the supply shortfall owed to disruption of Indo-Burma trade. Sen and Mukherjee suggest that the famine was engineered by the state owing to indifference or a mistaken faith in markets (Mukherjee, 2009; Sen, 1989).

Other scholars who have researched the 1943 Bengal famine have offered somewhat different interpretations of the episode. Islam suggests that the number of near- destitute was already large in Bengal, owing to a slow-developing mismatch between food and population, when the famine struck (Islam, 2007). Paul Greenough argues that government regulation of the grain market caused uncertainty and led to rise in prices. Moreover, a gradual process of diminishing returns to agriculture in the Bengal delta made the crisis more probable (Greenough, 1982). Bose places the famine in the backdrop of a post-depression crisis in the small peasant economy of Bengal, where ‘the subsistence foundations of agriculture had for some time been cracking’ (Bose, 1990).

Dharma Kumar cautions against overemphasizing the role of the pre-colonial rule vis-a-vis the colonial state in controlling and reducing the effects of famine. She wrote that even though ‘Pre-British’ governments in India ‘did try to counteract the effects of famine by takkavi loans, the distribution of grain from public granaries’, yet public and private resources were limited to mitigate the situation (Kumar, 1993: 2268). Roy argued that the human misery following the nineteenth century famines in India had more to do with the limited means – poor information, meager infrastructure, and small fiscal capacity – that the British imperial state had at its disposal when dealing with natural disasters of such magnitude, than with liberal ideologies or capitalism (Roy, 2012). Vishal Singh Deo disagrees with Roy’s claim and insists on the links between colonial property and famine distress. He states that the Report of the Indian Famine Commission of 1880 articulated relief through a process that forced ‘distressed persons into worksites and viewed confiscated estates as part of necessary logic of capital to move from loss-making to profit-yielding estates’ (Deo, 2021: 87).

David Hardiman suggests that free trade and hoarding, carried out under direct or indirect sponsorship of the colonial state, made famine conditions worse in western India (Hardiman, 1996: 113). But this was not very rampant due to the threat of grain riots and crimes against money lenders or state officials. It is interesting to know that the grain riots have been co-related to the concept of the moral economy of famines. It is widely understood that the dominant classes deny their culpability for dearth and famine but seek to legitimize their position by claiming that they would make attempts in ensuring subsistence for the poor as gesture of paternal generosity or charity. The poor on the other hand see it as a matter of elementary justice and the duty of the rich to maintain them. In case of any grievance, they felt justified to take direct action against the rich which James Scott has described as the “the right to subsistence”.

Scott adapted ‘The moral economy of the peasant’ from E. P. Thompson’s concept of “the moral economy of the poor” (Scott, 1976; Thompson, 1971). Paul Greenough has
argued that the, patron-client relationships involving reciprocal forms of exchange were sanctioned by an ideology of hierarchy and caste system. But in the context of Bengal famine of 1943-4, the peasants suffered through famine as a fait accompli as there were no grain riots or a demand for a “right to subsistence” (Greenough, 1982). This submissive and fatalistic attitude attributed to peasants has been questioned by Tirthankar Roy, Ranajit Guha and other others who have provided evidence for peasant insurgency in the pre-colonial and colonial period.

Moreover even in the princely state of Travancore, mass disease and starvation claimed more than 90,000 lives during the Second World War. However, this episode has never received much prominence, especially when compared to the simultaneous crisis in Bengal. Balasubramanian claims that ‘Integration into the world economy, the reordering of a rigid social structure, and popular political pressures on an autocratic princely regime created a unique set of conditions that left Travancore vulnerable to food scarcity and conflict’. Hence ‘Hunger was a constitutive experience of this period across various parts of India, but the post-colonial political legacies of war could be regionally distinct’ (Balasubramian 2023).

The role of philanthropy, benevolence and patron-client obligation was part and parcel of the moral economy of famine. Sunil Amrith suggests that ‘from the late nineteenth century, food was at the heart of secular interventions to improve the welfare of the population of India’, and shows how ‘the problem of hunger’ led to an elaboration of older religious notions of charity at the same time (Amrith, 2008). Douglas Haynes showed that the formation of elite identity among mercantile communities also refigured notions of public charity whereas Brewis proposes that many private charity directed at famine relief specifically evolved in the colonial times (Haynes, 1987, Brewis, 2010: 887).

