

Railway and Famines in British India

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Abstract

In their expedition from trade to colonization, the British government carved out various instruments to maintain their hegemony in which colonial railways were the single largest and the most significant investment programme made in the history of the British Empire. Under the facade of laissez faire doctrine, the British rule released open support to encourage private investors for railway introduction and extension in India. Railway infrastructure was given priority at theory, policy and practice levels. However, the effectiveness of this largest investment program, in combating frequent terrible famines, is quite questionable. Colonial railways had a regressive impact on the land, environment and the people of India. Fundamentally, railway infrastructure accelerated the process of deindustrialization, poverty and frequent famines. Railway and famines went hand in gloves, as maximum food grains were transported to Europe and Indians were forced to face terrible famines. Therefore, famines in British India can be interpreted as problems of distribution, rather than food production. It was an obnoxious nexus of magical wheels with empty stomach.

Keywords: Colonialism; Commercialization of agriculture; Drain of wealth; Epidemic; Man-made famine; Railroad

Introduction

To understand the query of famines¹ in India, one must begin with the fact that Indian agricultural practices are chiefly based on monsoonal climate, since time immemorial. At least once in the course of a decade, the monsoon fails to arrive in a particular region, resulting in the scarcity of water or drought (Bhatia, 1968; Crook, 1933). Consequently, the shortage of water leads to the shortage of food grains or famine. Tirthankar Roy suggests that the famines in India were the result of environmental factors inherent in India's ecology as scarcity of water, poor quality of soil, unproductive livestock and obsolete cultivation practices & techniques (Roy, 2013). Florence Nightingale pointed out that the famines in British India were not caused by the lack of food in a particular geographical area. They were instead caused by inadequate transportation of food. Nightingale identified two types of famine as Grain famine and Money famine. Grain famine is the absence of normal agricultural production caused by unfavourable monsoons. On the contrary, money famine is an artificial food scarcity, which was formulated by the drainage of money from the peasant to the British government, or the money was drained to landlord to repay the debt (Nightingale and Vallee, 2006). In both of the conditions, it was impossible for the peasant to procure food. Amartya Sen implies that the famines in the British era were due to a lack of a serious effort on the part of the British government to prevent famines in large geographical regions of India. He explains the absence of democratic framework and attitude in British India. Sen 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 in time (Sen, 1982). This kind of pressure could not be exerted under conditions of colonial subjection.

Prior to British rule, the traditional India governments always

¹ Simply, famine is a widespread scarcity of food grains. This phenomenon is usually preceded by malnutrition, starvation, epidemic, increased mortality rate and stagnant population growth. Droughts may be considered as the root cause of famines. Drought or scarcity of water leads to crop failure and finally the failure of the crops in turn leads to a scarcity of food in the affected region. Droughts are themselves usually caused by the failure of monsoons.

planned for food crisis by laying aside food stocks at various levels of administration. This procedure ensured that there would be adequate food in famine-ridden years. The central administrative authority, whether in Ancient or Medieval period, would suspend the various taxes in the critical phase of economic insecurity. On the contrary, British rule always laid emphasis on the generation of revenue rather than expenditure for the betterment of common masses. Comparing the various governmental setups, Bhatia writes, *“From about the beginning of the eleventh century to the end of the eighteenth there were fourteen major famines in India. Under East India Company regime there occurred 16 major famines, a rate eight times higher than what had been before. This large scale massacre remained, more or less, equivalent up to the independence of India”* (Bhatia, 1968). Hence, the history of the British in India is a history of the deliberate creation of famines or man-made famines.

Objectives of the Study

The proposed study makes a comprehensive analysis of the British policy towards the introduction of imperial railways in India. It discusses whether the colonial railways were the means of improvement or impoverishment.

Discussion

From 17th century onwards, the East India Company (EIC)² enjoyed the status of vital trader partner of India. In the initial phase, the balance of trade³ was in favour of India, but with political subjection of the country the company started functioning according to the doctrine of colonialism. The most influential ideology behind British political development was the classical theory propounded by Adam Smith.

