Environmental History Spring 2019

Late Victorian Holocausts

1

Victoria's Ghosts

> The more one hears about this famine, the more one feels that such a hideous record of human suffering and destruction the world has never seen before.
>
> — Florence Nightingale (1877)

"Here's the northeast monsoon at last," said Hon. Robert Ellis, C.B., junior member of the Governor's Council, Madras, as a heavy shower of rain fell at Coonoor, on a day towards the end of October 1876, when the members of the Madras Government were returning from their summer sojourn on the hills.

"I am afraid that is not the monsoon," said the gentleman to whom the remark was made.

"Not the monsoon?" rejoined Mr. Ellis. "Good God! It must be the monsoon. If it is not, and if the monsoon does not come, there will be an awful famine."[1]

The British rulers of Madras had every reason to be apprehensive. The life-giving southwest monsoon had already failed much of southern and central India the previous summer. The Madras Observatory would record only 6.3 inches of precipitation for all of 1876 in contrast to the annual average of 27.6 inches during the previous decade.[2] The fate of millions now hung on the timely arrival of generous winter rains. Despite Ellis's warning, the governor of Madras, Richard Grenville, the Duke of Buckingham and Chandos, who was a greenhorn to India and its discontents, sailed away on a leisurely tour of the Andaman Islands, Burma and Ceylon. When he finally reached Colombo, he found urgent cables detailing the grain riots that were sweeping the so-called

Ceded Districts of Kurnool, Cuddapah and Bellary in the wake of another monsoon failure. Popular outbursts against impossibly high prices were likewise occurring in the Deccan districts of neighboring Bombay Presidency, especially in Ahmednagar and Sholapur. Having tried to survive on roots while awaiting the rains, multitudes of poor peasants and laborers were now on the move, fleeing a slowly dying countryside.[3]

As the old-hands at Fort St. George undoubtedly realized, the semi-arid interior of India was primed for disaster. The worsening depression in world trade had been spreading misery and igniting discontent throughout cotton-exporting districts of the Deccan, where in any case forest enclosures and the displacement of *gram* by cotton had greatly reduced local food security. The traditional system of household and village grain reserves regulated by complex networks of patrimonial obligation had been largely supplanted since the Mutiny by merchant inventories and the cash nexus. Although rice and wheat production in the rest of India (which now included bonanzas of coarse rice from the recently conquered Irawaddy Delta) had been above average for the past three years, much of the surplus had been exported to England.[4] Londoners were in effect eating India's bread. "It seems an anomaly," wrote a troubled observer, "that, with her famines on hand, India is able to supply food for other parts of the world."[5]

Table 1.1

Indian Wheat Exports to the UK, 1875–78
(1,000s of Quarters)

1875	308
1876	757
1877	1,409
1878	420

Source: Cornelius Walford, *The Famines of the World*, London 1879, p. 127.

There were other "anomalies." The newly constructed railroads, lauded as institutional safeguards against famine, were instead used by merchants to ship grain inventories from outlying drought-stricken districts to central depots for hoarding (as well as protection from rioters). Likewise the telegraph ensured that price hikes were coordinated in a thousand towns at once, regardless of local supply trends. Moreover, British antipathy to price control invited anyone who had the money to join in the frenzy of grain speculation. "Besides

regular traders," a British official reported from Meerut in late 1876, "men of all sorts embarked in it who had or could raise any capital; jewelers and cloth dealers pledging their stocks, even their wives' jewels, to engage in business and import grain."[6] Buckingham, not a free-trade fundamentalist, was appalled by the speed with which modern markets accelerated rather than relieved the famine:

> The rise [of prices] was so extraordinary, and the available supply, as compared with well-known requirements, so scanty that merchants and dealers, hopeful of enormous future gains, appeared determined to hold their stocks for some indefinite time and not to part with the article which was becoming of such unwonted value. It was apparent to the Government that facilities for moving grain by the rail were rapidly raising prices everywhere, and that the activity of apparent importation and railway transit, did not indicate any addition to the food stocks of the Presidency … retail trade up-country was almost at standstill. Either prices were asked which were beyond the means of the multitude to pay, or shops remained entirely closed.[7]

As a result, food prices soared out of the reach of outcaste laborers, displaced weavers, sharecroppers and poor peasants. "The dearth," as *The Nineteenth Century* pointed out a few months later, "was one of money and of labour rather than of food."[8] The earlier optimism of mid-Victorian observers —Karl Marx as well as Lord Salisbury—about the velocity of economic transformation in India, especially the railroad revolution, had failed to adequately discount for the fiscal impact of such "modernization." The taxes that financed the railroads had also crushed the ryots. Their inability to purchase subsistence was further compounded by the depreciation of the rupee due to the new international gold standard (which India had not adopted), which steeply raised the cost of imports. Thanks to the price explosion, the poor began starve to death even in well-watered districts like Thanjavur in Tamil Nadu, "reputed to be immune to food shortages."[9] Sepoys meanwhile encountered increasing difficulty in enforcing order in the panic-stricken bazaars and villages as famine engulfed the vast Deccan plateau. Roadblocks were hastily established to stem the flood of stick-thin country people into Bombay and Poona, while in Madras the police forcibly expelled some 25,000 famine refugees.[10]

Figure 1.1 India: The Famine of 1876–78

India's Nero

The central government under the leadership of Queen Victoria's favorite poet, Lord Lytton, vehemently opposed efforts by Buckingham and some of his district officers to stockpile grain or otherwise interfere with market forces. All through the autumn of 1876, while the vital *kharif* crop was withering in the fields of southern India, Lytton had been absorbed in organizing the immense Imperial Assemblage in Delhi to proclaim Victoria Empress of India (Kaiser-i-Hind). As *The Times*'s special correspondent described it, "The Viceroy seemed to have made the tales of Arabian fiction true … nothing was too rich, nothing too costly." "Lytton put on a spectacle," adds a biographer of Lord Salisbury (the secretary of state for India), "which achieved the two criteria Salisbury had set him six months earlier, of being 'gaudy enough to impress the orientals' … and furthermore a pageant which hid 'the nakedness of the sword on which we really rely.'"[11] Its "climacteric ceremonial" included a week-long feast for 68,000 officials, satraps and maharajas: the most colossal and expensive meal in world history.[12] An English journalist later estimated that 100,000 of the Queen-Empress's subjects starved to death in Madras and Mysore in the course of Lytton's spectacular *durbar*.[13] Indians in future generations justifiably would remember him as their Nero.[14]

