

# **The British Empire, Ecology and Famines in Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century Central India**

**By**

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More than thirty million famine related deaths occurred in British India between 1870 and 1910, a phenomenon Mike Davis in his recent book has called the “Late Victorian Holocaust.”<sup>1</sup> The Deccan region of central India was the worst victim of these famines. This paper will analyze the official ideology, the reasons, and consequences of these famines.

## **On the Question of Theory:**

Just as the Europeans justified the Atlantic slave trade in terms of civilizing the savage, Christianizing the heathen, and making the barbarian productive through a work ethic based on reason, so was the British imperialist project in India and Asia.<sup>2</sup> Here the so-called ‘tropics’ were condemned as naturally unhealthy, diseased and famine prone.<sup>3</sup> Overtly implying that somehow European weather, climate and geographical environment was healthier than the conquered territories.<sup>4</sup> But the most influential ideology behind western imperialism was the classical political economy propounded by Adam Smith in his *Wealth of Nations*. Accordingly, a laissez-faire doctrine of market capitalism was introduced in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, which guided the European imperialist project whereby government interference in the economy was objected to even in the face of acute crisis like the famine. Although it should be noted here, this market capitalism was in fact imposed on conquered territories with the might of European gunboats and arms. However, to this doctrine was later added the Malthusian theory of population whereby famine was regarded as a natural check to over population, relieving the state

and government from the responsibility of expenditure on relief.<sup>5</sup> However, the driving ideas behind the Indian Famine Commission Reports of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were those of Jeremy Bentham. The utilitarian principle that relief should be bitterly punitive in order to discourage dependence upon the government was purely Benthamite. The reports relieved the British government of India any responsibility for the horrific mortality. It was asserted that the cheap famine labour could be fruitfully used in modernizing projects such as the railways, road construction, and repair of tanks, stone and masonry works, etc. The famine reports further held that the calamity was caused by natural phenomenon and that human agencies have no control over it. The staunch Benthamite cronies like James Mill and his son John Stuart Mill also supported this utilitarian orthodoxy<sup>6</sup> of the East India Company and the British Empire after 1857.

All the British imperial viceroys, governors, and proconsuls like Lytton, Temple, Elgin, and Curzon strongly adhered to the doctrine that it was the climate and failure of rains that caused failure of crops and famine. It was believed that the empire had to be governed for revenues and not expenditure. And any act that would influence the prices of grains such as charity was to be either strictly monitored or discouraged. Even in the face of acute distress, relief had to be punitive and conditional. So the ‘Temple Wage’ propounded by Sir Richard Temple, a staunch laissez faire doctrinaire on government famine relief was set at only 16-22 oz of food or 1-2 annas with a minimum of 9-10 hours of work per day. The whole idea was to strongly discourage dependence on government relief. Viceroy Lytton (in late 1870s) vehemently supported the Temple wage of below minimum while Curzon (in early 1900s) implemented a tight press censorship to prevent Indian nationalists from making a political capital out of the macabre famine of 1899-

1900.<sup>7</sup> Amartya Sen and Jean Dreze in their study have suggested that the reasons why famines suddenly seized with the end of British Empire (post-1947) was not so much because the nationalist government was more benevolent but because the free press and public opinion put constant pressure on the government to respond. This kind of pressure could not be exerted under conditions of colonial subjection.<sup>8</sup>

### **An Examination into the Nature and Causes of Famines:**

The scholars of ancient and medieval India like H.D. Sankhalia, D.D. Kosambi, Romila Thapar, D. N. Jha, R.S. Sharma, Irfan Habib and others have observed that the South Asian society had always been shaped and reshaped by a close interaction between pastoral nomads, agriculturists, and forest dwellers.<sup>9</sup> Sumit Guha in his recent book has further elaborated this observation by stating that the boundary between the three environmental regions, i.e., forests, grazing grounds, and cultivated fields had always been fluid before the advent of British rule. And this fluidity also extended to occupational flexibility whereby people acquired skills in accordance with the political economy and social culture of the times.<sup>10</sup> However, this fluidity and flexibility threatened the colonial state's greed for revenues and desire for territorial expansion. The fluid boundaries had to be frozen and occupational flexibility had to be put into the straightjacket category of caste for better control and management of the empire and its subjects.<sup>11</sup>

So the first order of business for the colonial state was to conduct extensive land survey and settlement operations while the process of empire building was in progress during the nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> The following table shows the movement of cultivated

and wasteland acreages as a result of British survey and settlement operations in six selected districts of Central India collectively called Berar.

