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**THE IMPLICATION OF BRITISH ECONOMIC POLICIES ON
INDIAN FAMINE**

by
Soujanya Niroula

Oxford, MS
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Abstract

During British rule, India was engulfed by multiple devastating famines. Over the past, scholars have presented varied opinions on the cause of Famine. Here, we seek to understand the British economic policies and their effects. Our analysis is focused on examining the taxation system, export/import policies, and crop production. We find that the interest of the British aligned with the extractive colonial strategy. The imposed institutions fostered higher tax collection and strict implementation of the free-trade system. Moreover, their primary goal was aimed at preserving trade and commerce than alleviating the distress of the native population.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background

The nineteenth century is widely celebrated as the golden era of the Industrial Revolution and Global Capitalism. With Britain leading the forefront of this period, the West saw an unprecedented transformation in the manufacturing industry. On one end, the revolution was leading to rapid economic growth and innovation. On the other, it was enhancing stiff competition among the European nations in need of resources and markets. So, the competition forced these nations to undertake expeditions creating colonies all over the world. Therefore, the nineteenth century is an essential facet of world history since it marks the zenith of colonial conquests.

Among the European nations, Britain was swiftly extending its imperial expedition towards the east. By the mid-nineteenth century, the British had established complete control over the Indian subcontinent region. In two hundred years of colonial rule, they laid the foundation and remodeled the entire institutional structure of India. Before the British regime, Indian society was governed by rulers whose policies aligned with religious and moral philosophies. Though Mughal rule persisted in India before the colonial era, it

was also mostly based on the precepts of religion. However, with the British, the whole societal objective was based on wealth and trade. Accordingly, the ideas of people like Adam Smith, Darwin, and Malthus became the basics of the institutional foundation.

Whenever we study the influence of Britain on India, we come across its history embedded with multiple and deadly famines. Britain strictly enforced the principles of free trade policy. India also witnessed exponential growth in the export of agricultural products. Especially, the food crops like rice and wheat, which constituted the major component of the Indian diet, dramatically increased over the decades. The influence of commercial farming was also diverting the fertile land from food crops to cash crops. Any major fluctuation in the market supply caused a severe famine in the region.

Nevertheless, despite the rapid development in railways and other trading infrastructures, it seems quite unusual for India to experience multiple devastating famines over the past centuries. In this paper, we would like to study the possible effects of British economic policies on Indian famine. We firstly begin by navigating the colonial history and the evolution of the taxation system in India. We then proceed towards analyzing the revenue structure and its implication on the extractive colonial strategy. By interpreting data on the area of crop production and yield, we come to a basic understanding of the ongoing trends in the agricultural industry. Finally, we use the export/import data to comprehend the effects of free trade policy on Indian famine.

1.2 British India Famine and Population Growth

In the absence of a widely irrigated system, monsoon rain played an important role in the agricultural industry. An irregularity in the rainfall pattern could potentially reduce crop

1.2 British India Famine and Population Growth

production, thereby causing a severe food shortage. However, despite this vulnerability, famines were of rare occurrence. Only 17 famines were recorded in the last two thousand years. But, in roughly two hundred years of British rule, the country witnessed 34 famines, which is said to have decimated more than 60 million population (Siddiqui 2020).

Famines	Location
Famine of 1770	Bengal, Bihar
Famine of 1837-38	Northwestern Province
Famine of 1860-61	Northwestern Province
Famine of 1865-66	Orrisa, Bengal, Bihar, Madras
Famine of 1868-70	Rajputana, Northwestern Provinces, Central Provinces. Bombay
Famine of 1873-74	Bengal and Bihar
Famine of 1876-78	Madras, Bombay, Mysore, Hyderabad
Famine of 1896-97	Bihar, Bengal, Bombay, Madras, Northwestern Provinces, Central Province, Punjab, Burma
Famine of 1899-1900	Gujarat, Bombay, Rajputana, Berar, Central Province and Punjab
Famine of 1943	Bengal

Table 1: Major Famines During the Colonial Rule

After the acquisition of Bengal and other subordinate regions in 1770, India saw its first famine under British rule. The famine could have resulted in the death of almost one-third of the population in Bengal. Similarly, Chalisa famine and Doji bara famine occurred towards the end of the eighteenth century; however, they did not extensively affect the regions governed by the East India Company. On the other hand, the nineteenth century was distressed by multiple famines depopulating many regions across India. The famine episodes under the British regime concluded with the Bengal Famine of 1943.