B.M. Bhatia who wrote on Indian famines argued that in the precolonial India, ‘caste and joint family systems imposed the obligation of looking after the old, the infirm, the poor, and the destitute’ so well that ‘the state had hardly any need to intervene’. But the advent of British colonial rule destroyed this ideal of mutual help and social cohesion, turning scarcities into famines (Bhatia,1975). Dick Kooiman’s study on the princely state of Travancore which was not a colonial territory indicates that nineteenth century famines broke up social cohesion among vulnerable population. Hence the colonial rule was not solely responsible for not being able to provide timely social service. Many scholars suggest that altruism did not end but reshaped the merchant identity, notions of citizenship, and patronage relations during that era. Historians seem to agree that charity and philanthropy took a new meaning in the wake of Indo-European cultural encounter (Roy, 2016: 20). Philanthropy failed, but not owing solely to colonial westernization but due to the limited capacity of the sponsor (Sugden, 1982).

The occurrence of famine and the failure to respond and resolve it in a suitable and efficient manner was compounded by the incidence of epidemics which happened simultaneously. The next Section will elaborate on this synchronous occurrence of famine and epidemics.

### 11.3 THE SCOURGE OF EPIDEMICS

There was concurrence in the timing of famine and epidemics as they occurred in a succession. A dreadful famine was typically followed by one or the other infectious diseases such as bubonic plague, cholera, influenza, malaria, smallpox, typhoid, pneumonia, etc. which killed a large section of population already destabilized by starvation (Drayton, 2001). Railway transportation multiplied the scale of such diseases as people migrated in search of food and work from the affected regions. Kinsley Davis and Tim Dyson explain that between 1870 and 1920 the life expectancy of Indians fell by 20%, population declined by 10% and net cropped area decreased by 12%.

The epidemic control and the need to supply the food on time were equally important. Famines made food unaffordable and exposed the already vulnerable population to epidemic outbreaks. Three diseases – cholera, plague and malaria – took heavy toll of life in the late-nineteenth century. Later the control of diseases, in turn, contributed to a permanent
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11.3.1 Malaria, Cholera, Plague and Social Malaise

The climatic and sanitary conditions played an important role in the breeding of disease vector and any epidemic spread not only affected the poor and vulnerable population but also the elite social groups. Further, the changing social and economic networks and altered behavior patterns contributed to the transmission of diseases. For example, population mobility due to railways led to the spread of malaria with migrants moving in and out of the endemic malaria zones (Arnold, 1993: 401). The epidemics intensified due to overcrowding, poverty, and malnutrition. Epidemic malaria did not necessarily occur along with a famine. However, it most often occurred when the nutritional deficiencies of rural poor after famine coincided with a proliferation of Anopheles – vector of malarial parasite – caused by heavy rain (Wakimura, 2002).

The simultaneity of cholera and famine was most devastating during the second half of the nineteenth century, a period of frequent and widespread famines (Arnold, 1993: 166-68). Epidemics caused widespread mortality but the loss of life doubled or trebled when cholera or plague coincided with famines. Thus cholera deaths were higher in the famine years of 1877 and 1900 (Arnold, 1989). Famine mortality was worsened by diseases but there were also epidemics independent of famines, like the plague epidemics in 1905 and 1911, and the influenza epidemic in 1918.

India’s droughts and famines seemed to contradict the general perception of tropical fertility and natural abundance. The word ‘tropical’ was used in botanical, medical and even geological texts in India and a perception of specific diseases occurring in this part of the subcontinent was created (Arnold, 2000: 51). Vibrio Cholerae or the rather maligned ‘Asiatic Cholera’ also referred to as ‘Indian Cholera’ was not only a serious public health concern but also a polemical issue of debate due to its seasonal visit. As per the records from the nineteenth century, it was predominantly the rural population in India who suffered the most due to cholera (Mehra, 2020). Nationally, cholera never reached the fearsome annual peaks of plague, influenza or malaria, but its cyclical frequency and intensity in India led to a recorded toll of 22 million between 1887 and 1954 (Klein, 1994).

The bubonic plague which engulfed the city of Bombay in 1896 re-ignited the controversy between the ‘contagionist etiology which focused on the human body as the carrier of disease to the localist framework which emphasized on the environmental factors as a predisposing cause of the plague’ (Kidambi, 2007). The Bombay plague epidemic was thought to have originated in the Chinese mainland during the early 19th century, spread to Hong Kong in 1894 and eventually reached India via naval trade routes entering Bombay by the summer of 1896. At the onset, the British authorities kept the ports functional so that global trade networks were not disrupted. They ascribed the outbreak to habits and local customs, blaming the living spaces of Indians for being filthy and unsanitary, deliberately overlooking extraneous factors such as the trade ships which arrived into the ports carrying the flea-infested rodents. The focus of governmental response was the ‘locality’ (slum) where thorough disinfection operation was carried out, plague-ridden buildings were demolished and large population was evicted to the camps outside the city (Mehra, 2020).
11.3.2 The Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897

In order to contain the contagion, the government passed a law known as ‘The Epidemic Diseases Act’ of 1897 which empowered authorities to adopt all measures deemed necessary to prevent the plague’s spread, including prohibition of pilgrimages to Mecca, of emigration from India, of railway bookings, of religious gatherings and of stocking essential commodities. The implementation of this Act did not go down well with the subject population. Soldiers were enlisted to conduct an intrusive door-to-door search, the ‘infected dwellings’ were demolished, caste and religious segregation was practised, arrangements were made to dispose of dead bodies by sprinkling carbolic powder over the corpse before washing with a phenyl solution. These stringent yet inconsiderate measures of assaulting, humiliating the people and destroying their property triggered discontent leading to the assassination of the plague commissioner WC Rand in Pune (Mehra, 2020).