2 The East India Company (EIC) or the Governor and Company of Merchants of London trading into the East Indies was a Britain based commercial company. Founded on 31st Dec. 1600, this company carried out trade and commerce in Indian sub-continent. They entered in India as traders, but the unstable political condition made them the masters of the country.

3 The balance of trade is the difference in value between a country's imports and exports. A *positive balance* consists of exporting more than the imports; whereas *negative balance/ trade deficit or trade gap* consists of more imports in comparison to exports.

Accordingly, a *laissez-faire*⁴ doctrine of market capitalism was introduced in the late 18th century (Nanda, 2003). This doctrine guided the European imperialist approach in which governmental interference in the economy was objected, even in the incidence of acute crisis like famine. In the later phase, the *laissez-faire* doctrine was added by Malthusian theory⁵ of population where famine was regarded as a natural check over population and relieving the government from the responsibility of expenditure on relief related works. Further, the utilitarian⁶ principle that relief should be bitterly punitive in order to discourage dependence upon the government was overtly followed by British rule in India (Dutt, 1950). British conservative officials and Viceroy as Lord Lytton (1876-80)⁷, Richard Temple, Curzon (1898-1905), etc. strongly adhered to the fact that the empire had to be governed for revenues and not expenditure. It was asserted that the cheap famine labour could be fruitfully used in modernizing projects such as the railways, road construction, 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.

The British imperial policies prevented the transformation of Indian economy from agrarian to industrial (Chaudhuri, 1971; Stephenson, 1916). Functioning according to the classical controlled economy, India exported raw material and consumed finished goods. In order to sustain this functioning, state investments mostly went into maintaining the institutions of control like extended railway network, vast army, bureaucracy, etc. Very little amount was expended for the development of human resource capital or for carving an economic infrastructure that would benefit the general population of India. The burden of high land revenue demand and government refusal to remit even in times of

4 This doctrine favours an economic environment where commercial transactions, between various ventures, are free from interfering government restrictions as tariffs and other taxes.

5 It explains a moral restriction in form of epidemic, famine, war, etc. over rapid increase of population.

6 In utilitarianism theory, everything useful to happiness is good. Therefore, the name of the doctrine is utilitarianism, based on the principle of utility. Utility is found in everything, which contributes to the happiness of every rational being.

7 Reacting against relief requisition during the 1876-79 famine, acting Governor-General Lord Lytton (1876-80) replied, "*There will be no interference of any kind on the part of Government with the object of reducing the price of food.*" He instructed district officers to discourage relief works in every possible way. He further said, "Mere distress is not a sufficient reason for opening a relief work."

famine made the suffering of the people intense.⁸ Even while the heavy toll of deaths was going on, record amounts of tax were recovered from the people by the most violent methods, which included murder, rape etc. This draws the inhuman tendency of British rule in India.⁹ Evaluating the effects of the worse Bengal famine, the acting Governor of East India Company, Warren Hastings (1772-85), himself quoted, “*Notwithstanding the loss of at least one-third of the inhabitants of the province, and the consequent decrease of the cultivation, the net revenue collections of the year 1771 exceeded even those of 1768. It was naturally to be expected that the reduction of the revenue should have kept an equal pace.*”

Many studies have explained that there was never a shortage of food grains, but the government lacked in distribution and willingness to curb the evil effects of calamity. The 19th century famines in Central India were basically price induced famines that could have been avoided with timely governmental interference (Bose, 1994). However, that never happened because of the official adherence to the *laissez faire* ideology of non-interference. Moreover, there is even literary evidence of grains being exported to Europe and other international markets, while millions were dying of starvation and disease in India. During the great famine of 1877-78, a noted Victorian journalist William Digby observed that the root causes of famines in India was railways. He narrated, “*The railways carried famine to grain surplus areas through artificial price inflation without any governmental check or control*” (Digby, 1878).

