Thinking through the Indian Famine Commission Reports as the foundation of contemporary Indian food policy – 1880-1901.¹

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There are so many hungry people that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread.
M. Gandhi.

The Famine Commission Reports (1880-1901) are treasures for public policy scholars in general and essential literature for those interested in food policy. They are examples of vanguard thinking and some practice in public policy in India in the late 1800s, early 1900s. This work-in-progress paper builds on previous work examining the reports of the Indian Famine Commission (IFC) from 1878 to 1901 (Romesh Dutt, 1901); Loveday, 1914; Bhatia, 1967; Srivastava, 1968; Brennan, 1984; and Drèze, 1988). The aim here is to investigate governance and food policy directions present in the different Famine Commission Reports between 1880 and 1901, under the influence of the classical political economy thinking of the time. It is a review of the documents as a representation of the understanding of the colonial elite of the situation and needs for famine prevention and relief work in India at the time and how it translated into public policy.

**Famine**

A famine is a community crisis (Currey and Hugo, 1985), conflagrated by a widespread scarcity of food (Kelly, 1992). It is defined in terms of mortality, malnutrition and hunger which are materialized through a set of social, nutritional and economic signs and symptoms with complex circular and correlated nets of causation that lead to a loss of community capability to support marginal members who either migrate due to the scarcity of food, or

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² Malnutrition reduces the body’s resistance to infection by impairing the immune

An intrinsic feature of a famine is that it is a regional scale phenomenon, resulting from “complex concatenation of spatial processes”, such as deforestation, drought, war, flood, crop failure, population imbalance and government policies (Arnold, 1993; Currey and Hugo, 1985; Devereux, 2000). Famines are simultaneously or subsequently followed by widespread occurrence of infectious diseases, such as cholera, dysentery and others such as, malaria, gum disease, anemia, beriberi, pellagra, and scurvy and many others as individuals are generally weak due to hunger and their immune systems incapable of keeping out commonly present pathogens (Rosen, 2014; Saml, 2011).2

A famine has long-term effects on a community, forcing, oftentimes, structural socio-economic transformations, leading to changes in political power, affecting, for example, immigration policies, rural development and public health norms. (Currey and Hugo, 1985:1). Due to abnormal social and environmental conditions produced, a breakdown in normal social relations takes place and highly dysfunctional behavioral responses are produced (Arnold, 1993).

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2 Malnutrition reduces the body’s resistance to infection by impairing the immune response [...]. Famine victims died in the tens of thousands from opportunistic diseases, after their immune systems had been weakened to the point that a simple rhinovirus – the common cold – can become a killer. But the relationship between infectious disease and malnutrition is complicated, and two-way. Infections shrink the appetite, and – when the gastrointestinal tract is targeted – reduce the Metabolism of nutrients, at the precise moment when more nutrients are needed to fight the infection. But while all infections affect nutrition, not all infections are affected by malnutrition (or, for that matter, good nutrition). A number of studies of modern famines have demonstrated that malnutrition has a progressive increase on the likelihood of infection. However, it’s just as common for malnutrition to actually inhibit the growth of pathogens, by denying them vital compounds. Rosen, 2014.
By present United Nations standards, a famine can be declared in a country or region when three conditions of mortality, malnutrition and hunger are met: (a) at least 20% of households are facing extreme food shortages; (b) Over 30% of the population experience acute malnutrition; (c) in the given time period, every day, hunger is declared as the cause of two out of every 10,000 deaths (World Food Program, n.d.).