**Table 1**

**The movement of cultivated and uncultivated acreages in Berar by District:  
1869-70 to 1902-03**

**1869-1870**

District	Cultivated acres	% of Cultivated to total acres	Unoccupied/waste acres	% of unoccupied to total acres	Total acres
Ellichpur	630,954	35.1	414,808	23	1,795,877
Amraoti	637,831	38.3	863,034	35.2	2,446,198
Wun	519,554	19.1	792,324	29.2	2,708,480
Akola	1,380,882	80.0	193,001	11.1	1,726,073
Buldana	1,253,173	71.4	308,427	17.5	1,753,158
Basim	576,715	49.8	340,937	29.4	1,155,909
Total	5,299,109	45.7	2,912,531	25.1	11,585,695

**1901-1902**

Ellichpur	660,134	39.4	33,154	1.9	1,674,785
Amraoti	1,505,474	85.2	120	0.006	1,765,896
Wun	1,669,842	66.5	133,897	5.3	2,509,626
Akola	1,454,121	84.8	6,937	0.4	1,714,459
Buldana	1,468,973	81.7	6,775	0.3	1,797,901
Basim	1,301,321	68.7	21,914	1.1	1,893,594
Total	8,059,865	70.9	202,797	1.7	11,356,261

**1902-1903**

Total	8,101,739	71.3	181,646	1.6	11,356,181
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**Sources:** Administration Report by the Resident at Hyderabad including a Report on the Administration of the Hyderabad Assigned Districts, for the year 1869-70. Hyderabad: Residency Government Press. Para 281; Report on the Administration of the Hyderabad Assigned Districts for the year 1901-02. Hyderabad: Residency Government Press, 1902. para 9; and Report on the Administration of the Hyderabad Assigned Districts for the year 1902-1903. Hyderabad: Residency Press, 1903. para 65.

It can be noticed from the above table that as the land survey and settlement operations progressed, cultivated acreage dramatically increased from 45.7% to 71.3% of the total acreage. The result of this was a simultaneous decline in the unoccupied areas to the

point of total extinction. This meant that the grazing lands and common grounds virtually disappeared under the onslaught of colonial commercialization. The official term for designating such areas was ‘wastelands.’ For the British this meant lands that did not generate revenues, hence uneconomic and therefore the need to make it productive and economic by putting it under the plough. But for people in the villages, these lands were a part of their daily life and survival in times of calamities such as famine and drought. Its disappearance had serious repercussions. In the most populated plain districts of Amraoti, Akola, and Buldana, the wastelands completely disappeared falling under 1%. In other districts also, it fell below 2%. In Wun district it stood at about 5%. Every district experienced the problem of space and overcrowding. Amraoti and Akola district suffered the worst because of the topography. When cotton cultivation expanded in the 1860s, these two districts were the very first to be denuded of all tree and forest cover. Most of the railways passed through these two districts. The population density got high and the ravage of drought, famine, disease, and death became intense.<sup>13</sup>

The Empire’s voracious appetite for revenues targeted the mobile people to sedentarize. The pressure of colonial institutions like the police, law and courts were employed to coerce pastoral nomads and forest dwellers to settle on the land and take up agriculture. Further pressure of imperial revenues forced pastures and common lands under the plough. Neeladri Bhattacharya in his study of the Punjab pastoralists shows how the extension of British control through punitive grazing taxes hit the transhumance pastoral nomads while depriving the peasantry of the traditional grazing runs and common lands.<sup>14</sup> Thus the extension of the imperial arm deprived pastoralists of their main source of survival while survey operations extended and froze the boundaries of

agriculture. Revenue and Agriculture Department was the largest and the most organized executive arm of the British Empire in India. In fact it extracted more than 85% of the imperial revenues and made sure that agriculture closed boundary with forests. It also encouraged cash crop cultivation and helped connect India to the London based world economy.<sup>15</sup>

While commercialization of land and agriculture threatened the existence of pastoral nomads, control over forests put pressure on forest dwellers. Writing in the context of Central India, Mahesh Rangarajan has aptly described the colonial commercialization of timber and other resources as ‘fencing the forest.’<sup>16</sup> From time immemorial everyone in the subcontinent had depended on forest and common land resources for their daily survival. According to Neil Charlesworth, the ratio of plough cattle to land in the Deccan plateau heavily depended on the availability of these resources.<sup>17</sup> As mentioned before, the people also fell back on these resources in times of drought, famine and other natural calamities. Ramachandra Guha in a recent article has suggested that historically, forests in South Asia had been under the management of local society and utilized as a common property resource.<sup>18</sup> The forest dwellers and plains agriculturists had always exchanged goods and services on balance.<sup>19</sup> The colonial Forest Department took control of forests and began putting restrictions on people’s access to its resources through a series of Forest Acts and Laws beginning 1866.<sup>20</sup> The forest dwellers were gradually pushed out of their natural habitat and *dhya* (slash and burn agriculture) was prohibited. The forests were taken over and declared government reserves in order to serve the needs of imperial railways and the military.<sup>21</sup> The commercialization of forest resources such as wood, leaf, manure, grass, fodder, wild

grains, fruits, roots, nuts, honey, vegetables, flowers, medicinal herbs, gums, plants, spices, lac, game, etc., removed the famine and drought cushion on which the people had traditionally relied in times of crisis. According to the well known famine scholar B.M. Bhatia, this resulted in general environmental deterioration that transformed minor calamities into disastrous events taking millions of lives.<sup>22</sup>