The introduction of railways pushed India into an era of classical colonialism. Right from the inception, the British government had a double objective behind the introduction of railroads. Firstly, to secure a more reliable source of raw material, and secondly, to sell Britain manufactured

8 Revenue and Agriculture department was the largest and the most organized executive arm of the British Empire in India. It extracted more than 85% of the imperial revenues. It also encouraged cash crop cultivation and thus helped immensely in the industrial growth of Britain.

9 The British East India Company began the administrative takeover of India in 1764-65. The company was appointed as *diwan* (revenue collector) of Bihar, Bengal and Orissa. Henceforth, the British acted as the administrative officers and tax collectors of the Mughal court. In comparison to previously collected £818,000 sterling, in 1765-66, the company was able to collect £1,470,000 as land revenue; and by 1790-1791, this figure had risen to £2,680,000.

cheap machine made goods to the millions of Indian masses.¹⁰ Karl Marx in 1853 predicted, *“The English company intend to endow India with railways with the exclusive view of extracting, at diminished expenses, the cotton and other raw materials for their manufactures.”* Throughout the 19th century, Britain enjoyed positive balance of trade with India. But at the same time it had a growing deficit in its overall international trade, which was compensated by Indian export surpluses up to a significant extent. The exports from India primarily constituted agricultural raw materials such as cotton, jute, tea, coffee, sugarcane, tobacco, wheat, rice, oil seeds, opium, etc, while imports mainly include clothes, railway and military hardware. Thus, Indian economy exclusively serviced the Industrial revolution in Britain, while at the same time Indian economy was forced to be agricultural based. Ironically, the Indian cottage industries collapsed at the same time as the required raw material was being drained to England (Charlesworth, 1982).

Introduced as a means of so-called modernization the railways had to confront a great deal of opposition and popular criticism. Many Indian nationalists criticized and claimed that railways had impoverished India through the accompanying higher taxes and lessened disposable income, which diminished resistance to famine. The economic historian Ramesh Chunder Dutt condemned the construction of railways as a wasteful expenditure. Sir Arthur Cotton, the architect of magnificent Godavari and Kaveri irrigation works, stated, *“What India wanted were waterways and not railways. It was also very difficult to convince the common people that a journey by rail was safe.”* Besides the above-narrated arguments the nature, the physical conditions and the geographical terrain of India also created greater obstacles. India was neither a flat country like Russia nor a small country like England. However, several surveys made by Simms, Robert Stephenson and others finally led to the conclusion that railway lines could successfully connect the various parts of India and the railways could be run safely and profitably under existing Indian conditions (Kerr, 1995).

¹⁰ First, the British destroyed India's worldwide exports in handloom textiles and then invaded country's own home market and destroyed the domestic industry.

Rationale Behind the Introduction of Railways

The British came to India as commercial traders, but unstable political circumstances made them the supreme masters. From 1757 AD onwards, English East India Company consolidated its political and economical possessions and India experienced the bitterness of Colonialism (Dutt, 1950).¹¹ With the policy of conquest and compromise, the English Company succeeded in establishing its authority over the major productive regions of India and afterwards the colonial government directly introduced the era of exploitation of both natural and human resources of India.

Undoubtedly, transport is an important infrastructure inevitable for the developmental process of any nation. Without proper means of transport and communications, it may not be possible for any government to govern a vast country like India. The introduction of railways, which is one of the noteworthy legacies of the British rule in India, has not only increased in the quick communication between different parts of India but also brought about profound changes in the economic structure of the country. Considering the great extent of vast fertile plains, the low value of land and cheapness of labour in India the Railway promoters in England brought political and economic pressures on East India Company to introduce railways in India. Hence, the initiative for railway construction came from the top, the government and not from below, the people (Seymour, 1970). Private individuals in England evinced so keen interest in opening railways in India that within three years from 1845 a number of railway companies were formed in England. The crux of the problem laid in the so-called guarantee system. Unless and until the government of India paid interest to the shareholders, no one was prepared to invest.