Famine was a pervasive phenomenon in India between 1707 and 1943 as 23 severe famines and many more episodes of shortages of food occurred (Murton, 2000). Some researchers have argued that during the British period, famines were more frequent, claimed more lives and affected larger areas (Paul, 2102; Davis, 2000; Sen, 1999). But their arguments do not seem to hold, as statistical evidence is scant prior to the British invasion, and most rely on unverifiable historical sources. Most evidence does account for the events, that is, the famines did occur, however there is an absence of historical statistical estimates accounting for famine victims and their pervasiveness that take into consideration variables such as estimated total population, general growth rates, mortality rates and crucial demographic data (Jha, 2004; Thapar, 2002; Hall-Matthews, 2008). Therefore, so far, much, if not, all estimates are mere speculations. It is reasonable to affirm, peremptorily, that any claims as to the worsening of famine conditions during the British period in relation to previous periods are not robust.

The causes of famines in India varied according to location as well as period; nonetheless, there were some regular patterns common to all of them. Droughts led to extreme deviations in monsoonal weather systems as a result of the El Niño-Southern Oscillation phenomenon (ENSO), which caused crop failure in a specific region or in multiples regions (Ghose, 1982; Paul, 2012). Inevitably, crop failures resulted in generalized food scarcity in the regions affected by the phenomenon. As the scarcity deepened famine followed and, in each occasion millions succumbed to inanition, related diseases and opportunistic infections (Bhatia, 1991; McAlpin, 1983).
Prominent contemporary researchers ascertain that famines and resulting deaths were largely preventable during the British period through effective public policy. Although severe droughts could not have been prevented, crop failures could have been remedied by providing the population with the means to survive. Some have suggested that the export of the most important cereals could have been banned in starving regions, relief provided more readily, taxes suspended and the creation of state held food reserves speeded (Paul, 2012:39).

Using the selectorate theory by Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2002, 2003), Plümper and Neumayer (2008), argue that, “governmental inaction in the face of a severe famine threat can be the rational outcome of a political support maximization calculus. Governments may rationally fail to act against famines when the political costs of action are higher than the political costs of inaction (Plümper and Neumayer, 2008:3).”

Amartya Sen (1999) has argued that most famines during the British era can be blamed on the colonizers inaction due to a lack of political will to prevent such calamities. According to Sen (1999), the authoritarian nature of the British Raj, that is, the absence of democracy was the main causal factor for the endemic nature of famines in British India. Having to win elections and face public criticism, democratic governments are strongly incentivized to work towards avoiding disasters such as famines. His famous proposition that “No famine has ever taken place in the history of the world in a functioning democracy,” has been disputed and discussed by many and as often happen

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3 The previous Viceroy, Northbrook (Thomas George Baring), 1872-1876, a liberal, reduced taxes and simplified legislation, cut back military spending, but rejected the most expensive irrigation projects (The Spectator, 1873). At the same time, Northbrook tried to avoid a second famine in Orissa by ordering 450,000 tons of rice to be procured in Bihar and northern Bengal.

4 The selectorate theory by Bueno de Mesquita, Smith, Siverson and Morrow (2002; 2003) is based on the proposition that the primary objective of a political leader is to perpetuate his/herself in power by maintaining their winning coalition. If the coalition is small, as in the case of autocracies, a leader will rely on the use of private goods to secure a coalition. In the case of large winning coalitions, such as in the case of democracies, leaders will rely on the use of public goods to build loyalty in the coalition.
with general propositions, the odd black swan does not seem to have shaken those that stand by it (Banik, 2007; 2011).\textsuperscript{5}

It is, however, important to note that there is no inconclusive historical evidence to affirm that the colonial government calculatingly prompted or allowed famines, despite the almost fascist rhetoric that some members of the government and opinions vented by the press that served the British in India advocated (Steele, 1999).\textsuperscript{6} Moreover, not all factors pertaining to the population’s well being were directly related to the British Raj’s policies. Nonetheless, the state seemingly could have used more of its resources to remedy the famine progression. As pointed by Sen (1999), illustrated in Plümper and Neumayer (2008), in an authoritarian state, issues of governance and accountability in famine prevention are commonly ignored (Hall-Matthews, 2002:9; De Waal, 2000).\textsuperscript{7}