Bipan Chandra, Sumit Sarkar, and Amiya Bagchi in their studies have shown that the lack of economic diversity was the reason for India's backwardness and poverty under the British Empire. Society was restrained to remain agrarian and feudal. The British imperial policies prevented the transformation of Indian economy from agrarian to industrial by skimming off the raw material and revenues without plowing anything back in return. Trapped in this classical political economy of the British Raj, India exported raw material and consumed finished goods. State investments mostly went into maintaining the institutions of control like the vast army, police, bureaucracy, and the espionage network of the Empire. Very little was made available for the development of human capital resource or even the economic infrastructure that would benefit the general populace. The colonial state and local moneylenders became parasitic classes that were not interested in either economic development or improving the material condition of the peasantry. Commercial crops not only encroached on food grains but pushed peasants into a debt cycle from which it was impossible to get out because the primary producer lost control over the crops. The burden of high state revenue demand and government refusal to remit even in times of famine made the suffering of the people intense and death difficult to allude.<sup>23</sup>

During the great famine of 1877-78, a noted Victorian journalist William Digby observed that the root causes of famines in India was railways and markets. Accordingly, the railways carried famine to grain surplus areas through artificial price inflation in the face of any government check or control.<sup>24</sup> Many studies since then have shown that there was never a shortage of food grains even in years of official famines. The problem was with grain prices. They were so high that the people could not afford to buy it.<sup>25</sup> However, one thing remained unchanged in British India and that was the wages of labourers.<sup>26</sup> The wage stagnation and very little movement in per capita income made food grains beyond the reach of ordinary persons trying to eke out a living off their labour. The following table explains this phenomenon for the region of Berar in Central India.

**Table 2**

**A comparison of wages and prices in Berar (with decennial averages): 1870-1903**

Year	Standard wage *annas per diem	Price of Jawari *seers per rupee	Wage/price exchange rate of jawari in seers
1870-71	4.33	18.5	5.01
1871-72	4.75	22.7	6.70
1872-73	3.75	26.3	6.14
1873-74	3.66	41.6	9.29
1874-75	3.5	52.6	11.32
1875-76	3.25	38.4	7.80
1876-77	3.33	19.2	3.96
1877-78	3.0	16.3	3.04
1878-79	3.5	13.8	3.03
1879-80	3.5	17.8	3.85
1880-81	3.0	38.4	6.98
<b>Average</b>	<b>3.5</b>	<b>27.7</b>	<b>6.1</b>
1881-82	3.0	32.2	5.99
1882-83	3.0	28.5	5.24
1883-84	3.5	25.6	5.59
1884-85	3.0	28.5	5.25
1885-86	3.0	25.0	4.60

1886-87	3.0	25.0	4.60
1887-88	3.0	17.2	3.22
1888-89	3.0	20.0	3.72
1889-90	3.5	22.7	4.96
1890-91	3.75	25.6	5.92
<b>Average</b>	<b>3.1</b>	<b>25.0</b>	<b>4.9</b>
1891-92	3.91	20.0	4.84
1892-93	3.91	16.6	4.02
1893-94	3.91	18.8	4.61
1894-95	3.91	22.2	5.34
1895-96	3.91	19.6	4.79
1896-97	3.16	10.4	2.04
1897-98	3.33	25.0	5.08
1898-99	3.33	23.8	4.92
1899-1900	2.58	9.8	1.58
<b>Average</b>	<b>3.5</b>	<b>18.4</b>	<b>4.1</b>
1900-01	N/A	17.9	N/A
1901-02	N/A	19.5	N/A
1902-03	N/A	22.4	N/A

\*One *seer* = approximately 2 lbs and *anna* was the 16<sup>th</sup> part of a *rupee*, the standard currency of British India

**Sources:** Prices and Wages in India. 22<sup>nd</sup> Issue. Compiled by the Office of the Director-General of Commercial Intelligence. Calcutta, 1905; K. L. Datta. Report on the Enquiry in the Rise of Prices in India, vol. II (Statistics of Prices), Calcutta: 1915; Statistical Bastracts Relating to British India, 1874-1917 (in multi-volumes), London: printed annually; Index Numbers of Indian Prices, 1861-1926, Calcutta: 1928; Report on the Census of Berar, 1881. Bombay: 1882; Report of the Sanitary Commissioner, Hyderabad Assigned Districts for the year 1897, Hyderabad: 1898; Manchester Guardian, 1850-1900; General Administration of the Hyderabad Assigned Districts, printed annually from 1855-56 to 1902-03, Hyderabad: Residency Press; Report on the Revenue Administration of the Hyderabad Assigned Districts, printed annually 1877-78 to 1902-03; Hyderabad: Residency Press.