In terms of economy, railways inaugurated a new industrial age, broke down the static character of Indian economy, made the population mobile and revolutionized trade and commerce. However, the main objective of English Company behind the introduction of Railways in

¹¹ From 1757 (Battle of Plassey) to 1850, the English East India Company, acquired a huge geographical area under their hegemony. Various mighty India political powers as Bengal, Mysore, Maratha, etc. surrendered through the authorized and unauthorized policies.

India was the exploitation of natural resources and raw material to meet out the demands of Industrial Revolution¹² in England. Through a pre-planned strategy, the East India Company made India a source of raw material and a profitable market for their finished goods. Due to the pressure created by the Manchester and Lancashire textile industries, the Company was forced to identify numerous hinterlands as the depots of raw material.¹³ Therefore, it became inevitable to link such hinterlands with the prime ports as Calcutta, Madras, Cochin, Mangalore, etc.

Railway and Famine: An Obnoxious Nexus

The battle of Plassey, fought in 1757, laid the foundations of the colonial economy well before the introduction of railways (Chaudhuri, 1971). After this battle, the English Company started draining the wealth of India to England. In the words of John Sullivan, President of Madras revenue board, *“Our system acts very much like a sponge drawing all the good things from the banks of river Ganges, and squeezes them down on the banks of the Thames.”* The railway only strengthened this foundation. A report furnished by an East India Company agent in mid-1840s aptly sums up the fundamental significance of railways in the colonial economy of India. The report narrates, *“If we can cheapen carriage, we may greatly increase the imports of foreign articles into the interior; and in a corresponding degree, export cotton and other agricultural produce.”* In 1846, Thomas Williamson, the revenue commissioner of Bombay, wrote to the chairman of the Great Indian Peninsular Railway Company in London stating that, *“The great trunk-line, running by the Malseje Ghaut in the direction of Nagpur, would be most direct which could possibly be selected to connect Bombay to Calcutta. Commercially, it would be best for the cotton of Berar, while for the first 120 miles from Bombay we would*

12 The introduction of Industrial Revolution compelled the British to find market for finished products. Consequently, there was a demand for controlled areas (colony) to get uninterrupted supplies of raw materials for their newly born factories. Asia and Africa proved profitable catchments, both for politics and economy, of Britain.

13 The controlled political condition and economic trends of the 19th century induced the British to construct railways in whole India. Railways, in the opinion of English historians, would accelerate the export and import phenomenon. Moreover, it would also be helpful in the administration and protection of India by facilitating the movement of troops within the subcontinent.

proceed in the immediate direction of the military stations of Ahmed-nuggur, Jaulna and Aurangabad.” From the above-mentioned literary evidences, it is quite simple to understand the twin purpose of colonial railways was commercial and military. These two objectives set the tone for the introduction of imperial railways in India.

The spread of famines throughout India can be measured with the expansion of the railroad infrastructure. There were 288 miles of railroads in India in 1857; which rose frequently in the coming years, as 1599 miles (1861), 3373 miles (1865), 9891 miles (1881), 19,555 miles (1895), and 34,56 miles (1914). With the expansion of the railroads, the exports of food grains rose rapidly. The export of rice grew from 12,697,983 hundred-weight in 1867-68, to 18,428,625 hundred-weight in 1877-78. Wheat exports grew 22 fold during this same period (Morris & Dudley, 1975; Ghosh, 1944). The inhuman British policy can be understood by this fact that since 1876-78 were major famine years, the export of rice reached 30.3 million hundred-weight, and wheat reached 30.3 million hundred-weight in 1896-97. Therefore, it could be said that railways and famines remain hand in gloves throughout the British rule in India.

The existence of railways never supported to encounter the effects of famine. The sole motive of railways was to the transport the food grains towards the coastal ports where they were sent to Europe. Substantial amounts of both food and non-food crops began to be shipped overseas. It is estimated that as much as 13 percent of the wheat produced in India went to Britain. By 1886, India was supplying 23 percent of Britain’s wheat imports. Much of the wheat and rice surplus was exported to England. On the eve of 1896 famine, the wheat belt of northern India had been depleted by massive exports to Britain. Millions of famine ridden in India died along the railroad tracks starving and exposing the hollow imperial claims of the life-saving benefits of railway transportation (Nanda, 2003). In all the famines, which occurred in the British period, there never was a shortage of food in the country. In fact, during the worst famines of 1876-79 and 1896-1902 surplus food grains were being exported from India. The figure illustrated below (fig. 1) shows the amount

of rice and wheat were being exported out of India, while millions of Indians were dying of starvation.

