

## **A 200-Year-Long Chronicle of Famine Management in British Bengal Province: A Progressive Approach or A Systematic Disruption?**

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### **Abstract**

The famines that pounded Eastern India under British colonial rule, especially in Bengal, Odisha, and Bihar, were not simply natural calamities but were mostly exacerbated by the colonial economic policies and administrative negligence. The Bengal famine of 1770, the Orissa Famine of 1866, and the devastating Great Bengal famine of 1943 embellishes a sinister pattern of systemic exploitation and an indifferent attitude towards famine management and relief by the colonial administration.

Calamities like famines in British ruled India constitute a significant and tragic aspect of the subcontinent's history. It is characterized by both socio-political and environmental factors that augmented severe food insecurity. Between the 18th and 20th centuries, colonised India witnessed and experienced a series of devastating famines of which the most notable tragedy was the Great Bengal Famine of 1943, which collectively resulted in near about three million human deaths and intense societal disruption. As a matter of fact, during the colonial rule, almost every other famine in British India turned catastrophic in nature from an initial phase of mere crop failure and shortage of food. These inflated crises and the devastations they brought about were mostly because of the utter negligence in famine management and relief initiatives on the part of the Britishers. Now, whether the negligence was intentional or unavoidable, whether the famine policies were drafted and implemented with sincerity or not, whether some psychological factors were working from behind to make things worse or the unfortunate aggravation of the situations were nothing but natural occurrences, this paper will try to explore all of it.

This paper will also explore the complex interactions between the environmental factors, societal impacts and colonial policies during these famines. It will lighten up the historical context that continues to influence discussions on food security and public health in India even today. According to many experts from a diverse range of disciplines, the Eastern Indian famines were not just natural disasters but man-made crises, shaped and escalated by colonial strategies in accordance with an indifferent, unwilling and insensitive British administration. I will try to explore how the prioritization of the "profit over people" policy led to so many devastating famines and hapless losses of human lives. I will try to explain how their hard-hearted attitude toward such calamities was mostly callous and left a lasting impact on India's socio-economic landscape. I want to shed some light on the colonial mindset that, without a shred of doubt, had

always been instrumental in making the entire famine management and relief program by the inadequate, irresponsible, and inefficient.

This paper will also try to discern the very psychology behind the ruthless economic exploitation by the colonizers, their inherent racial superiority complex, Laissez-faire ideology, Malthusian ideas, and imperial economic pragmatism all of which played a crucial role in maintaining a continuous series of mismanagement in the time calamities for a long stretch of about two hundred years in British India. My paper will try to explain reasons and the psychology behind framing famines as natural population controls rather than severe crises demanding intervention through management and relief.

In this paper I have carefully chosen three important famines from eastern India, from three different timelines, to investigate and understand the nature of the famines and their management during the colonial rule. The approaches I have taken are going to be multifaceted and will definitely help to illustrate a clearer picture of how so often mere scarcity and starvation had evolved into a full-fledged famine under the able hands of the great British Empire. And whether during that period of two hundred years of colonial rule, any real-time significant changes were instituted to the famine (and other calamities) management policies by the Britishers, will also be peered into through this work.

**Keywords:** Famine, British, Management, Crisis, India, Policy