During British rule, India was not only suffering from devastating famines but also severe epidemics. It has been reported that cholera alone killed twenty-three million

1.2 British India Famine and Population Growth

people between 1865 and 1947 (Arnold 1986, 113). Though the figures are roughly estimated, we can understand the severity of these apocalypses from such a high number of deaths. Still, the population of India was constantly growing, but at an irregular rate. The following table presents the census data from 1881 till 1931.

Year	Population	Percent Change
1881	253,982,595	-
1891	287,223,431	+13
1901	293,361,056	+2
1911	315,156,396	+7
1921	318,942,480	+1
1931	352,837,778	+11

Table 2: Population of British India (1881-1931)

Chapter 2

History and its context

2.1 Background on the history of colonial conquest

The history of Indian colonialism begins with the arrival of Portuguese, in the 15th century, on the pretext of engaging in trade and commerce. Slowly, the increasing trading rivalry in Europe encouraged other emerging powers to undertake their colonial conquest. In the midst of this competition, nations like France, Netherlands, Denmark, and Britain were engaged in military warfare to gain a firm hold over the territories spreading across India. However, amongst all these European nations, only Britain succeeded in having complete control over the Indian sub-continent region.

British too, initially, arrived in India as traders. They established themselves as English East India Company and received a permit from the Mughal emperor, Jahangir, in 1613 to establish a factory in Surat. Gradually, they also got permission to establish factories across South India. Under the Mughal rule, India was constantly under tumult, primarily due to the existing rivalries between Hindu and Muslims. In the presence of a richly diversified population and ever-existing discord among political powers, it did not take long for the British to exploit this weakness in expanding their military pursuit. The battle of Plassey in 1757 marks the formal inauguration of the British Empire in India. After the battle of Buxar in 1764, they gained complete economic control over Bengal,

Orissa, and Bihar. Slowly, the expansion proceeded across all regions from north to south. By 1857, the Company had acquired complete control over the Indian subcontinent. After the Mutiny of 1857, the company rule ended, paving the way for direct control of the British Monarch.

Britain ruled over India for roughly 200 years. After India's independence in 1947, the empire was divided mainly into India and Pakistan. Burma (Myanmar), initially administered under British India, was partitioned in 1937 as a separate colony. Burma got its independence in 1948. Subsequently, other colonies in South Asia like Ceylon (present-day Sri-Lanka) and Maldives also became independent from the British subjugation.

2.2 On Taxation System and its History

As corroborated in the history of the world, after a conquest, the conquering empire alters and erects its own set of institutions. With the advent of Mughal rule in India, Emperor Akbar introduced the Mansabdari system to control state affairs. The emperor appointed designated officials as Mansabdars. These officials acted like administrators and were also responsible for collecting revenues (Ali 1978, 40). The profession was non-hereditary, and the emperor reserved the right to demote or remove any Mansabdars, entitling him with the privilege of direct influence over the administration. After the decline of the Mughal rule in the 18th century, in different parts of India, these officials took over administrative affairs. They became hereditary landlords or chiefs in their community (Banerjee and Iyer 2005, 4). Therefore, when the British arrived, they came across a disparate set of administrative systems across the region. Since the Indian subcontinent was inhabited

by a diverse group of people of different ethnicities, races, and religions, the British instigated firm control by altering the institutional structure aligned with their interests and ideologies.

2.2.1 Zamindari System

Bengal was the first place in India, where the East India Company successfully established its direct control. Initially, they went with the current flow by supporting the hierarchical system of zamindars (intermediaries who collected revenues for the ruler of Bengal in Mughal India) for collecting revenues. In the early days, the Company was cash-strapped, so it set a high level of revenue demands in the form of tax. Under this complex hierarchical system, the tax burden was transferred to the peasants, and the zamindars constantly coerced the peasants to meet the revenue demands. The poor administrative system led to several criticisms, and, especially after the mass famine of 1770, reforms were made to improve the system. However, since the Company's primary focus was aligned towards extracting the revenue, the pressure of meeting the tax demands was placed over the shoulders of zamindars. If a zamindar failed to pay his taxes, his property would be sold to someone else. The situation was worst confounded as the zamindars were bound to regularly pay the stipulated revenue regardless of any natural or other calamities (Islam, 24). It has been recorded that lands yielding 41% of the revenue was sold out in Bengal and Bihar between 1794 and 1807. Similarly, 51% of the prior zamindars were wiped out between 1804 and 1818 (Husain and Sarwar 2012, 24). Therefore, it can be accessed that the British implemented a pressurized institutional system where the burden of paying the revenue dues was laid upon the natives without any support of insurance in times of calamities.