Table 2 suggests that the standard cash wage rate remained stagnant at 3.5 annas per diem while the price of staple grain jawari increased tremendously from 27.7 seers per rupee to 18.4 between 1870 and 1903. This further suggests that the labourer's wages failed to keep up with the prices. The direct consequence of this was undernourishment and even starvation in times of famine. The wage/price exchange rate of jawari also fell by a third, causing severe economic and material hardships to the vast majority of labouring population of central India.

Thus, the 19<sup>th</sup> century famines in Central India were basically price-induced famines that could have been avoided with timely government intervention. However, that never happened because of the official adherence to the *laissez-faire* ideology of non-interference. In fact there is even evidence of grains being exported to England and Europe for speculative trading in international market while millions were dying of disease and starvation in the sub-continent.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, the problem of food shortages in colonial Berar is associated with grain exports and high prices. It is rather appalling that while majority of the Berar's population was suffering from poverty and hunger, the region was exporting food grains. This was in fact the case even during years of drought and famine. The following table illustrates exactly how much of food grains were actually exported. These food grains included the staple crop jowari (millet), wheat, and other edible grains such as gram, bajri, masur, tur, rice, urad, etc.

**Table 3**

**Food grains and raw cotton exports from Berar: 1874-75 to 1902-03**

Year	Foodgrain exports in maunds*	% of foodgrains to total exports	Raw cotton exports in maunds	% of raw cotton to total exports	Total exports in maunds
1874-75	345,000		1,431,781		N/A
1875-76	469,000		1,054,438		N/A
1876-77	2,196,000		1,626,686		N/A
1877-78	1,509,000		1,699,737		N/A
1878-79	972,000	38.4	1,200,662	47.5	2,527,415
1879-80	250,130	16.1	1,004,398	64.8	1,549,793
1880-81	411,223	20.1	1,020,059	50.0	2,037,754
1881-82	2,011,061	45.4	1,572,052	35.5	4,421,710
1882-83	1,488,429	33.8	1,430,931	32.5	4,402,510
1883-84	847,408	28.3	1,027,785	34.3	2,990,857
1884-85	721,764	21.9	807,598	24.5	3,294,844
1885-86	1,320,721	30.7	1,278,108	29.7	4,289,640
1886-87	2,356,618	44.8	1,726,364	32.8	5,251,732
1887-88	1,519,458	43.8	921,100	26.5	3,463,158

1888-89	1,023,801	23.9	1,866,461	43.6	4,276,377
1889-90	580,521	15.9	1,902,429	52.3	3,635,968
1890-91	N/A		N/A		3,926,000
1891-92	1,943,000	36.2	1,714,338	32.0	5,355,000
1892-93	1,067,000	28.8	1,355,420	36.6	3,701,000
1893-94	2,020,372	53.7	1,651,022	43.9	3,760,000
1894-95	235,000	8.7	1,211,933	45.0	2,691,000
1895-96	475,000	12.4	1,954,056	51.3	3,809,000
1896-97	655,000	18.5	1,827,708	51.8	3,522,000
1897-98	257,000	8.2	1,686,115	53.9	3,128,000
1898-99	500,000	8.7	3,208,228	55.8	5,747,000
1899-1900	747,000	28.6	915,157	35.0	2,609,000
1900-01	275,000	6.4	2,183,142	51.5	4,233,000
1901-02	835,000	10.6	3,830,744	48.8	7,842,000
1902-03	483,000	7.6	3,218,399	50.8	6,324,000
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Average	979,910	24.5	1,654,530	42.9	
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\*1 Berar maund = 82 lbs. weight

**Sources:** Report on the Rail and Road Borne Trade of the Hyderabad Assigned Districts, 1878-79 to 1902-03. Printed annually at Hyderabad: Residency Government Press; and East India (Report of Famine). Appendix I: Miscellaneous Papers Bearing Upon the Condition of the Country and People of India. London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1881. p. 50; and Central Provinces and Berar District Gazetteer: Akola District. Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1910. p. 245.

The above table clearly indicates that at any given point of time, Berar was exporting precious food grains worth 979,910 maunds (40,176 tons). This enormous quantity was primarily snatched from the mouths of the hungry and the poor. With the average population of 2,637,958 persons at any given point between 1867 and 1901,<sup>28</sup> this loss amounted to approximately 30.4 lbs per person. According to the general administration report of 1882-83, an average individual required 0.96 lbs of food grain per diem for survival.<sup>29</sup> Even if this relatively low consumption figure is applied, the surplus food grain that was exported could have sustained the entire population of Berar for up to 31.7 days. Even in the worst of famine and drought years (1877-79; 1896-97; and 1899-1900) a total of 2,375,509 maunds of food grains were exported out of the province. Similarly, the people of Berar never got anything in return for the raw cotton exports that formed on

average 42.9% of the total exports in any given year. The colonial roads and railways became the artery of people's misery. With such large quantities of grains leaving the province, the traditional custom of storing grains in 'peos' completely declined.<sup>30</sup> Thus the high grain prices and exports did not necessarily translate into increasing incomes for peasants as Michele McAlphin and Morris D. Morris have surmised.<sup>31</sup> Nor did it mean a change in their material condition. In fact it led to worsening of their lives.