Figure 1.2 The Poet as Viceroy: Lytton in Calcutta, 1877

Following this triumph, the viceroy seemed to regard the growing famine as a tiresome distraction from the Great Game of preempting Russia in Central Asia by fomenting war with the blameless Sher Ali, the Emir of Afghanistan. Lytton, according to Salisbury, was "burning with anxiety to distinguish himself in a great war." [15] Serendipitously for him, the Czar was on a collision course with Turkey in the Balkans, and Disraeli and Salisbury were eager to show the Union Jack on the Khyber Pass. Lytton's warrant, as he was constantly reminded by his chief budgetary adviser, Sir John Strachey, was to ensure that Indian, not English, taxpayers paid the costs of what radical critics later denounced as "a war of deliberately planned aggression." The depreciation of the rupee made strict parsimony in the nonmilitary budget even more urgent.[16]

The 44-year-old Lytton, the former minister to Lisbon, had replaced the Earl of Northbrook after the latter had honorably refused to acquiesce in Disraeli's machiavellian "forward" policy on the northwest frontier. He was a strange and troubling choice (actually, only fourth on Salisbury's short list) to exercise paramount authority over a starving subcontinent of 250 million people. A writer, seemingly admired only by Victoria, who wrote "vast, stale poems" and ponderous novels under the *nom de plume* of Owen Meredith, he had been accused of plagiarism by both Swinburne and his own father,

Bulwer-Lytton (author of *The Last Days of Pompeii*).[17] Moreover, it was widely suspected that the new viceroy's judgement was addled by opium and incipient insanity. Since a nervous breakdown in 1868, Lytton had repeatedly exhibited wild swings between megalomania and self-lacerating despair.[18]

Although his possible psychosis ("Lytton's mind tends violently to exaggeration" complained Salisbury to Disraeli) was allowed free reign over famine policy, it became a cabinet scandal after he denounced his own government in October 1877 for "allegedly attempting to create an Anglo-Franco-Russian coalition against Germany." As one of Salisbury's biographers has emphasized, this was "about as absurd a contention as it was possible to make at the time, even from the distance of Simla," and it produced an explosion inside Whitehall. "Salisbury explained the Viceroy's ravings by admitting that he was 'a little mad'. It was known that both Lytton and his father had used opium, and when Derby read the 'inconceivable' memorandum, he concluded that Lytton was dangerous and should resign: 'When a man inherits insanity from one parent, and limitless conceit from the other, he has a 'ready-made excuse for almost any extravagance which he may commit.'"[19]

But in adopting a strict laissez-faire approach to famine, Lytton, demented or not, could claim to be extravagance's greatest enemy. He clearly conceived himself to be standing on the shoulders of giants, or, at least, the sacerdotal authority of Adam Smith, who a century earlier in the *The Wealth of Nations* had asserted (vis-à-vis the terrible Bengal drought-famine of 1770) that "famine has never arisen from any other cause but the violence of government attempting, by improper means, to remedy the inconvenience of dearth."[20]

Smith's injunction against state attempts to regulate the price of grain during famine had been taught for years in the East India Company's famous college at Haileybury.[21] Thus the viceroy was only repeating orthodox curriculum when he lectured Buckingham that high prices, by stimulating imports and limiting consumption, were the "natural saviours of the situation." He issued strict, "semi-theological" orders that "there is be no interference of any kind on the part of Government with the object of reducing the price of food," and "in his letters home to the India Office and to politicians of both parties, he denounced 'humanitarian hysterics'."[22] "Let the British public foot the bill for its 'cheap sentiment,' if it wished to save life at a cost that would bankrupt India."[23] By official dictate, India like Ireland before it had become a Utilitarian laboratory where millions of lives were wagered against dogmatic

faith in omnipotent markets overcoming the "inconvenience of dearth."[24] Grain merchants, in fact, preferred to export a record 6.4 million cwt. of wheat to Europe in 1877–78 rather than relieve starvation in India.[25]

Lytton, to be fair, probably believed that he was in any case balancing budgets against lives that were already doomed or devalued of any civilized human quality. The grim doctrines of Thomas Malthus, former Chair of Political Economy at Haileybury, still held great sway over the white rajas. Although it was bad manners to openly air such opinions in front of the natives in Calcutta, Malthusian principles, updated by Social Darwinism, were regularly invoked to legitimize Indian famine policy at home in England. Lytton, who justified his stringencies to the Legislative Council in 1877 by arguing that the Indian population "has a tendency to increase more rapidly than the food it raises from the soil,"[26] most likely subscribed to the melancholy viewpoint expressed by Sir Evelyn Baring (afterwards Lord Cromer), the finance minister, in a later debate on the government's conduct during the 1876–79 catastrophe. "[E]very benevolent attempt made to mitigate the effects of famine and defective sanitation serves but to enhance the evils resulting from over-population."[27]

In the same vein, an 1881 report "concluded that 80% of the famine mortality were drawn from the poorest 20% of the population, and if such deaths were prevented this stratum of the population would still be unable to adopt prudential restraint. Thus, if the government spent more of its revenue on famine relief, an even larger proportion of the population would become penurious."[28] As in Ireland thirty years before, those with the power to relieve famine convinced themselves that overly heroic exertions against implacable natural laws, whether of market prices or population growth, were worse than no effort at all.

His recent biographers claim that Salisbury, the gray eminence of Indian policy, was privately tormented by these Malthusian calculations. A decade earlier, during his first stint as secretary of state for India, he had followed the advice of the Council in Calcutta and refused to intervene in the early stages of a deadly famine in Orissa. "I did nothing for two months," he later confessed. "Before that time the monsoon had closed the ports of Orissa—help was impossible—and—it is said—a million people died. The Governments of India and Bengal had taken in effect no precautions whatever … I never could feel that I was free from all blame for the result."

As a result, he harbored a lifelong distrust of officials who "worshipped political economy as a sort of 'fetish'" as well as Englishmen in India who accepted "famine as a salutary cure for over-population."[29] Yet, whatever his private misgivings, it was Salisbury who had urged the appointment of the laissez-faire fanatic Lytton, and publically congratulated Disraeli for repudiating "the growing idea that England ought to pay tribute to India for having conquered her." Indeed, when his own advisers later protested the repeal of cotton duties in the face of the fiscal emergency of the famine, Salisbury denounced as a "species of International Communism" the idea "that a rich Britain should consent to penalize her trade for the sake of a poor India."[30]

Like other architects of the Victorian Raj, Salisbury was terrified of setting any precedent for the permanent maintenance of the India poor. As the *Calcutta Review* pointed out in 1877, "In India there is no legal provision made for the poor, either in British territory, or in the native states; [although] the need for it is said by medical men and others, to be exceedingly great."[31] Both Calcutta and London feared that "enthusiastic prodigality" like Buckingham's could become a trojan horse for an Indian Poor Law.[32]

In its final report, the Famine Commission of 1878–80 approvingly underscored Lord Lytton's skinflint reasoning: "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 …"[33] None of the principal players on either side of the House of Commons disagreed with the supreme principle that India was to be governed as a revenue plantation, not a almshouse.