**Historical Circumstances**

The majority report of the Famine Commission of 1880 was later codified into the Famine Codes which were developed in the 1880s by civil servants of the British Raj, establishing the first modern times famine scales, and subsequently becoming the basis for famine codes and scales that endeavored to predict and in so doing, prevent famines throughout India and the world.\textsuperscript{8} Set in the broader British historical backdrop of the Irish Potato Famine that had taken place roughly just two decades before (1845-1852), to

\textsuperscript{5} For example, Vandana Shiva (2002) affirmed that starvation was “making a comeback” in India, in “Why Half the Planet is Hungry, the Observer of London, June 16, 2002. See also, Dan Banik (2011; 2007).

\textsuperscript{6} “Salisbury was shocked at the tone of the newspapers in India that catered for the British official and business communities; they described famine as a salutary cure for over-population.” Steele, 1999:97.

\textsuperscript{7} De Waal (2000:1), hypothesizes that “Democratic political institutions and processes can play a role in the struggle against famine, but this depends upon the development of political coalitions in the countries concerned, and the strategies they use.”

\textsuperscript{8} Process-tracing the Commission formation can shine light on the end product and contribute to the literature dedicated to understanding India’s food security traditions, laws, programs and general practices.
almost complete English Government inaction, the ensuing relief activities carried out under the recommendations of the Commissions are noteworthy. The very existence of the Famine Commissions (FCs) was a reaction of the India Office through the Government of India to a sequence of famines from the early 1860s to 1877, which resulted in great loss of life, diminished profits to traders, revenue loss to the Government of India and much political upheaval and some revolt. The initial 1878-80 Commission was formed reflecting the interests and political influences of the India Office, and central and provincial governments (Brennan, 1984). Despite having an unwritten mandate to justify the Raj’s policy towards food policy and disaster response, the Commissions defied that.

The arrival of the newly appointed Viceroy of India, Lord Lytton (1876-1880), coincided with the Great Famine of 1876-78. The Viceroy travelled between Madras and Mysore from August 17 to September 27, 1877 to verify for himself the effects of the famine and also to confer with the Governor of the Madras Presidency, Richard Chandos-Grenville. As the Famine showed no signs of abating, almost 8 months later, in May 1878, Lytton created a Famine Commission responsible for investigating the causes and effects of the famine, recommend ways to predict and prevent future ones, and suggest how the Government should intervene. With the Commission, a one million pounds a year Famine Insurance Fund was set up and a budget of 500 thousand pounds allocated to railway construction and general public works. A further 250 thousand pounds were set aside for irrigational projects, which were advocated as one of the ways to mitigate the desolation caused by the droughts (Great Britain, 1899).

9 3rd Duke of Buckingham and Chandos.
10 Interestingly, in a clear evidence of the ecological deterioration India was already suffering in the 19th century, during the works of the Famine Commission, in 1879, in certain regions, irrigation works were refuted as a “universal famine preventative”, as “[t]he Commission of 1879 had taken the view that the localities in which large-scale irrigation could be undertaken with significant advantage were becoming exhausted.” (Whitcombe, 2005 [1983]:717
Lytton acted under pressure from the India Office in London and from his Conservative government, led by Benjamin Disraeli, at the same time as he was strongly criticized by British and Indian civil society groups and individuals (Digby, 1878; De Waal, 1997). Previous viceroys had grappled with the issue of famine relief due to the multilayered complexities surrounding the phenomenon, restrained by ideological and budget constraints. Intermittent droughts, incentives for grain arbitrage as wheat was on average cheaper in India than in England in the second half of the 1800s, coupled with a devaluing rupee and cheapening freight costs, in a laissez-faire economic environment, confounded even the most well-meaning, benevolent government (Brennan, 1984; Bhatia, 1991; Roy, 2011).