The Epidemic Diseases Act passed in 1897 was a small legislation consisting of four sections to prevent the spread of “Dangerous” Diseases. The concerns included specifying special measures to control the outbreak, enabling the state governments to take measures to contain it, spelling out penalty for those who disobeyed and granting protection to those who implemented it. While the Act was precise in its content, it left much room for interpretation. The definition of a “dangerous epidemic disease” was not provided in the Act. There was no clear description of whether an epidemic was “dangerous” on the basis of the magnitude of the problem or the severity of the disease. It was purely regulatory in nature and lacked a specific public health focus. Hence it, was like a “policing” Act, intended to control epidemics and not to deal with coordinated and scientific responses to prevent and tackle the outbreak (Rakesh, 2016; Mehra, 2020).

11.4 FAMINES AND COLONIAL POLICIES

Famines and Epidemics experienced during the Colonial period in India were severe and had a long term impact on the population and economic growth of the country. The famines were typically followed by fatal diseases and the railway networks which helped people to migrate in search of food and work also enabled the spread the diseases to other areas (Meena, 2016: 13-14). Florence Nightingale who worked in the famine affected regions pointed out that they were not caused by the ‘lack of food’ in a particular geographical area but due to ‘inadequate transportation of food’ and the basis for it was ‘an absence of a political and social structure.’ (Lynn & Gérard, 2006). The Indian Famine Codes introduced in the wake of a series of major famines in the 1870s cautioned to watch out for early warning signals which included rise in grain prices, increase in migration and widespread crimes but the recommendation of the major commissions and famine codes were not entirely implemented (Grada, 2009: 3-4). While some prominent British citizens, such as William Digby campaigned for policy reform and hunger relief, most others like the British Governor-General of India, Lord Lytton, opposed such changes, believing that it will stimulate wage aversion by Indian workers. The effects of the famine varied in different regions and city dwellers never suffered to the same degree as their rural counterparts. Even though some famines were triggered by the lack of rainfall or due to manmade reasons, yet the impact was felt more due to the result of chronic poverty. Morris D Morris rightly pointed out that ‘drought, floods and threats of famine produce more intense public reactions than do epidemics or the far more grievous burden of structural poverty’ (Morris, 1975: 283). Hence the colonial political outlook was more concerned in preventing the dire effects of famines and epidemics but ignored the structural issue arising out of their policies and economic exploitation that resulted in widespread poverty and mortality.

11.5 SUMMARY

After reading this unit you will be able to understand the linkages between colonial political economy, famines and epidemics. You will be able to differentiate the policies followed in the pre-colonial period, under the East India Company and the British Crown to deal with famine and epidemics. You will learn about natural and manmade factors that contributed
to ecological changes and worsening of famine situation. The effects of famine in the form of grain riots and philanthropy have also been laid out. Finally the role of The Epidemic Diseases Act in dealing with contagious diseases has been discussed briefly.

11.6 GLOSSARY

**Chalisa** 
*Chalisa* (literally, "of the fortieth" in Hindustani) refers to the Vikram Samvat calendar year 1840 (1783)

**Contagionist Etiology** 
The causation for the spread of an infectious disease

**Doji Bara** 
The Doji Bara famine (also Skull Famine) of 1791-1792 was attributed to a major El Nino event lasting from 1789-1795 and producing prolonged droughts.

**Famine Codes** 
They were guidelines for the local administration to provide relief measures

11.7 EXERCISES

1. What were the recommendations given by the Famine Commissions?
2. How useful were the Famine Codes?
3. How is crime and philanthropy related to famine relief?
4. Are epidemics always related to famines?
5. How far did the Epidemic Diseases Act respond to the problems created by contagious diseases?

11.8 SUGGESTED READINGS


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Starving an ‘Inconsequential’ Race: Looking at the Bengal Famine 75 Years, Author(s): EPW Engage ISSN (Online): 2349-8846.


11.9 INSTRUCTIONAL VIDEO RECOMMENDATIONS

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNVHezNjGGY
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9XhezyGfuDU&t=480s