The 'Temple Wage'

Over the next year, the gathering horror of the drought-famine spread from the Madras Presidency through Mysore, the Bombay Deccan and eventually into the North Western Provinces. The crop losses in many districts of the Deccan plateau and Tamilnad plains (see Table 1.2) were nothing short of catastrophic. Ryots in district after district sold their "bullocks, field implements, the thatch of the roofs, the frames of their doors and windows" to survive the terrible first year of the drought. Without essential means of production, however, they were unable to take advantage of the little rain that fell in April–May 1877 to

sow emergency crops of rape and *cumboo*. As a result they died in their myriads in August and September.[34]

Table 1.2

Madras Presidency: Chief Famine Districts, 1877

District	Population (Millions)	Percentage of Crop Saved
Bellary	1.68	6
Kurnool	.98	6
Cuddapah	1.35	18
Chingleput	1.34	18
Nellore	1.38	25
North Arcot	2.02	25
Coimbatore	1.76	25
Madura	2.27	25
Salem	1.97	33
Tinnevelly	1.64	37

Source: From report by Sir Richard Temple in *Report of the Indian Famine Commission, 1878,* Part I, *Famine Relief,* London 1880, p. 71.

Millions more had reached the stage of acute malnutrition, characterized by hunger edema and anemia, that modern health workers frequently call "skeletonization."[35] Village officers wrote to their superiors from Nellore and other ravaged districts of the Madras Deccan that the only well-fed part of the local population were the pariah dogs, "fat as sheep," that feasted on the bodies of dead children:

> After a couple of minutes' search, I came upon two dogs worrying over the body of a girl about eight years old. They had newly attacked it, and had only torn one of the legs a little, but the corpse was so enormously bloated that it was only from the total length of the figure one could tell it was a child's. The sight and smell of the locality were so revolting, and the dogs so dangerous, that I did not stay to look for a second body; but I saw two skulls and a backbone which had been freshly picked.[36]

Officials, however, were not eager to share such horrors with the English or educated Indian publics, and the vernacular press charged that starvation deaths were being deliberated misreported as cholera or dysentery mortality in order to disguise the true magnitude of the famine.[37]

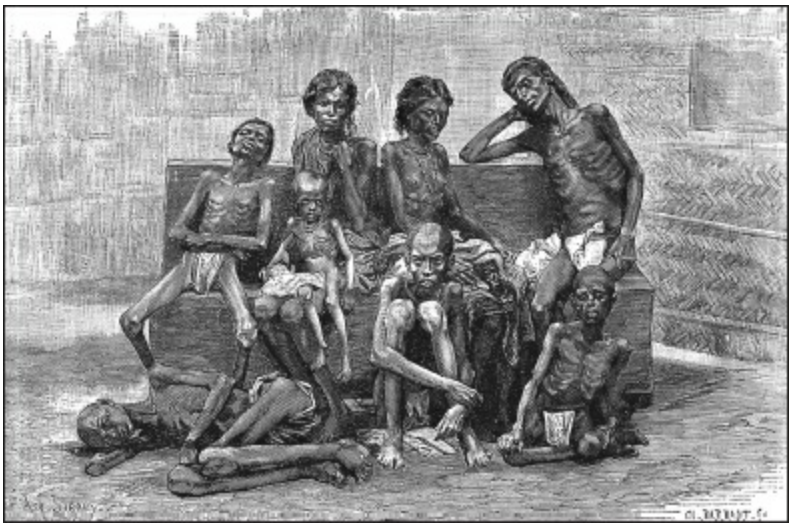

Figure 1.3 A Family in the Deccan, 1877

Conditions were equally desperate across the linguistic and administrative boundary in the Bombay Deccan. Almost two-thirds of the harvest was lost in nine Maharashtran districts affecting 8 million people, with virtually no crop at all in Sholapur and Kaladgi. The disaster befell a peasantry already ground down by exorbitant taxation and extortionate debt. In the Ahmednagar region officials reported that no less than three-fifths of the peasantry was "hopelessly indebted," while in Sholapur the district officer warned his superiors in May 1875: "I see no reason to doubt the fact stated to me by many apparently trustworthy witnesses and which my own personal observation confirms, that in many cases the assessments are only paid by selling ornaments or cattle." (As Jairus Banaji comments, "A household without cattle was a household on the verge of extinction.") Ahmednagar with Poona had been the center of the famous Deccan Riots in May–June 1875, when ryots beat up moneylenders and destroyed debt records.[38]

While British procrastination was sacrificing charity to their savage god, the Invisible Hand, tens of thousands of these destitute villagers were voting with their feet and fleeing to Hyderabad, where the Nazim was providing assistance to famine victims. A large part of Sholapur was depopulated before British officials managed to organize relief works. Then, as a horrified British journalist discovered, they turned away anyone who was too starved to undertake hard coolie labor. But even "the labour test imposed upon the able-bodied," the correspondent notes, "is found to be too heavy for their famished frames; the wages paid are inadequately low; in many districts all who are willing work do not find employment … No arrangements have been made to

preserve the cattle by providing fodder or pasture lands. No grain stores have been collected or charity houses opened for the infirm and the aged." The only recourse for the young, the infirm and the aged was therefore to attempt the long trek to Hyderabad—an ordeal that reportedly killed most of them.[39]

Widespread unemployment and the high price of grain, meanwhile, brought the spectre of hunger even into districts where rainfall had been adequate. As a result, several million emaciated laborers and poor peasants overwhelmed the relief works belatedly authorized by the Bombay and Madras governments. At the beginning of February, the lieutenant-governor of Bengal, Sir Richard Temple, was sent south as plenipotentiary Famine Delegate by Lytton to clamp down on the "out of control" expenditures that threatened the financing of the planned invasion of Afghanistan. Although the viceroy had also skirmished bitterly with Sir Philip Wodehouse, the governor of Bombay, over Calcutta's refusal to subsidize large-scale relief works during the fall of 1876, his greatest indignation was directed at Buckingham for making "public charity indiscriminate" in Bellary, Cuddapah and Kurnool, where one-quarter of the population was employed breaking stone or digging canals.[40]

Temple was a shrewd choice as Lytton's enforcer. Earlier, in 1873–74, he had followed Salisbury's urgings and dealt aggressively with a drought that severely damaged the harvest throughout most of Bengal and Bihar. Importing half a million tons of rice from Burma, he provided life-saving subsistence, both through relief works and a "gratuitous dole," which forestalled mass mortality. Indeed, the official record claimed only twenty-three starvation deaths. It was the only truly successful British relief effort in the nineteenth century and might have been celebrated as a template for dealing with future emergencies. Instead, Temple came under withering fire from London for the "extravagance" of allowing "the scale of wages paid at relief works had to be determined by the daily food needs of the labourer and the prevailing food prices in the market rather than by the amount that the Government afford to spend for the purpose."[41] In public, he was lambasted by the *Economist* for encouraging indolent Indians to believe that "it is the duty of the Government to keep them alive."[42] Senior civil servants, convinced (according to Lord Salisbury) that it was "a mistake to spend to spend so much money to save a lot of black fellows," denounced the relief campaign as "pure Fourierism."[43] Temple's career was almost ruined.