Vasant Kaiwar in his studies of the Deccan has suggested that the incorporation of local economy into the world market network brought devastating famines to central India. The encroachment of imperial policies and imposition of a colonial infrastructure based on conditional private property in land<sup>32</sup> and a high rate of revenue demand undermined the traditional food security chain.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, David Hardiman argues that the neglect of traditional water works by the colonial state brought drought and famine to the Deccan plateau. These water works in the form of small irrigation systems like tanks, masonry dams, *anicuts*, reservoirs, lakes, ponds, canals, etc., had successfully avoided the problem of salination and malaria by tapping water for local irrigation and daily use. In pre-colonial times, the maintenance of these water works had been through local communal labour financed by the state in a situation where land, grazing grounds and surrounding forests were a common property resource of the village. The introduction of conditional private property rights in land under colonial aegis and withdrawal of state support led to the decline of local irrigation works.<sup>34</sup> Not surprisingly, one of the most acute problems during famine in Central India was that of water scarcity. Elizabeth Whitcombe, Ira Klein, and David Gilmartin have also suggested that the British neglect of small water works in favour of large irrigation canals were the chief cause of

salination, silting, leaching, disease, and famine that were triggered by a general environmental collapse.<sup>35</sup>

P.A. Elphinstone conducted extensive survey and settlement operations in the Deccan in 1860s and 70s. In his reports he poignantly noted the neglect of traditional water works and the acute problem of water scarcity.<sup>36</sup> But every subsequent colonial official in this cotton rich region of Central India came to believe that there was no need to develop irrigation or water works because the black cotton soil was naturally rich and did not need much water to grow crops. A strong anti-irrigation lobby among the officials created this myth that Berar was immune from drought and famine. Therefore the need for a famine code or relief measures were neither felt nor devised. With this attitude, the officials in fact refused to even acknowledge that drought, disease, and famine related deaths were taking place.<sup>37</sup> This denial and failure to put in place even a semblance of infrastructure made the famine in Central India all the more devastating. Similarly, the sanitary commissioner's reports actually drew a strong connection between contaminated water and diseases like cholera, malaria, diarrhea, dysentery and smallpox, not to mention undernourishment caused by the low calorie intake of the general mass of population.<sup>38</sup> Yet, no public action was forthcoming. And when serious famines did hit the region (1877-78; 1896-97 and 1899-1900) and the state was forced to recognize it on account of millions of deaths, the blame was put on natural causes like the failure of rains and crops.<sup>39</sup> However, a simple common sense query would demolish this colonialist argument. If the region is naturally rich with black cotton soil and does not need much water to grow crops, then how can failure of rain cause famines?

Radhika Ramasubban in her work on epidemic diseases and medicine in colonial India has argued that government sanitation measures were primarily geared towards protecting British cantonments and civil lines where most of the European population was concentrated. This ‘enclavist’ nature of colonial medicine failed to protect the vast majority of the people not just during famines but also in ordinary times.<sup>40</sup> And the railways took plague and cholera along with grains to every nook and corner of Central India from the port city of Bombay.<sup>41</sup> However, Irfan Habib states that the dark underlying cause of all famines in British India was the intense poverty of its masses. And this suggests a deep relationship between the colonial political economy of exploitation and the material condition of the masses.<sup>42</sup>

As already mentioned, the extensive land survey operations conducted in Berar in 1860s and 70s were designed for revision every thirty years. The first revision took place in 1898-99, but unfortunately most of the revision settlement reports have either been lost or yet to be found. However, only one of the report survived through time and this report was done in 1900 for the Basim *taluka*<sup>43</sup> in Basim district by a one F. W. Francis, the Director of Land Records and Agriculture. In this report there is one extremely interesting data that shows a rather rare comparison in the people’s standard of living during these two time periods twenty-five years apart. It is worthwhile here to reproduce the comparative data:

**Table 4**

**Comparative statistics from the first settlement to the revision settlement in Basim taluka of Berar in Central India (some parameters of the standard of living in an agrarian society): 1872-73 and 1898-99**

<b>Subject</b>	<b>1872-73</b>	<b>1898-99</b>
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No. of houses per head population	0.25	0.17
No. of agricultural cattle per head of population	0.43	0.31
No. of cows and buffaloes per head of population	0.60	0.42
No. of sheep and goats per head of population	0.08	0.11
No. of carts per head of population	0.04	0.03
No. of wells per head of population	0.03	0.02
No. of cultivated acres head of population	5.7	3.1

**Source:** Basim Taluka Settlement Report, Prepared by F.W. Francis, Director of Land Records and Agriculture, Hyderabad Assigned Districts, Chikalda (April 25, 1900), p. 4.