Despite Lytton’s apparent concern with the issue, he became a stumbling block to further work, as he was more concerned with saving the exchequer for British expansion towards Afghanistan, which he had inherited from the previous viceroyalty (Steele, 1999).\footnote{“During the worst part of the famine in 1877 the Parliament obliviously removed the five-percent import duty on manufactured cotton goods which Northbrook and the Council had opposed doing. The Government of India was thus short of money while it was also spending much on the war in Afghanistan.” Beck, 2008.} In reaction to pleas for relief in 1877, Lytton wrote, “Let the British public foot the bill for its ‘cheap sentiment’, if it wished to save life at a cost that would bankrupt India” and “there is to be no interference of any kind on the part of Government with the object of reducing the price of food,” and he instructed his district officers to “discourage relief works in every possible way,” as, “Mere distress is not a sufficient reason for opening a relief work” […], as he believed that any kind of famine relief would encourage shirking (Osborn, 1880: 244; Balfour, 1899).\footnote{Social Darwinism was the vogue of the British establishment of the time and Lytton subscribed to it and that considerably delayed his response to the issue. Concomitantly, his office had been delegated the responsibility of implementing the Crown’s trading policy which has been held partially responsible for the worsening of the conditions which led to the extension of the Famine (Davis, 2000).}

Rains returned in the autumn of 1877 and relief works were gradually phased out but the Great Famine had lasting social impacts that reverberated
economically and politically, setting the stage for historically significant movements (The Spectator, 1877). For example, following it, increasing numbers of farmhands and handloom weavers in South India were, for the most part, if not forcefully, deceitfully relocated to British plantation colonies – Fiji, Natal (South Africa), Burma (Myanmar), Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Malaya (Peninsular Malaysia), British Guiana, Mauritius, Jamaica and Trinidad as indentured laborers (Laurence, 1994; Kale, 1998).

Additionally, the political impact was probably the most relevant as the millions of deaths and the tardy and inept reaction of the Government so deeply unsettled some British administrators, among them, William Wedderburn and A. O. Hume, that a strengthened moderate nationalist thinking emerged, partially as a reaction to the handling of the famine reliefs. Also, a budding generation of nationalists, among them, Dadabhai Naoroji and Romesh Chunder Dutt, were to shore up their economic critique against the British Government in India (Paul, 2012).

**Influences on Famine Policy in the 1870s-80s**

Brennan (1984) advances two traceable influences of British famine relief policy in the 1870s onwards. The first major influence was the mainstream classical economic thinking of the time. Most in the India Office and in the Government of India were adherents to the laissez-faire interpretation of Adam Smith`s and related thinkers worldview. Non-intervention was the key term, though interestingly, the very formation of a famine commission was a clear sign of dissent against laissez-faire and in favor of greater responsibility of the state in guaranteeing the minimum requirements in food supply, notwithstanding the fact that it was not a democratic government but rather a colonial occupying power. At least, in principle, Queen Victoria’s message to the Imperial Assemblage to her newly incorporated Indian subjects that their
“happiness, prosperity and welfare” were the “present aims and objects of Our Empire”, seemed to be translated into policy objectives.\textsuperscript{13}

The second explanation, correlated to the first, was the British fiscal policy in India. In the almost 100 years of the British Raj, the Indian economy was stagnant, growing one percent a year at the same rate as the population (Roy, 2011). The Government desired to keep famine relief to a minimum in order to cut expenses as much as possible and delay tax hikes and new taxes. Corroborating this notion, Bhatia (1967) claims that the main reason behind British reluctance regarding taxes was the need to appease the landowning and trading classes whose continued acquiescence was vital to their permanence.