In 1877 the thoroughly chastened lieutenant-governor, "burning to retrieve

his reputation for extravagance in the last famine," had become the implacable instrument of Lytton's frugality. The viceroy boasted to the India Office that he could not have found "a man more likely, or better able to help us save money in famine management."[44] Indeed, *The Times* was soon marveling at the "pliability" of his character: "Sir Richard Temple, whether rightly or wrongly, has the reputation of having a mind so plastic and principles so facile that he can in a moment change front and adopt most contradictory lines of policy. His course in the famine districts certainly seems to bear this out, for he is even more strict than the Supreme Government in enforcing a policy which differs in every respect from that which he himself practised in Behar three years ago."[45]

Although Victoria in her message to the Imperial Assemblage had reassured Indians that their "happiness, prosperity and welfare" were the "present aims and objects of Our Empire,"[46] Temple's brief from the Council of India left no ambiguity about the government's true priorities: "The task of saving life irrespective of cost, is one which it is beyond our power to undertake. The embarrassment of debt and weight of taxation consequent on the expense thereby involved would soon become more fatal than the famine itself." Likewise, the viceroy insisted that Temple everywhere in Madras "tighten the reins." The famine campaign in Lytton's conception was a semi-military demonstration of Britain's necessary guardianship over a people unable to help themselves, not an opportunity for Indian initiative or self-organization.[47] If, as a modern authority on famine emphasizes, "emergency relief, like development aid, is only truly effective if the recipients have the power to determine what it is and how it used," Temple's perverse task was to make relief as repugnant and ineffective as possible.[48] In zealously following his instructions to the letter, he became to Indian history what Charles Edward Trevelyan—permanent secretary to the Treasury during the Great Hunger (and, later, governor of Madras)—had become to Irish history: the personification of free market economics as a mask for colonial genocide.[49]

In a lightning tour of the famished countryside of the eastern Deccan, Temple purged a half million people from relief work and forced Madras to follow Bombay's precedent of requiring starving applicants to travel to dormitory camps outside their locality for coolie labor on railroad and canal projects. The deliberately cruel "distance test" refused work to able-bodied adults and older children within a ten-mile radius of their homes. Famished laborers were also prohibited from seeking relief until "it was certified that

they had become indigent, destitute and capable of only a modicum of labour."[50] Digby later observed that Temple "went to Madras with the preconceived idea that the calamity had been exaggerated, that it was being inadequately met, and that, therefore, facts were, unconsciously may be, squared with this theory … He expected to see a certain state of things, and he saw that—that and none other."[51]

In a self-proclaimed Benthamite "experiment" that eerily prefigured later Nazi research on minimal human subsistence diets in concentration camps, Temple cut rations for male coolies, whom he compared to "a school full of refractory children," down to one pound of rice per diem despite medical testimony that the ryots—once "strapping fine fellows"— were now "little more than animated skeletons … utterly unfit for any work." (Noting that felons traditionally received two pounds of rice per day, one district official suggested that "it would be better to shoot down the wretches than to prolong their misery in the way proposed.")[52] The same reduced ration had been introduced previously by General Kennedy (another acerbic personality, "not personally popular even in his own department")[53] in the Bombay Deccan, and Madras's sanitary commissioner, Dr. Cornish, was "of the opinion that 'experiment' in that case [meant] only slow, but certain starvation."

Table 1.3

The "Temple Wage" in Perspective

	Caloric Value	Activity Level
Basal metabolism (adult)	1500	No activity
"Temple ration" in Madras (1877)	1627	Heavy labor
Buchenwald ration (1944)	1750	Heavy labor
7-year-old child, approved diet (1981)	2050	Normal activity
Minimum war ration, Japan (1945)	2165	Moderate activity
Indian adult, subsistence (1985)	2400	Moderate activity
Temple ration in Bengal (1874)	2500	Heavy labor
Survey of Bengali laborers (1862)	2790	Heavy labor
Indian male, approved diet (1981)	3900	Heavy labor
Voit-Atwater standard (1895)	4200	Heavy labor

Source: Caloric value of Temple ration from Sumit Guha, *The Agrarian Economy of the Bombay Deccan, 1818–1941,* Delhi 1985, p. 186 fn35; Buchenwald ration from C. Richet, "Medicales sur le camp de Buchenwald en 1944–45," *Bulletin Academie Medicine* 129 (1945), pp. 377–88; recommended Indian adult subsistence diet from Asok Mitra, "The Nutrition Situation in India," in Margaret Biswas and Per Pinstrup-Andersen, eds., *Nutrition and Development,* Oxford 1985, p. 149; basal metabolism from

Philip Payne, "The Nature of Malnutrition," ibid., p. 7; child diet and recommended calories for Indian males performing heavy labor from C. Gapalan, "Undernutrition: Measurement," in S. Osmani, ed., *Nutrition and Poverty,* Oxford 1992, p. 2; Rev. James Long's 1862 study of Bengali diets in Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal,* p. 80 fn94; Voit-Atwater tables discussed in Elmer McCollom, *A History of Nutrition,* Boston 1957, pp. 191–2; and the Temple ration during the 1874 Bengal famine calculated on the basis of 1.5 pounds of rice per day with condiments and *dal* (see *Edinburgh Review,* July 1877).

Apart from its sheer deficiency in energy, Cornish pointed out that the exclusive rice ration without the daily addition of protein-rich pulses (*dal*), fish or meat would lead to rapid degeneration.[54] Indeed, as the lieutenant-governor was undoubtedly aware, the Indian government had previously fixed the minimum shipboard diet of emigrant coolies "living in a state of quietude" at twenty ounces of rice plus one pound of dal, mutton, vegetables and condiment.[55] In the event, the "Temple wage," as it became known, provided less sustenance for hard labor than the diet inside the infamous Buchenwald concentration camp and less than half of the modern caloric standard recommended for adult males by the Indian government.