The above table is just for the taluka of Basim. However, it certainly suggests a trend for the period and perhaps for the province as a whole. It should be noted that Basim is a hilly jungle taluk and if the situation was declining in the hill districts, then in the plain districts where cultivation is more extensive, the intensity of decline would be perhaps even greater. And considering the severity of the famines in the closing decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it may well be that the standard of living was declining in the entire province. For example, the number of houses per capita declined along with cattle heads, carts, wells, and cultivated acreage. This certainly suggests an overall decline in the standard of living. Decline in the number of wells and cultivated acres surely led to acute water and food availability decline throughout the province as droughts and famines periodically devastated the region. Widespread drought and famine related disasters are reported in the colonial documents for the years: 1862; 1865-66; 1868; 1871; 1875; 1878; 1883-84; 1885; 1886-87; 1887-88; 1896-97; and 1899-1900 in which diseases decimated cattle and people without distinction.<sup>44</sup> So even though only three famines were officially recognized, there were many other years when drought and famine conditions existed but were never recognized by the colonial state. And most of the deaths in fact took place during these officially non-drought and famine years.

### **On the Consequences of Famine:**

The consequences of these famines were quite dramatic. South Asian scholars like Kinsley Davis, Tim Dyson and others who study demography and productivity agree that between 1870 and 1920 the life expectancy fell by 20%, population declined by 10% and net cropped area decreased by 12%.<sup>45</sup> It can also be argued that although the colonial state reluctantly recognized only three famines in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, yet drought like conditions prevailed in general throughout Central India taking a heavy toll of human and cattle lives.

Despite extracting millions of pounds in revenues, the state developed cold feet when it came to spending on public relief. The government was always worried about commensurate returns on its investments. And expenditure on famine relief was considered wasteful and uneconomic. In fact it was even looked down upon in official circles. Keeping in line with the imperial ideology, every effort was made to discourage people from seeking relief. The relief camps were not only hard to reach but were in fact deliberately kept in remote locations and beyond the reach of the physically weakened population. And those who somehow managed to reach these camps soon found that the conditions were more horrifying than the villages they had left behind. The sanitation was often very poor and prison like conditions prevailed while the relief camps gained notoriety as centers of epidemic diseases. It will be worth repeating here that all government relief was conditional upon heavy work in colonial projects on which both

cash and kind wages were deliberately kept low.<sup>46</sup> And in general, the state did not show much interest in famine relief.

But even in this weakened state, there was resistance to what Partha Chatterjee has called the ‘colonial [in]difference.’<sup>47</sup> There are innumerable recorded instances of grain riots, attacks on grain trains, protest against high prices and grain exports, hoarding and speculative trading, house trespass, bazaar unrest, offence against property, raids on standing debt crops held by moneylenders, raids on government establishments, robberies, thefts, incendiaries, and dacoities.<sup>48</sup> Some of them like the Deccan Riots in Poona in 1870s became symbols of bigger protests launched by the nationalist organizations like the Poona Sarvajanic Sabha and the Indian National Congress.<sup>49</sup>

#### **Coda for the Victims of Famine in Colonial India:**

In conclusion then, the laissez-faire ideology of the British Empire prevented state intervention in times of calamities such as droughts and famines. Western technology like the railways took grains out and brought famine even to surplus areas. This paper argues that the famines were caused not so much by the failure of rains but by artificial price inflations driven by the colonial policies and export trade. In an oppressive situation of colonial subjection and imperial domination over forests, grazing lands, and agriculture, the society remained socially and economically involuted. But most significantly it got exposed to droughts and famines that mercilessly decimated millions in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, even in their weakened state the people resisted to their last breath and gave birth the Indian nationalism.

#### **Endnotes:**

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<sup>1</sup> Mike Davis. *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Nino Famines and the Making of the Third World*. London: Verso, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> See Jim Blaut. *The Colonizer's Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Euro-centric History*. New York: The Guilford Press, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> See Sheldon Watts. *Epidemics and History: Disease, Power and Imperialism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> See Jared Diamond. *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*. New York: Norton, 1997; David Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor* (New York: Norton, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> See John Caldwell. "Malthus and the Less Developed World: The Pivotal Role of India." *Population and Development Review* 24:4 (Dec. 1998).

<sup>6</sup> See Eric Stokes. *The English Utilitarians and India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959.

<sup>7</sup> See B. M. Bhatia. *Famines in India, 1850-1945*. Bombay, 1963; and Mike Davis. *Late Victorian Holocausts*. Chs. 1 & 5.