2.2.2 Ryotwari System

As the British annexed other regions into their line of control, newer systems of governance began to emerge. Under the zamindari system, zamindars acted as middlemen while collecting taxes. Thomas Munro, a British Official, wanted to make the system more efficient by removing the middlemen. Therefore, Munro introduced the idea of “Ryotwari System.” The system was designed by adapting to the Ricardian Theory of rent (Tomlinson, p. 44). Under the theory, the state is entitled to a fixed share of the produced surplus. The government, now, directly dealt with the cultivators for the collection of revenue. It also solidified the British ideology in advocating private property rights over the region. Moreover, it was assumed that the cultivators gained more freedom over the control of the land. The system was mainly employed across South India. However, with extremely high demand for land revenue, the new system could not abate the suffering of the common people. It has been reported that the cultivators even abandoned their properties in some of the districts due to the excessive financial burden (Swamy 2020, 142).

2.2.3 Mahalwari System

Over the Northwestern Provinces and Punjab, the mahalwari system was adopted. Under this system, the revenue was collected through the village bodies. The body jointly owned the land in the village and was responsible for paying revenues to the British government. The system can be viewed as a hybrid representation of the Zamindari and Ryotwari systems. The composition of the village body varied across places. In some places, the village body was comprised of a single household, while in others, the body consisted of a large number of villagers (Banarjee and Iyer 2005, 1194). The share of revenue among

2.2 On Taxation System and its History

the villagers was determined using various factors like soil, caste, and land ownership.

Chapter 3

Data and its Interpretation

3.1 Land Revenue: Milching Cow for Colonial Existence

As the agricultural activity was the primary attraction for the colonial conquest in India, the British brought subsequent changes into the agrarian system for maximizing the revenue collection from the agricultural output. The change in the agrarian system also modified the social and occupational structure of India. The queer system inherited the institutional structures of the Mughal era in combination with the popular ideas from England. This created complications in the existing land settlement pattern. A complex system gradually evolved and provided complete control over the Indian production market.

Initially, in many areas, the revenue demand for land was put at 90% of the net agricultural output. As the Company diversified the revenue sources with the annexation of new territories, the demand was put at ease. In 1833, the revenue demand was decreased to 50% in parts of South India, where the Ryotwari system was in vogue. Gradually, in 1864, the demand was decreased to 33% (Tomlinson 1993, 44-45).