Temple, who three years earlier had fixed the minimum ration during the Bengal famine at one-and-half pounds of rice plus *dal*, now publically disdained the protests of Cornish and other medical officers. They erroneously, and "irresponsibly" in his view, elevated public health above public finance. "Everything," he lectured, "must be subordinated … to the financial consideration of disbursing the smallest sum of money consistent with the preservation of human life."[56] He completed his cost-saving expedition to Madras by imposing the Anti-Charitable Contributions Act of 1877, which prohibited at the pain of imprisonment private relief donations that potentially interfered with the market-fixing of grain prices. He also stopped Buckingham from remitting onerous land taxes in the famine districts. In May, after Temple had reported back, the viceroy censured Madras officials for their "exaggerated impressions" of misery and "un-called for relief."[57] Temple meanwhile proclaimed that he had put "the famine under control." (Digby sourly responded that "a famine can scarcely be said to be adequately controlled which leaves one-fourth of the people dead.")[58]

The militarization of relief, followed by the failure of the southwest monsoon and another doubling of grain prices in the six months from the middle of 1877, punctually produced lethal results.[59] Exactly as medical officials had warned, the "Temple wage" combined with heavy physical labor

and dreadful sanitation turned the work camps into extermination camps. By the end of May horrified relief officials in Madras were reporting that more than half of the inmates were too weakened to carry out any physical labor whatsoever.[60] Most of them were dead by the beginning of the terrible summer of 1877. As Temple's most dogged critic, Dr. Cornish, pointed out, monthly mortality was now equivalent to an annual death rate of 94 percent. Post-mortem examinations, moreover, showed that the chief cause of death —"extreme wasting of tissue and destruction of the lining membrane of the lower bowel"—was textbook starvation, with full-grown men reduced to under sixty pounds in weight.[61] Mortality was similar in camps throughout the Bombay Deccan, where cholera, spread by polluted water and filth, accelerated the decimation. One official wrote that one relief road project "bore the appearance of a battlefield, its sides being strewn with the dead, the dying and those recently attacked."[62]

Jails ironically were the only exception to this institutional mortality pattern, and they were generally preferred by the poor to the disease-ridden relief camps. An American missionary described how a group of weavers begged him to have them arrested for nonfulfillment of a contract. "We are very sorry, sir, but we have eaten up all the money you gave us, and we have made no clothes. We are in a starving condition, and if you will only send us to jail we shall get something to eat." It was an eminently sensible request. "Prisoners were the best fed poor people in the country," and, accordingly, "the jails were filled to overflowing."[63]

During the Irish famine, Trevelyan had protested that the country's "greatest evil" was not hunger, but "the selfish, perverse and turbulent character of the people."[64] Similarly, Temple's ferocious response to reports of mass mortality in the camps was to blame the victims: "The infatuation of these poor people in respect to eating the bread of idleness; their dread of marching on command to any distance from home; their preference often for extreme privation rather than submission to even simple and reasonable orders, can be fully believed only by those who have seen or personally known these things."[65] Moreover, he claimed that the majority of the famine dead were not the cultivating yeomanry, "the bone and sinew of the country," but parasitic mendicants who essentially had committed suicide: "Nor will many be inclined to grieve much for the fate which they brought upon themselves, and which terminated lives of idleness and too often of crime."[66]

The Relief Strike

These calumnies, of course, inflamed Indians of all classes. To the consternation of Temple and Lytton, the famished peasants in relief camps throughout the Bombay Deccan (where the sixteen-ounce ration had first been introduced) organized massive, Gandhi-like protests against the rice reduction and distance test. Temple added more than he realized to the imperial lexicon by calling it "passive resistance." The movement had begun in January 1877, when families on village relief refused orders to march to the new, militarized work camps where men were separated from their wives and children. They were subsequently joined by thousands more who left the camps in protest of the starvation wage and mistreatment by overseers. According to Digby:

> Temple estimated that between January 12 and March 12, 102,000 people discharged themselves from Government employ. He thought he traced in their proceedings a sign of "some method and system." They imagined, by suddenly throwing themselves out of employ they virtually offered a passive resistance to the orders of Government. They counted on exciting the compassion of the authorities and still more on arousing fears lest some accidents to human life should occur. They wandered about in bands and crowds seeking for sympathy.[67]

Figure 1.4 "Forsaken!": An Illustration from Digby's *History*

The "relief strike," as it was called, was sympathetically embraced by the Sarvajanik Sabha (Civic Association) in Poona, a moderate nationalist group composed of prominent local merchants, absentee landlords and professionals led by Ganesh Joshi and Mahdev Govinda Ranade. (Temple cautioned Calcutta that the articulate Ranade might bid to become the "Deccan's Parnell")[68] In widely publicized memorials to Governor Wodehouse and General Kennedy, the Sabha warned of the human catastrophe that British churlishness was

ensuring. In addition to pointing out that the new ration was only half of the traditional penal standard and thus sure to doom "thousands by the slow torture of starvation," they focused attention on the group most ignored by district officers: the children of famine villages.

"It should be remembered," the Sabha wrote to Bombay, "that the same harsh policy which reduced the wages drove away the smaller children from the works, who, till then, had been receiving their small dole in return for their nominal labour. These children, though cast out by Government, will have a prior claim upon the affections of their parents, and many hundreds of poor fathers and mothers will stint themselves out of the pound allowed to support their children."[69] (An American missionary later pointed out that although a child could be fed for a pittance, "just for want of these two cents a day, hundreds and thousands of children wasted away and are no more.")[70]

With the support of the Sabha, the strike kindled the broadest demonstration of Indian anger since the Mutiny. "Meetings, immense as regards numbers, were held, speeches were made, resolutions were passed, and the telegraph wire called into requisition." Temple, in response, ordered Kennedy to "stand firm" against any concession to "combinations of workpeople formed with sinister or self-interested objects." The local relief officers, however, were unnerved, according to Digby, by the "obstinacy with which persons almost in a dying condition would go away anywhere rather than to a relief camp. They seem to have felt the repugnance to relief camps which respectable poor in England have to the Union Workhouses." Official morale seemed to be sapped by the dignity and courage of the protest. The viceroy, at any event, was convinced that a firmer hand was needed in Bombay, and at the end of April Wodehouse resigned and was replaced by Temple.[71]

In his original response to Disraeli's proposal to appoint him viceroy two years earlier, Lytton had protested his "absolute ignorance of every fact and question concerning India."[72] Now, after chastising both Buckingham and Wodehouse, he asserted virtual omniscience over life and death judgements affecting millions of Indians. The Indian press, however, was not as easily bridled or humiliated as the two Tory governors. Little newspapers that usually wasted newsprint with tedious social gossip and regimental sporting news were now conduits to the English public of shocking accounts of rebellion and starvation within the relief camps.[73] Dissident journalists like William Digby in Madras (who later published a two-volume critical history of the

government's response to the famine) and the Bombay *Statesman*'s representative in the Deccan stirred troubling memories of the Irish famine as well as the Sepoy Mutiny. In England, moreover, a group of old Indian hands and Radical reformers, including William Wedderburn, Sir Arthur Cotton, John Bright, Henry Hyndman and Florence Nightingale, kept *The Times*'s letters column full of complaints about Calcutta's callous policies.