<sup>8</sup> See Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen. *The Political Economy of Hunger: Selected Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995; and Amartya Sen. *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.

<sup>9</sup> See the works of H.D. Sankhalia. *The Prehistory and protohistory of India and Pakistan*. Poona, 1974; D.D. Kosambi. *Ancient India: A History of Its Culture and Civilization*. New York: Pantheon Book, 1965; Romila Thapar. *A History of India*, Volume 1. London: Penguin Books, 1990; D. N. Jha, *Ancient India in Historical Outline*. New Delhi: Manohar, 1998; R.S. Sharma. *Indian Feudalism, circa A.D. 300-1200*.

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Delhi, 1980; and Irfan Habib. *The Agrarian System of Mughal India, 1556-1707*. Bombay, 1963.

<sup>10</sup> Sumit Guha. *Environment and Ethnicity in India, 1200-1991*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

<sup>11</sup> Nicholas Dirks. *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Laxman D. Satya. "Colonial Encroachment and Popular Resistance: Land Survey and Settlement Operations in Berar: 1860-1877." *Agricultural History* 72: 1 (Winter 1998): 55-76.

<sup>13</sup> *Central Provinces District Gazetteers: Amraoti District* (Bombay: Caxton Works, 1911), pp. 106-111; and *Central Provinces and Berar District Gazetteers: Akola District* (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1910), pp. 231-251.

<sup>14</sup> Neeladri Bhattacharya. "Pastoralists in a Colonial World," in David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha, ed., *Nature, Culture, Imperialism: Essays on the Environmental History of South Asia*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998. Pp. 49-85.

<sup>15</sup> Irfan Habib. *Essays in Indian History: Towards a Marxist Perception*. New Delhi: Tulika, 1995. Pp. 296-335.

<sup>16</sup> See Mahesh Rangarajan. *Fencing the Forest: Conservation and Ecological Change in India's Central Provinces, 1860-1914*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996.

<sup>17</sup> Neil Charlesworth. *Peasants and Imperial Rule: Agriculture and Agrarian Society in the Bombay Presidency: 1850-1935*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

<sup>18</sup> Ramachandra Guha. "The Prehistory of Community Forestry in India." *Environmental History* 6: 2 (Apr 2001): 213-238.

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<sup>19</sup> Vanita Damodaran. “Famine in a Forest Tract: Ecological Change and the Causes of the 1897 Famine in Chota Nagpur – North India.” In Richard Grove, et. al. eds. *Nature and the Orient: The Environmental History of South and Southeast Asia*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998; and D.E.U. Baker. *Colonialism in an Indian Hinterland: The Central Provinces, 1820-1920*. Delhi, 1993.

<sup>20</sup> Ram Guha. “An environmental history debate: The making of the 1878 Forest Act.” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 27:1 (1990): 65-84.

<sup>21</sup> Indira Munshi Saldhana. “Colonial Forest Regulation and Collective Resistance: 19<sup>th</sup> Century Thana District.” In Richard Grove, et. al. ed. *Nature and the Orient: The Environmental History of South and Southeast Asia*.

<sup>22</sup> B. Bhatia. *Famines in India, 1850-1945*. Bombay, 1963; and Ramachandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil. *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996.

<sup>23</sup> See Bipan Chandra. *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India: Economic Policies of Indian Nationalist Leadership, 1885-1905*. New Delhi, 1966; Sumit Sarkar. *Modern India, 1885-1947*. Delhi: McMillan, 1983; and Amiya Bagchi. *Private Investments in India, 1900-1939*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972.

<sup>24</sup> See William Digby. *Prosperous British India*. London, 1901.

<sup>25</sup> See Amartya Sen. “Famine Mortality: A Study of the Bengal Famine of 1943.” In E. Hobsbawm, et. al. eds. *Peasants in History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980.

<sup>26</sup> See Laxman D. Satya. *Cotton and Famine in Berar: 1850-1900*. Delhi: Manohar, 1997. Ch. 7; and Mike Davis. *Late Victorian Holocausts*. P. 310.

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<sup>27</sup> Mike Davis. *Late Victorian Holocausts*. P. 11; and Michael Watts. *Silent Violence: Food, Famine and Peasantry in Northern Nigeria*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.

<sup>28</sup> Tim Dyson. "The Population History of Berar since 1881 and its potential wider significance." *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 24:2 (1989): 168.

<sup>29</sup> *Report on the Administration of the Hyderabad Assigned Districts for the year 1882-83*. Hyderabad: Residency Government Press, 1883. para 12.

<sup>30</sup> *The Report of the Indian Famine Commission, 1898*. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1898. p. 363.

<sup>31</sup> Michele McAlphin. *Subject to Famine: Food Crisis and Economic Change in Western India, 1860-1920*. New Jersey, 1983; and for a critique of McAlphin see, Currie, Kate, "Famines in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Indian History: A Materialist Alternative to Ecological Reductionism," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 16:4 (1986): 475-490.