3.1 Land Revenue: Milching Cow for Colonial Existence

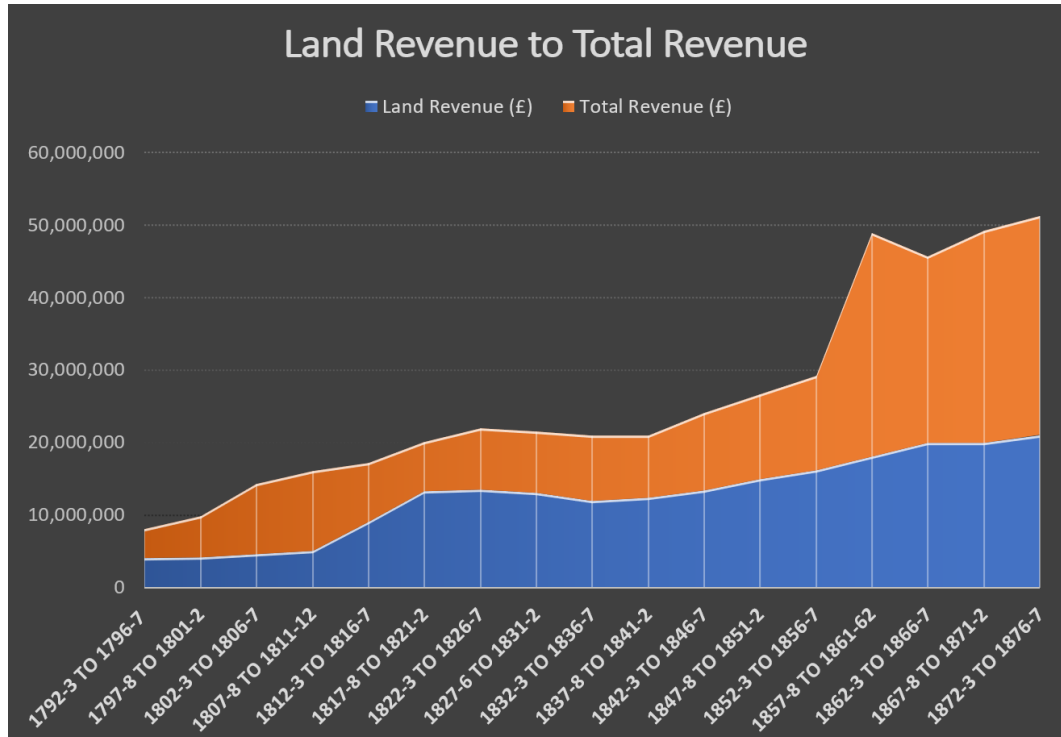


Figure 1: Land Revenue to Total Revenue Averaged across Years

In figure 1, we have plotted the stream of land revenue to total revenue for British India from 1792 to 1877. Land revenue usually comprised more than 50% of the total income. From 1817 to 1822, the revenue covered more than 66% of the total collection. As we move towards the mid-nineteenth century, the percentage share slightly decreases. However, after the Indian Mutiny of 1857, the composition of revenue share falls below 50%. After the direct rule of the Monarch from 1858, the British were able to diversify and increase the revenue from other sources. Towards the end of the century, land revenue covered only about 25% of the total revenue stream. Between 1860 and 1904, the public revenue increased by more than double, while the land revenue remained fairly the same amount, with its percentage composition standing at about 23%.

The coercion of high rates of taxation in India implies the extractive colonial strategy of Britain. It can be implied that with the astronomical rates for revenue demand, the

British were acting as the owner of the system with zero liability. It can be observed that even during severe famines like the Orissa Famine of 1866 and Rajputana Famine of 1869, there was no decline in the amount of land revenue collected. Between 1792 to 1900, India witnessed multiple famines; but, there seems to be no impact on revenue collection.

Moreover, the unusually high demand in the share of the agricultural output system forced the peasants to lead a life of dire poverty. Before the British rule, cultivators could store the surplus grain, thereby creating a shock absorber against calamities. But now, to fulfill the revenue demand, cultivators were forced to sell their surplus stock, having no means to sustain themselves during food shortages.

3.2 On Crop Production and Yield:

We want to investigate the effect of British policies on the area of crop production and yield from 1895 to 1935. Here, tables summarize the area and yield for rice, wheat, cotton, and jute. Rice and wheat are the staple food crops in an Indian diet, whereas cotton and jute are the major cash crops. The values are averaged across five years.

As shown in Table 3, between 1895 and 1910, we see a dip in rice and wheat production. This fact also corresponds with the two major famines that occurred during this period. In 1896-97 rice production fell by almost 33%. During this year, the food shortage affected the southern and western areas, resulting in a famine. Immediately after a few years, India was attacked by another famine in 1899-1900. During this time, rice production fell by 10% in 1899-1900 and another 8% in 1900-01. After 1910, the production of both food crops has steadily remained constant through 1935. No major

3.2 On Crop Production and Yield:

famines have been recorded during this period.

Years	Rice (tons)	Wheat (tons)	Cotton (bales)	Jute (bales)
1895-96 to 1899-1900	19.062	6.029	2.296	5.771
1900-01 to 1904-05	18.633	7.676	3.179	7.036
1905-06 to 1909-10	19.179	8.092	3.961	8.136
1910-11 to 1914-15	24.707	9.663	4.33	9.069
1915-16 to 1919-20	27.775	9.288	4.357	7.992
1920-21 to 1924-25	26.247	9.007	4.833	6.354
1925-26 to 1929-30	25.462	8.904	5.584	10.30
1930-31 to 1934-35	26.699	9.377	4.733	8.061

Table 3: Yield of Crop Production Averaged (In Millions)

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Years	Rice	Wheat	Cotton	Jute
1895-96 to 1899-1900	45.26	22.649	13.803	2.035
1900-01 to 1904-05	43.445	25.518	16.497	2.335
1905-06 to 1909-10	48.861	26.565	21.127	3.264
1910-11 to 1914-15	61.284	30.55	22.992	3.058
1915-16 to 1919-20	69.01	30.499	21.569	2.631
1920-21 to 1924-25	69.384	29.56	22.08	2.277
1925-26 to 1929-30	68.262	31.519	25.814	3.379
1930-31 to 1934-35	70.288	33.907	23.258	2.537

Table 4: Area of Crop Production Averaged (In Million Acres)

3.2 On Crop Production and Yield:

production of both food crops has steadily remained constant through 1935. No major famines have been recorded during this period.