A third explanation of British famine relief policy can be found in the reaction of British colonial officers to earlier. The then administrators had been penalized for “indulging” the poor with “vaiedictory dole”, Quinine for fever and relief works in the Bihar Famine of 1873-74, which was one of the most effective British disaster aversion efforts in colonial times (Imperial Gazetteer of India, 1908:482; Davis, 2000). Richard Temple, at the time of the Bihar Famine lieutenant governor of Bengal Presidency, was one of them and seems to have vowed to redeem himself when occasion arose. (Hall-Matthews, 2008; Davis, 2000). In the following famine (Great Famine of 1876–78, Northwest India) the same officials reverted their actions, and outdid one another in a thrifty implementation of relief policies, which failed in their

\begin{footnotesize}{13} The Queen, represented by the Viceroy Lord Lytton, sent a telegram on 1\textsuperscript{st} January 1877, which read:

We, Victoria, by the grace of God, Empress of India, and through our Viceroy, to all our officers, civil and military, and to all princes, chiefs, and peoples now at Delhi assembled, send our Royal and Imperial greeting, and assure them of the deep interest and earnest affection with which we regard the people of our Indian Empire. We have witnessed with heartfelt satisfaction the reception they have accorded to our beloved son, and have been touched by their loyalty and attachment to our House and Throne.

We trust the present occasion may tend to unite in bonds of yet closer affection ourselves and our subjects, that from the highest to the humblest all may feel that under our rule the great principles of liberty, equity and justice are secured to them, and that to promote their happiness, to add to their prosperity, and advance their welfare, are the ever-present aims and objects of our Empire.
\end{footnotesize}
purpose (Hall-Matthews, 2008). The Colonial government under Lytton would not accept any suggestions to forego taxation of the most affected areas and miserly fed those that were able-bodied to participate in relief works.¹⁴

A forth influence would be the English Poor Laws of 1834, which is patent in statements such as this in the Report of the Commission of 1880, “The doctrine that in time of famine the poor are entitled to demand relief [...] would probably lead to the doctrine that they are entitled to such relief at all times, and thus the foundation would be laid of a system of general poor relief, which we cannot contemplate without serious apprehension.” (FC, 1880). The biggest difference, Murton (1984) points out, is that the English law for the English was designed to support the poor in ordinary times, whereas the Hunger Codes which were derived from the majority report of the 1880 Commission, provisioned for government entitlements only in the presence of a declared famine.

The First Commission and Report – an overview

The Commission of 1880 had two objectives: formulate general principles for countering future famines; and, recommend specific measures to prevent material losses and starvation related deaths. In principle, “the Commission of 1880 recognized to the full the obligation imposed on the State to offer to the necessitous the means of relief in times of famine” (Famine Commission of 1901:2). And, as a result, the Report of 1878-1880 (henceforth, FC 1880) had to wait until Lytton left India in 1880 before it was officially published. The

¹⁴ Osborn (1880), summarized the acts of the government in the following excerpt: “The appalling mortality which marked this famine [1876-78] I attributed to two causes. Firstly, the rapacity of the Indian Government in insisting upon an immediate collection of the Land Revenue during a season of unparalleled distress and destitution; and, secondly, its inhuman niggardliness in providing labour and food for a starving populace.” [...] “There is no satisfaction to be obtained from the belief that a million of Her Majesty’s subjects perished of hunger, owing to the heedless cruelty and neglect of Lord Lytton, Sir John Strachey, and Sir George Couper.” (Osborn, 1880: 227).
findings of the Famine Commission were to be instrumental for the principles and practices of the Famine Codes that were to become the basis for relief works in the following Famine, that of 1896.

The hypothesis advocated by the Famine Commission of 1880 was that agricultural laborers and artisans loss of employment and wages due to droughts was the main cause of preceding famines and that national supply was not the issue. The resulting Famine Code of 1883, and subsequent codes of 1897 and 1900, set out a public policy for: (1) the transportation of grain to areas under famine conditions, provision of food in exchange for work relief to the able-bodied; (2) Guidelines for famine relief; (3) The construction of protective railways, and (4) the further expansion of irrigation works (FC, 1880).