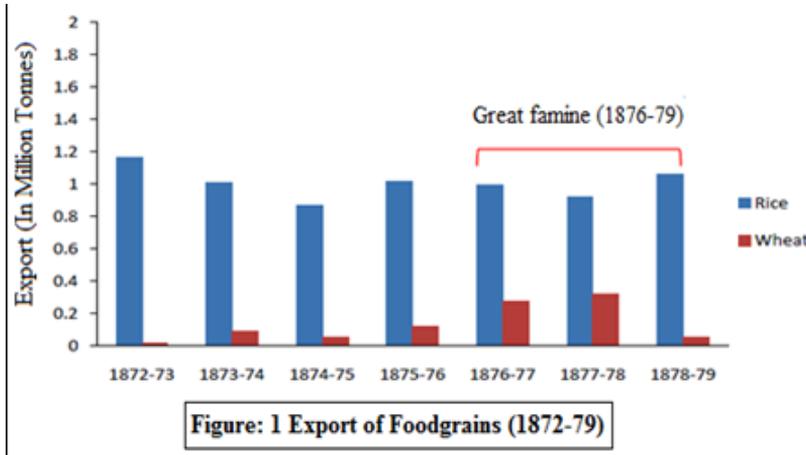


Figure 1: Export of Foodgrains (1872-79) (Ghosh, 1944)

The terrible famine of 1876-79 (coded as Great Famine) was spread out across nearly the whole of southern, western and northern India, which covers the modern states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Haryana.¹⁴ According to a historical estimate, this famine tolled nearly 10 million deaths (Roy, 2013). Those who survived from starvation were finished off by outbreaks of cholera. During the crucial period, export of rice and wheat continued more or less as usual. Moreover, the British government and India Office (London) refused to import grain into South India to reduce inflated grain prices and relieve Starvation. Figure: 1 depicts that three million tonnes of wheat were exported during the calamity phase (Ghosh, 1944). During the great famine, the pro-irrigation lobbyists Sir Arthur Cotton and Florence Nightingale raised their voices against the absolute worthlessness of railways in combating distress. In

¹⁴ The famine of 1876-78, also known as the Great Famine, caused a large migration of agricultural labourers and artisans from southern India to other regions where they worked as indentured labourers. This famine tolled about 10.3 million of the population in Bombay and Madras Presidencies, which can be testified through the census estimates of 1871 and 1881.

the 20th century, Gandhi also denounced the railroads as the main killer of traditional Indian handicrafts and depleting food stocks from the countryside. Further, imperial investment in irrigation complemented the railways in promoting commercial crops for exports rather than grain crops.

The same miserable story was repeated again in the terrible famines of 1896-1902.¹⁵ This time also the rice and wheat exports soared to record levels in the years when the famine was at its apex. Writing about the worst famine of 1896-97, eminent scholar Bhatia wrote, “*There was civil commotion and unrest in Bombay against continuing exports of food grains from the presidency at a time when the people faced the threat of famine. Even then, the British government refused to change its food policy and steadfastly tried to mitigate the views so far*” (Bhatia, 1968).