<sup>32</sup> The colonial condition being, the regular payment of land revenue under the threat of seizure and court auction for default.

<sup>33</sup> See Vasant Kaiwar "The Colonial State, Capital and the Peasantry in Bombay Presidency." *Modern Asian Studies* 28:4 (1994): 793-832.

<sup>34</sup> David Hardiman. "Small-Dam Systems of the Sahyadris." See David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha, eds., *Nature, Culture, and Imperialism: Essays on the Environmental History of South Asia*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.

<sup>35</sup> Whitcombe, Elizabeth, "The Environmental Costs of Irrigation in British India: Waterlogging, Salinity and Malaria," in David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha, eds., *Nature, Culture, and Imperialism: Essays on the Environmental History of South Asia*.

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Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998: 237-259; and Klein, Ira. "Development and death: Reinterpreting malaria, economics and ecology in British India." *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 38:2 (2001): 147-179; and Gilmartin, David, "Scientific Empire and Imperial Science: Colonialism and Irrigation Technology in the Indus Basin," *Journal of Asian Studies* 53:4 (November 1994): 1127-1149.

<sup>36</sup> Elphinstone wrote several settlement reports as survey officer. Here only two most important once are mentioned, *Mehkur Taluka Settlement Report*, no. 1098 of 1868; and *Morsi Taluka Settlement Report*, No. 563 of 1871.

<sup>37</sup> Laxman D. Satya. *Cotton and Famine in Berar: 1850-1900*. Ch. 7.

<sup>38</sup> Sanitary Commissioner's Reports were published annually between 1873 and 1902 under the title: *Report of the Sanitary Commissioner of the Hyderabad Assigned Districts, for the year.....* published by the British Resident at Hyderabad.

<sup>39</sup> Famine commission reports and every colonial document of the 19<sup>th</sup> century repeated this refrain. For example, see J. A. Crawford. *Report on the Famine in the Hyderabad Assigned Districts in the years 1899 and 1900*, vol. 1. Nagpur: Chambers Press, 1901; F. S. Bullock. *Narrative of the Famine in the Hyderabad Assigned Districts during the year 1896-97*. Hyderabad: Residency Printing Office, 1898; and *Report of the Indian Famine Commission. Vol. III. Evidence in Reply to Inquiries of the Commission. Ch. 1 – Condition of the Country and People*. London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1880.

<sup>40</sup> See Ramasubban, Radhika. "Imperial health in British India, 1857-1900." In Roy Macleod and Milton Lewis, ed., *Disease, Medicine and Empire: Perspectives on Western Medicine and the Experience of European Expansion*. New York: Routledge, 1988.

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<sup>41</sup> Catanach, I. J. "Plague and the tensions of empire: India 1896-1918." In David Arnold, ed., *Imperial Medicine and indigenous societies*. Manchester: Manchester University Press: 1988; McNeill, William H. *Plagues and Peoples*. New York: Doubleday, 1977; Anil Kumar. *Medicine and the Raj: British Medical Policy in India: 1835-1911*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1998; and Ira Klein. "Development and death: Reinterpreting malaria, economics and ecology in British India." *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 38:2 (2001): 147-179.

<sup>42</sup> Irfan Habib. *Essays in Indian History*. Pp. 296-335.

<sup>43</sup> A *taluka* is a sub-division of a district and the smallest unit of colonial administration above the village.

<sup>44</sup> See *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, vol. VII. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901. p. 397.

<sup>45</sup> Kinsley Davis. *Population of India and Pakistan*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951; Irfan Habib. "Studying a Colonial Economy – Without Perceiving Colonialism." *Modern Asian Studies* 19:3 (1985); Sumit Guha, ed. *Growth Stagnation or Decline? Agricultural Productivity in British India*. Delhi, 1992; and Tim Dyson, ed. *India's Historical Demography*. London: Curzon Press, 1989.

<sup>46</sup> See J. A. Crawford. *Report on the Famine in the Hyderabad Assigned Districts in the years 1899 and 1900*, vol. 1.; F. S. Bullock. *Narrative of the Famine in the Hyderabad Assigned Districts during the year 1896-97*; and *Report of the Indian Famine Commission*. Vol. III. *Evidence in Reply to Inquiries of the Commission*. Ch. 1 – *Condition of the Country and People*.

<sup>47</sup> Partha Chatterjee. *Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Post Colonial Histories*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

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<sup>48</sup> Laxman D. Satya. *Cotton and Famine in Berar, 1850-1900*. Ch. 7; and Mike Davis. *Late Victorian Holocausts*. Pt. II & IV.

<sup>49</sup> See Ravinder Kumar. "The Deccan Riots of 1875." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 24: 4 (August 1965): 613-635.