Although Lytton urged the India Office to hold fast against these "hysterics," the government was embarrassed by the uproar.[74] Writing to Disraeli, the secretary of state for India, Lord Salisbury, expressed his own fear that the viceroy was "bearing too hard on the people."[75] With the prime minister's approval, Salisbury pulled on Lytton's reins in early May, advising him "not to place too much restriction on the discretion of the local government." In effect, while Disraeli defended Lytton against the Liberals in Parliament, the viceroy was ordered to give local officials the loopholes they needed to reduce mass mortality with higher rations and reduced workloads. This concession more or less tamed the Poona Sabha, whose own conservatives were wary of the explosive potential of the masses, but it was too little and too late to brake the slide into a terminal phase of starvation and epidemic disease. If rice harvests in Burma and Bengal in 1877 were normal, and overall grain inventories sufficed to service the export demand, it was no solace to the 36 million rural Indians whom Calcutta admitted in August 1877 were directly stalked by starvation. The weather remained relentless. After a brief flirtation with the monsoon in April, the skies cleared and temperatures sharply rose. In one of his economizing decrees the year before, Lytton had drastically cut back the budget for maintenance and repair of local water storage. The result, as Digby emphasized in his history of the famine, was that precious rainwater was simply "run to waste" in a needless "sacrifice of human lives." The furnace hot winds that swept the Deccan added to the misery by evaporating what little moisture remained in the soil. The fields were baked to brick.[76]

As water supplies dried up or became polluted with human waste, cholera became the scythe that cut down hundreds of thousands of weakened, skeletal villagers. The same El Niño weather system that had brought the drought the previous year also warmed waters in the Bay of Bengal, promoting the phytoplankton blooms that are the nurseries of the cholera bacterium. A terrible cyclone, which drowned perhaps 150,000 Bengalis, brought the pandemic ashore, "modern transport provided the invasion route for disease", and the

fetid relief camps became crucibles for "cholera's great synergism with malnutrition."[77]

Obdurate Bombay officials meanwhile continued to outrage Indians and incite charges of a cover-up in the press by refusing to publish any estimate of rural mortality. (Even Florence Nightingale was snubbed when she requested figures in early 1878.)[78] The Sabha accordingly decided to carry out its own census of people and cattle in the fifty-four villages comprising three taluks of Sholapur district in August 1877. "It perfected a network of school teachers, retired civil servants and other throughout the dry districts, which gave it in some areas better data faster than the government could produce." It was a trailblazing example of using survey techniques and statistics against the empire.[79]

Table 1.4

Sabha Estimates of Famine Mortality

Taluks	**Prefamine Population**	**Present Population**	**Decline**
Madhee and Mohol	24,581	15,778	36%
Indi	39,950	20,905	48%
	Cattle before Famine	**Cattle Now**	**Decline**
Madhee and Mohol	16,561	5,470	67%
Indi	35,747	5,644	84%

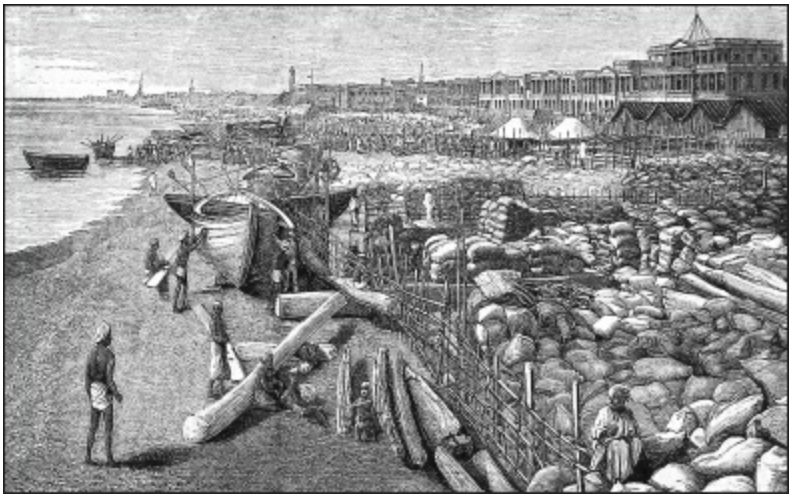

Figure 1.5 Grain Stores in Madras, February 1877

Buckingham, on the other hand, complied with public opinion and ordered a rough census of famine deaths. Reports from the Madras districts indicated that at least 1.5 million had already died in Presidency. In the driest Deccan districts like Bellary, one-quarter of the population perished, and in some *taluks* with high percentages of landless laborers, more than one-third.[80] In Madras city, overwhelmed by 100,000 drought refugees, famished peasants dropped dead in front of the troops guarding pyramids of imported rice, while "on any day and every day mothers might be seen in the streets … offering children for sale."[81] (The Madras Chamber of Commerce helpfully suggested that flogging posts be erected along the beach so that police could deter potential grain thieves.)[82] In the North Western Provinces, as we shall see, only desultory and punitive relief was organized, "with the result that in spite of the abundant winter crops and the restricted area affected, in nine months the mortality amounted to over a million."[83]

However, "the Malthusian overtones of famine policies and their disastrous consequences," Ira Klein argues, "were experienced most woefully in Mysore," where the British Commission of Regency later conceded that fully one quarter of the population perished.[84] Frugality became criminal negligence as the chief commissioner, from "dread of spending the Mysore surplus," refused life-saving expenditure; then, after his inaction had become a scandal, turned relief work into sadistic regime of punishing the starving. "On the command of the Viceroy to develop a famine policy, he drew up a series of irrigation and other projects, most so far from the famine stricken tracts that emaciated victims had to walk a hundred miles or more to them."[85] Those who actually reached the camps found them fetid, disease-wracked boneyards where a majority of refugees quickly died. One official later recalled scenes out of Dante's *Inferno*.

> The dead and dying were lying about on all sides, cholera patients rolling about in the midst of persons free of the disease; for shelter some had crawled to the graves of an adjoining cemetery and had lain themselves down between two graves as support for their wearied limbs; the crows were hovering over bodies that still had a spark of life in them … The place seemed tenanted by none but the dead and the dying. In a few minutes I picked up five bodies; one being that of an infant which its dying mother had firmly clasped, ignorant of the child being no more; the cholera patients were lying about unheeded by those around; some poor children were crying piteously for water within the hearing of the cooks, who never stirred to wet the lips of the poor things that were *in extremis* …[86]

By the summer of 1877, as the famine in Mysore approached its terrible

apogee, social order was preserved only by terror. When desperate women and their hungry children, for example, attempted to steal from gardens or glean grain from fields, they were "branded, tortured, had their noses cut off, and were sometimes killed." Rural mobs, in turn, assaulted landowners and patels, pillaging their grain stores, even burning their families alive. In other instances, extremely rare in Indian history, hunger-crazed individuals resorted to cannibalism. "One madman dug up and devoured part of a cholera victim, while another killed his son and ate part of the boy."[87]