Yield per acre has also constantly varied on an annual basis. For instance, in 1894-95, production for rice stood at 0.49 tons per acre. However, in 1934-35, the production fell to 0.35 tons per acre. Moreover, from 1891-92 to 1895-96, rice production averaged 0.43 tons per acre. But, in both successive periods from 1925-26 to 1929-30 and 1930-31 to 1934-35, the yield was at 0.37. It seems, even after a significant increase in the area of crop production, the yield per acre has constantly fallen towards the latter part of the colonial regime. This fact can be attested to the lack of agricultural innovation, an issue that has repeatedly been cited in the historical accounts of British India.

Similarly, India saw unprecedented growth in the production of cash crops during the colonial period. In table 3, we can see a fairly constant increase in cotton and jute production from 1895 to 1935. It has been argued that the shift in the production from food crops to cash crops was one of the influential factors for Indian famine. The increasing trend for cash crop cultivation can be realized from the exponential growth in the area of production for cotton. Between 1895 and 1935, the total area covered for cotton plantation increased by about 68% on average. On the contrary, the percentage share of the total harvest for rice and jowar (staple food crops) fell from 66% in 1891 to 58% in 1940 (Tomlinson 1993, 59). Likewise, the agricultural industry also saw significant growth in cultivating other cash crops like indigo, oilseeds, and opium.

3.3 Unrestricted Export:

India's unregulated export economy is regarded as the primary attribute for acute famines. In our analysis, we will focus on the export/import data of rice and wheat. To simplify, we would like to look over the data during the Famine of 1876-78 and 1899-1900. In both of these famines, the Bombay presidency was severely affected, resulting in millions of deaths. So, by constraining our focus, we have collected export/import data for Bombay. Similarly, we have also included the export data for, overall, British India in the given time frame.

	Rice			Wheat		
Years	Import	Export	Net-Export	Import	Export	Net-Export
1873-74	5,150	208,669	203,519	3,187	434,453	431,266
1874-75	4,584	250,478	245,894	32,355	633,681	601,326
1875-76	1,430	223,767	222,337	18,739	837,869	819,130
1876-77	1,539	208,237	206,698	54,221	1,234,094	1,179,873
1877-78	306,561	310,113	3,552	423,061	1,159,443	736,382

Table 5: Export/Import Quantities for Bombay Presidency (1873-1878)

3.3 Unrestricted Export:

Year	Rice (CWT)	Wheat (CWT)
1873-74	20,245,385	1,755,954
1874-74	17,392,938	1,073,655
1875-76	20,416,032	2,510,768
1876-77	19,911,334	5,586,604
1877-78	18,428,625	6,373,168

Table 6: Export in Quantities for British India (1873-1878)

	Rice			Wheat		
Years	Import	Export	Net-Export	Import	Export	Net-Export
1899-1900	300,434	612,358	311,924	162,377	2,310,535	2,148,158
1900-01	74,797	572,876	498,079	332,025	24,070	-307,955
1901-02	60,101	792,274	732,173	177,057	83,297	-93,760
1902-03	26,536	973,733	947,197	739	390,748	390,009
1903-04	4,521	847,400	842,879	18,818	3,690,762	3,671,944

Table 7: Export/Import Quantities for Bombay Presidency (1899-1904)

Year	Rice (CWT)	Wheat (CWT)
1899-1900	32,271,393	9,704,087
1900-01	31,342,788	50,021
1901-02	34,028,839	7,321,818
1902-03	47,485,099	10,292,150
1903-04	45,001,751	25,911,312

Table 8: Export in Quantities for British India (1899-1904)

During the Famine of 1876-78, India witnessed a consistent level of rice export. The wheat export substantially increased from 1873-1878. India exported almost 6.4 million hundredweight of wheat in 1877-78, an increment of 14% from the previous year. However, in the Bombay Presidency, we can notice a significant dip in the net export of rice. Though a large quantity of rice was imported during the famine period, there was no effect on rice export. A similar analysis can be presented on net-wheat export from Bombay. Though wheat export was reasonably constant in the famine year, a considerable quantity was imported from other places.