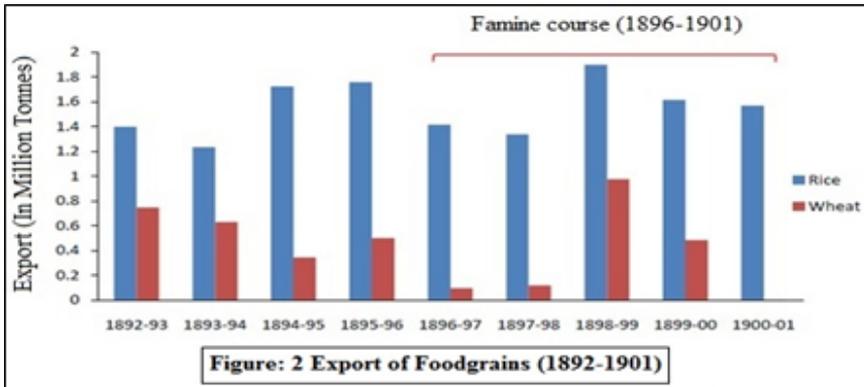


Figure 2: Export of Foodgrains (1892-1901)

Figure 2: Export of Foodgrains (1892-1901) (Ghosh, 1944)

Tirthankar Roy estimated total famine-related mortality during the regional crises of 1876-78 and 1896-1902 was between thirteen and sixteen million people (Roy, 2013). While railways had a role to play in facilitating food distribution, the British regime entirely focused on the export of food grains and other raw materials to Britain. The colonial

15 The famine of 1896-97 in the Madras Presidency was made more acute by the Colonial government's policy of *laissez faire* in the trade of grain. The two of the worst famine deteriorated districts in the Madras Presidency (Ganjam and Vizagapatam) were forced to export grains throughout the course of famine.

telegraph, built alongside railways, coordinated the price hikes in hundreds of towns at once. Consequently, modern markets accelerated rather than relieved famine. Railroads hiked the price of grains everywhere and made it beyond the reach of the common people. This communication worsened the situation, as poor farmers already drowned in debt due to excessive taxation were finally forced to die merciless.

The railroads failed to generate sustainable employment for the India masses; otherwise, little money would have been gathered by the common masses to face the crisis of famine (Maharatna, 1996). The planning and execution of railway construction in India was entrusted almost exclusively to British civil and military engineers. This gave the Indian railways a colonial character. Thus, Indian railways generated employment and industry for Britain rather than for India. Indian people paid for these colonial railways with their taxes while the profits benefited the English.

Famine and epidemic went hand in hand. The dreadful famines were typically followed by various infectious diseases such as bubonic plague, 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. The long-term consequences of these famines were quite dramatic. Scholars like 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%. Due to the horrific death toll extracted by the successive holocausts, population growth stagnated and in many areas of India even went into negative. As the second decade of twentieth century approached the average, life span of Indians went on steadily decreasing. Over a period of 70 years, the population grew by barely 100 million. The census reports of 1881, 1901 and 1921 also support the data of stagnation. Figure: 3 give an idea of the average life expectancy of Indians in the Colonial rule.

Table 1: Average Life Expectancy of Indians (1871-1922) (Klein, 1973)

S. No.	Decade	Average Life Expectancy
1.	1871-81	24.6
2.	1881-91	25
3.	1891-1901	23.8
4.	1901-11	22.9
5.	1911-21	20.1

Some historians point out that the Great Famine of 1876-78, was the direct cause of investigations and the beginning of a process that led to the establishment of the Indian Famine code (1880).¹⁶ Of course, this innovative step spoke for relief camps, but in reality, they proved relief-cum-death camps where caloric intake reduced human beings into walking skeletons. 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. Those who somehow managed to reach these camps soon found that the conditions were more horrifying than the villages they had left behind.

Conclusion

Famine had been considered as a frequent characteristic 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.*” More to the unfavourable monsoons and ill administrative policies of British regime 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

¹⁶ The Indian Famine Codes (1880), developed by the colonial government, were one of the earliest famine combating measures. The Famine Codes defined three levels of food insecurity as near scarcity, scarcity, and famine. The 1901 Famine Commission found that twelve famines and four “severe scarcities” took place between 1765 and 1858.

(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 or famines. 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. Famines in British India were severe enough to have a substantial impact on the long-term population growth of the country. These famines were typically followed by fatal diseases, which were shifted by railway network to various regions, as people migrated in search of food and work from the affected regions.

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