Down from Olympus

Lytton was kept well-informed of such grisly details. From his hard-minded perspective, however, the most serious escalation in the famine was the increasing burden on the Indian Treasury. The failure of the 1877 monsoon threatened to divert another £10 million for the salvation of what he viewed through his Malthusian spectacles as a largely redundant stratum of the population. Having bent his rules in May to accommodate London's anxieties, the viceroy felt confident enough in the summer to resume his campaign against profligate relief. In August 1877, shortly after the Great White Queen reassured the public that "no exertion will be wanting on the part of my Indian Government to mitigate this terrible calamity," Lytton finally came down from his seasonal headquarters in the Himalayas to spend a few days inspecting conditions in Madras.[88]

This was his first personal exposure to the terrible reality of the famine. A local English-language newspaper editorialized that after domiciling himself for so long in the distant comforts of Simla, "the Indian Olympus," where he displayed "merely the faintest idea of the extent of the calamity," Lytton would now have to confront inescapable truths. "There are, in the relief camps of Palaveram and Monegar Choultry, sights to be witnessed, which even we, who have become callous and hardened, cannot but look upon without a shudder; sights which we dare not describe, and which an artist could not paint. What the effect of these sights must have been on the sensitive and poetical mind of Lord Lytton, we pause to imagine."[89]

In addition to the hugely unpopular Temple wage, the British community in Madras was outraged by Lytton's public denunciation of their recent efforts to raise relief funds in England. With both grain prices and famine deaths (157,588 in August) soaring, but with his hands tied by the viceroy's various

strictures and economies, the Duke of Buckingham had embraced the philanthropic appeal as a last-ditch hope. It remained to be seen whether Lytton and his "Supreme Government" (as it was called in those days) would yield to the overwhelming urgency of the crisis. "The Viceroy," editorialized the same paper, "has now the opportunity, literally speaking, of saving thousands of lives. Let him telegraph to England candidly, boldly, and fearlessly, the real facts of the case; he may, by this means, perhaps, remove the doubt now certainly engendered in the minds of people at home, as to the need of their charitable aid."[90]

In the event, the viceroy's "sensitive and poetical mind" was stubbornly unmoved by anything he experienced during his lightning tour of southern India. On the contrary, Lytton was convinced that Buckingham, like a fat squire in a Fielding novel, was allowing the lower orders to run riot in the relief camps. After briefly visiting one of the camps, Lytton sent a letter to his wife that bristled with patrician contempt both for Buckingham and the famished people of Madras. "You never saw such 'popular picnics' as they are. The people in them do no work of any kind, are bursting with fat, and naturally enjoy themselves thoroughly. The Duke visits these camps like a Buckingham squire would visit his model farm, taking the deepest interest in the growing fatness of his prize oxen and pigs … But the terrible question is how the Madras Government is ever to get these demoralized masses on to really useful work."[91]

In a bitter conference in Madras, Lytton forced Buckingham to reaffirm his complete allegiance to the cardinal principles of famine policy—"the sufficiency of private trade" and "the necessity of non-interference with private trade"—and imposed his own man, Major-General Kennedy from Bombay, as Buckingham's "Personal Assistant." In practice, it was a coup d'état that deposed Buckingham's Council and installed Kennedy as supremo for famine administration with orders to adhere to the strict letter of the Temple reforms.[92] Meanwhile, from the remote corners of the Deccan, missionaries reported more unspeakable scenes. "Recently, the corpse of a woman was carried along the road slung to a pole like an animal, with the face partly devoured by dogs. The other day, a famished crazy woman took a dead dog and ate it, near our bungalow." "This is not sensational writing," emphasized the Anglican correspondent. "The half of the horrors of this famine have not, cannot, be told. Men do not care to reproduce in writing scenes which have

made their blood run cold."[93]

The Deccan's villages were also now rent by desperate internal struggles over the last hoarded supplies of grain. A social chain reaction set in as each class or caste attempted to save themselves at the expense of the groups below them. As David Arnold as shown, collectively structured, "moral-economic" *dacoities* (expropriations) against moneylenders and grain merchants tended to degenerate in the later stages of famine into inter-caste violence or even a Hobbesian war of *ryot* against *ryot*. "The longer famine persisted the less crime and acts of violence bore the mark of collective protest and appropriation, and the more they assumed the bitterness of personal anguish, desolation and despair."[94] Sharma agrees that the transition from communitarian action to intra-village violence followed a predictable pattern: "The change in the agricultural cycle had significant implications for forms of popular action and solidarities. The temporary class solidarities and collective popular action which had been witnessed during the failure of the *kharif* [crop] showed a declining tendency in the winter seasons. Standing *rabi* crops soon became the objects of plunder, more than granaries and storage pits of hoarders and banias. The zamindars had to guard their crops by employing *lathi*-wielding musclemen."[95]

Heavy rains in September and October finally eased the drought in southern India, but only at the price of a malaria epidemic that killed further hundreds of thousands of enfeebled peasants in the United Provinces as well as the Deccan. Modern research has shown that extreme drought, by decimating their chief predators, ensures an explosion in mosquito populations upon the first return of the monsoon. The ensuing spike in malaria cases, in turn, delays the resumption of normal agricultural practices.[96] But in 1878 there were other obstacles as well to planting a life-saving crop. The fodder famine had been so extreme that plough animals were virtually extinct in many localities. As *The Times*'s correspondent reported from the Madras Deccan in July, "To show how scarce the bullocks have become, I may mention, that in the Bellary district merchants send out their grain supplies to distant villages on carts drawn by men. The value of the labour of the human animal is so low that it is cheaper to employ half-a-dozen men to move a load of rice than a couple of bullocks. The men, at any rate, can be fed, whereas fodder for cattle employed on the roads is not to be had at any price."[97]

With their bullocks dead and their farm implements pawned, *ryots* had to

scratch at the heavy Deccan soil with tree branches or yoke themselves or their wives to the remaining ploughs. Much of the seed grain distributed by relief committees was bad, while that which sprouted and pushed its way above the ground was instantly devoured by great plagues of locusts that, as in the Bible, were the camp followers of drought. "The solid earth," according to an American missionary, "seemed in motion, so great were the numbers of these insects; compounds and fields appeared as if they had been scorched with devastating fires after the pests had passed."[98] By early 1878 famine accompanied by cholera had returned to many districts, but relief grain stocks, in anticipation of a good harvest, were depleted and prices as high as ever. Digby tells a grim story about the distress that lingered through the spring: "Three women (sisters) had married three brothers, and they and their families all lived in one large house, in Hindu and patriarchal fashion. The whole household, on 1 January 1878, numbered forty-eight persons. Their crops failed, their money was gone, their credit was *nil*. They tried to live on seeds, leaves, etc. and, as a consequence, cholera attacked them, and thirty died from this disease. Fifteen others expired from what a relative called 'cold fever', and in April only three persons remained."[99]