Similarly, during the famine of 1899-1900, India exported significant quantities of rice and wheat. In the Bombay Presidency, rice was consistently being exported between 1899 to 1904. Large quantities of rice were also imported in 1899-1900, but imports remained low in the following years. However, we do observe an anomaly in the trade of wheat. Wheat export remained strong in 1899-1900. But, in 1900-01, the export declined by a whopping 98%. Export remains low in 1901-02 but rises again in the following years. During the famine period, relief programs were also organized in the province. Perhaps, to control the famine outbreak, wheat imports remained strong from 1899 to 1902.

By analyzing the export and import trends, we conclude that the primary objective of the British rulers was to maintain the trade and economy in India. The consistent export of rice and wheat during the crucial moments of famine signals their firm conviction over the free-trade system. As stated in section 3.1, the surplus grain accumulated during the good years was sold to fulfill the land revenue demands. During severe drought, cultivators were bereft of financial resources to procure their daily necessities due to crop failures. Even more, they were still obligated to pay their regular tax dues. Therefore, in the absence of government intervention and support, the vast majority of the population could not simply afford to purchase in the market-driven economy.

3.4 On laissez-faire and price volatility

We have already observed that adherence to the free-trade policy was the foremost priority of British rulers. However, with an ever-increasing global trade and lack of substantial governmental intervention, the domestic market also suffers from ups and downs of global supply and demand. The colonial era was constantly filled with political instability. As a result, international trade was also exposed to the vulnerability of changing flux in the economic and political domain.

Years	Export	Import
1927-28	100.0	100.0
1928-29	97.5	96.4
1929-30	90.2	93.2
1930-31	71.5	80.0
1931-32	59.2	71.7
1932-33	55.3	65.2
1933-34	53.5	63.5
1934-35	54.1	63.0
1935-36	56.9	62.1
1936-37	57.2	62.8

Table 9: Export and Import Index from 1927-1937

Table 7 represents the export and import index from 1927 to 1937, where 1927-28 is the base year. Here, we can observe a constant decline in the price of both export and import goods. Till 1928-29, the prices fairly equalize with each other. However, beginning from 1929-30, there is a sharp decline in exports compared to imports. In economic history, we can attribute this fluctuation to the decreasing demand for consumer goods due to the Great Depression. The liquidity crunch in the United States also affected the credit supply market for agricultural production in India. Similarly, the liquidity crisis forced domestic agricultural prices to decline along with the increasing uncertainty in the monetary system. It has been recorded that domestic prices for agricultural goods decreased by 44% between 1929 to 1931 (Tomlinson 1993, 68).

Though we can observe how the volatility in the world economy affected the domestic

market of India, it is not our primary objective to advocate the efficiency of a closed economy. However, we want to expose the vulnerabilities that most Indians had to face during British rule. By comparing the export and import index in Table 7, it can be implied that the wages of the agricultural workers were declining at a higher rate. Especially when the industry relied much on the production of cash crops that were mainly grown to fulfill the international demand, the workers were the ones who suffered the most from the demand fluctuations.

Therefore, an export-oriented market system always remains prone to vulnerabilities affecting the external demand. With the irregular flow of income, people often suffer from insecurity at times of crisis. In the absence of adequate resources, they could not compete to purchase food in a free market economy.

Chapter 4

Conclusions

Insofar, we can notice that the imposed colonial institutions altered the agrarian land structure. From our analysis of the revenue composition, the interest of British economic policies aligned with the extractive colonial strategies. This pushed the agricultural workers into a dire state of poverty. By comparing the export/import trend during the period of famine, we have verified the strong support of the British for free-trade policy. Without protection from the government and amidst a volatile market system, people could not compete to purchase items with a limited source of income.

Similarly, lack of innovation and excessive commercialization deteriorated the agricultural industry to adapt to the changing demand for crop production. This study implies that the British government occupied India exclusively for their political and economic interest. They felt little to no obligation to care for the increasing death toll among the native population. Moreover, to fulfill the colonial objectives, the remodeling of India's political and economic structure stirred imbalances resulting in distresses like famine.