The first Commission was a political and technical one. The president was Richard Strachey, a lieutenant General of the British Indian Army, representative of one of the most influential families in the colonial government at the time (Caine, 2005). Its secretary, Charles Alfred Elliott, a seasoned career official who eventually became the lieutenant governor of Bengal (1890-1895), not only directed the works of the Commission but also organized and directed relief operations (Lee, 1912).
James Caird, the third member of the Commission, was an agricultural expert who had worked in the latter stages of the Great Irish Famine. He was to be one of the authors of the dissenting minute in the Commission report of 1880. The other dissenting member was a civil servant from Madras, H. E. Sullivan (Gray, 2006). In their official dissent, commissioners H. E. Sullivan and Sir James Caird defended that the government should store grain itself, as they believed that private traders could not be expected to supply emergency food relief in sudden regional emergencies (FC 1880, Part I, pp. 66-9.). They were overruled and the Famine Commission’s secretary prepared a draft code.
based on the findings of the majority of the Commission. A model code was then distributed to provincial governments prior to the approval of the Government of India and the India Office. Later these codes were adapted to local circumstances and were in continued use with eventual updates until the 1970s (Brennan, 1984:91). Two Indians were included, Mahadev Vasudev Barve, chief minister (C.I.E., Diwan) of the princely state of Kolhapur (Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency, 1886), and C. V. Rungacharlu, who later was appointed Diwan of Mysore (1881-1883).15

The documents: Reports of the Indian Famine Commission (1880), (1898), (1901)16

This section is dedicated to an in-depth analysis of one of the Reports, the one elaborated by the 1898 Commission (IFC 1898). The Commission of 1898 was appointed to “formulate for future guidance the lessons which the Famine experience of 1897 has to teach.” (IFC 1898:i). As much as the Famine Codes derived from the majority Report of 1880 had been introduced by the government to prevent further famines, severe shortages of food occurred afterwards and by 1896, a famine was castigating the land. Starting in the Bundelkhand region (parts of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh), and later spreading to the United Provinces, the Central Provinces and Berar, Bihar, parts of Bombay and Madras presidencies, the Hissar district in the Punjab (and to a lesser extent, the princely states of Rajputana, Central India Agency and Hyderabad) a drought in the autumn of 1895 was followed by acute scarcity, and eventually a famine set in (Imperial

15 So far, I have not been able to locate documents that narrate their participation in the Commission’s work.

16 Three reports are regarded as foundational, namely, the Report of the Indian Famine Commission, 1880 (London, 1880); the Report of the Indian Famine Commission, 1898 (Simla, 1898); and the Report of the Indian Famine Commission, 1901 (Calcutta, 1901). Due to time and space constraints, only the Report of 1898 is analyzed in depth. This decision is also influenced not only by the historical value of the report, but also by what it represents in terms of policy and governance evolution, apart from lessons learnt that were incorporated to the text by 1898.
Gazetteer of India, 1907). The Commission desired to improve the “Provisional Famine Code of 1883”, used as the guideline for famine relief in 1896-97, but which failed to predict and prevent starvation deaths. The Imperial Gazetteer (1907), registered that, “The famine ended, generally, when the autumn harvest of 1897 was ripe; but it was followed by heavy mortality from fever in the autumn, and by a plague of rats. The actual famine mortality in British Districts may be roughly estimated at about 750,000.” (Imperial Gazetteer of India, 1907:491).

The permanent members of the Commission were J. B. Lyall (president), J. Richardson, T. W. Holderness, T. Higham, Rai Bahadur B. K. Bose and H. J. McIntosh (secretary). Apart from the permanent members, 8 temporary members were appointed to assist “[the Commission] in our inquiries and to see that local points or questions were not overlooked or misunderstood[.]” (IFC 1898:2).

The 371 pages Report comprises of seven chapters, subdivided in sections.

[In progress.]

Second Part

Foundations of the Right to Food Act (2014) in the Reports of the 1898 and 1901 Commission

[Upcoming]

17 There is a register of Rai Bahadur B. K. Bose as the official representative of the Central Provinces in the Indian financial statement and proceedings for the years 1900-1 and 1901-2. Cited in Bagchi, 2000:41.
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