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Appendix A

Data Sources for Tables and Figures

Table 1: Bhatia (1963) and Gopal (1949)

Table 2: Census of India

Figure 1: Finance and Revenue Account of the Government of India and Frederick (1858)

Table 3,4: Estimates of Area and Yield of Principal Crops in India

Table 5,7 : Annual Statement of the Trade and Navigation of the Presidency of Bombay

Table 6,8: Annual Statement of the Trade and Navigation of British India

Table 9: Review of the Trade in India, 1936-37

Appendix B

Map

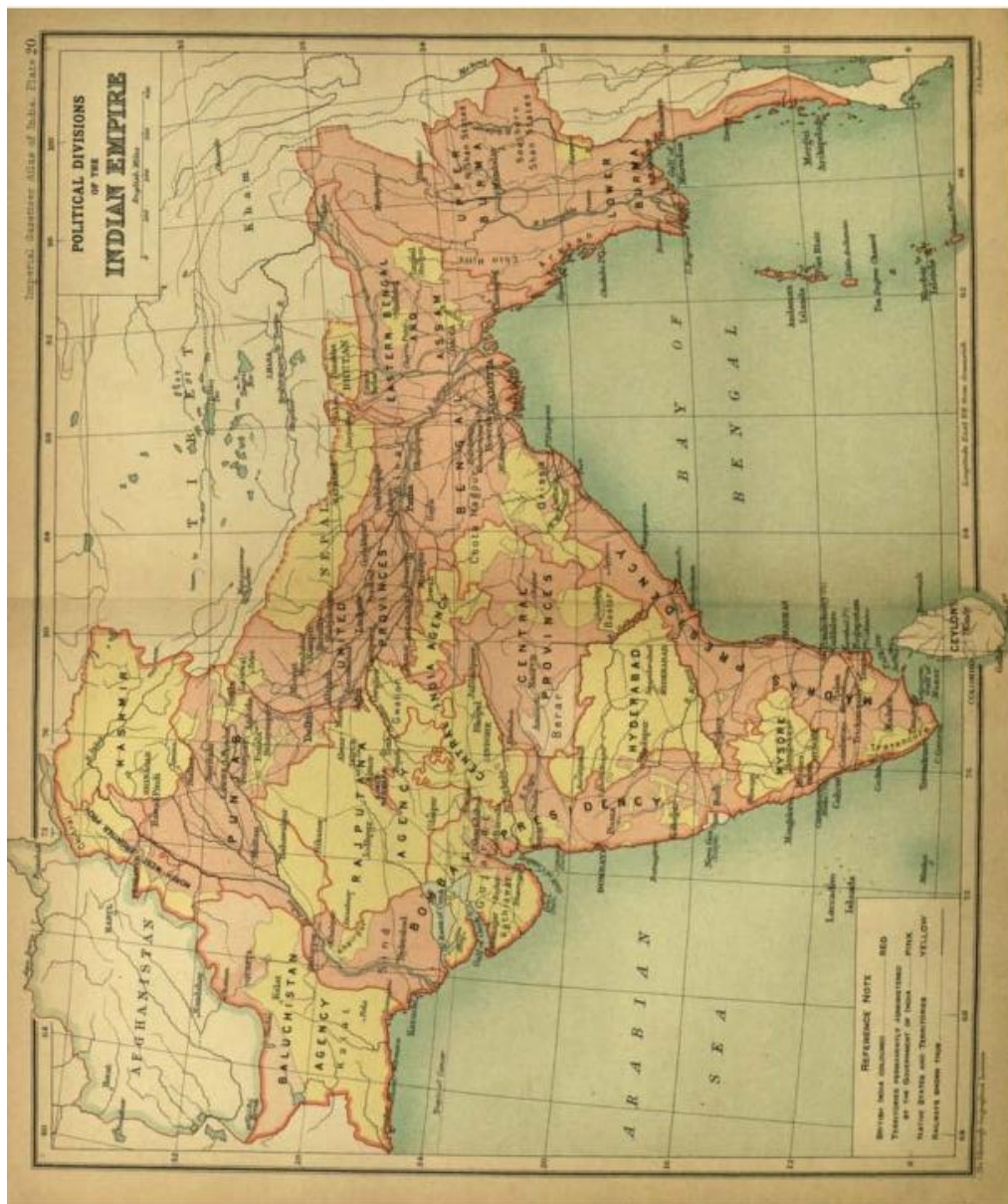


Figure B.1 British India Map

Source: The Imperial Gazetteer of India V.26 (1909)