The final blow against the Deccan peasantry was a militarized campaign to collect the tax arrears accumulated during the drought. The government ruthlessly picked the pockets of paupers.[100] In the Kurnool district of Madras, for example, "in 1879–80, coercive policies had to be employed for the recovery of as much as 78% of total collections." As D. Rajasekhar points out, the resulting auction of lands in arrears may have been a windfall for rich peasants and moneylenders, who had already profited from famine-induced sacrifice sales of cattle and land mortgages, but it crippled the recovery of an agrarian economy that traditionally upon the energy of (now ruined) smallholders to bring cultivable wastes under plough.[101]

'Multidunious Murders'

The year 1878 also saw terrible, wanton mortality in northwestern India following the failure of the monsoon in the summer of 1877 and a retrenchment of dry weather in early 1878. Even more than in the south, however, drought was consciously made into famine by the decisions taken in palaces of rajas and viceroys. Thus in the remote and beautiful valleys of Kashmir, British officials blamed "the criminal apathy of the Maharaja and the greed of his

officials, who bought up the stores of grain to sell at extravagant prices" for the starvation of a full third of the population. "Unless Sir Robert Egerton, then Lieutenant-Governor of the Punjab, had insisted on taking the transport and supply service out of the hands of the corrupt and incompetent Kashmir Government, the valley would have been depopulated."[102]

Figure 1.6 Famine Victims, 1877
The original caption of this missionary photograph reads, "Those who have got to this stage rarely recover."

But with equal justice the same criminal charges could be (and were) lodged against the British administration in the North-West Provinces and Oud, as well as adjoining districts of the Punjab, where famine killed at least 1.25 million people in 1878–79. As Indian historians have emphasized, this staggering death toll was the foreseeable and avoidable result of deliberate policy choices. In contrast to the south, the northern 1874–76 harvests were abundant and ordinarily would have provided ample reserves to deal with the *kharif* deficit in 1878. But subsistence farming in many parts of the North Western Provinces had been recently converted into an captive export sector to stabilize British grain prices. Poor harvests and high prices in England during 1876–77 generated a demand that absorbed most of the region's wheat surplus. Likewise, most of the provinces' cruder grain stocks like millet were commercially exported to the famine districts in Bombay and Madras presidencies, leaving local peasants with no hedge against drought. The profits from the grain exports, meanwhile, were pocketed by richer zamindars,

moneylenders and grain merchants—not the direct producers.[103]

Still, early and energetic organization of relief and, above all, the deferment of collection of the land tax might have held mortality to a minimum. Indeed the province's executive, Sir George Couper, implored Lytton to remit that year's revenues. "The Lieutenant-Governor is well aware of the straits to which the Government of India is put at the present time for money, and it is with the utmost reluctance that he makes a report which must temporarily add to their burdens. *But he sees no other course to adopt*. If the village communities which form the great mass of our revenue payers be pressed now, they will *simply be ruined*."[104]

Lytton, however, was still bogged down in the logistics of his Afghanistan adventure and was again unswayed by images of destitute villages. He rejected Couper's appeal out of hand. The lieutenant-governor had none of Buckingham's stubborn, paternalist pity for the people, and, to the disgust of some of his own district officers ("a more suicidal policy I cannot conceive," complained one), immediately and obsequiously vowed "to put the screw" upon the hard-hit zamindars and their famished tenants. ("His Honour trusts that the realizations will equal the expectations of the Governments of India, but if they are disappointed, his Excellency the Viceroy … may rest assured *that it will not be for want of effort or inclination to put the necessary pressure on those who are liable for the demand*.") He promptly ordered his district officers and engineers to "discourage relief works in every possible way … Mere distress is not a sufficient reason for opening a relief work." The point was to force the peasants to give money to the government, not the other way around.[105] When starving peasants fought back (there were 150 grain riots in August and September of 1877 alone), Couper filled the jails and prisons.[106]

As one dissident civil servant, Lt.-Col. Ronald Osborn, would later explain to readers of *The Contemporary Review*, a murderous official deception was employed to justify the collections and disguise the huge consequent casualties:

> But the Government of India having decreed the collection of the land revenue, were now compelled to justify their rapacity, by pretending there was no famine calling for a remission. The dearth and the frightful mortality throughout the North-West Provinces were to be preserved as a State secret like the negotiations with Shere Ali [the emir of Afghanistan] …
>
> During all that dreary winter famine was busy devouring its victims by thousands … [I]n the desperate endeavor to keep their cattle alive, the wretched peasantry fed them on the straw which thatched their huts, and which provided them with bedding. The winter was abnormally

> severe, and without a roof above them or bedding beneath them, scantily clad and poorly fed, multitudes perished of cold. The dying and the dead were strewn along the cross-country roads. Scores of corpses were tumbled into old wells, because the deaths were too numerous for the miserable relatives to perform the usual funeral rites. Mothers sold their children for a single scanty meal. Husbands flung their wives into ponds, to escape the torment of seeing them perish by the lingering agonies of hunger. Amid these scenes of death the Government of India kept its serenity and cheerfulness unimpared. The journals of the North-West were persuaded into silence. Strict orders were given to civilians under no circumstances to countenance the pretence of the natives that they were dying of hunger. One civilian, a Mr. MacMinn, unable to endure the misery around him, opened a relief work at his own expense. He was severely reprimanded, threatened with degradation, and ordered to close the work immediately.[107]

"Not a whisper" of this manmade disaster reached the public until a notable government critic, Robert Knight, publisher of the *Indian Economist and Statesman*, visited Agra in February 1878. "He was astonished to find all around the indications of appalling misery." His public revelations prompted a long, self-laudatory minute from Couper that was fulsomely endorsed by the viceroy. In his comment, Lytton blamed the horrendous mortality in the North-West more on "the unwillingness of the people to leave their homes than by any want of forethought on the part of the local government in providing works where they might be relieved."[108] Knight replied, in turn, in an editorial that for the first time bluntly used the term "murder" to characterize official famine policy:

> Do not accuse the *Statesman* of exaggerating matters. Accuse yourself. For long weary years have we demanded the suspension of these kists [land tax] when famine comes and in vain. With no poor law in the land, and the old policy once more set up of letting the people pull through or die, as they can, and with the vernacular press which alone witnesses the sufferings of the people silenced by a cruel necessity, we and our contemporaries must speak without reserve or be partakers in the guilt of multitudinous murders committed by men blinded to the real nature of what we are doing in the country.[109]

Indeed, "blind men" like Lytton and Temple were fortunate that they had to face only the wrath of newspaper editorials. The India of "supine sufferers" which they governed in 1877 was still traumatized by the savage terror that had followed the Mutiny twenty years earlier. Violent protest was everywhere deterred by memories of sepoys blown apart at the mouth of canons and whole forests of peasants writhing at the noose. The exception was in Poona where Basudeo Balwant Phadke and his followers, inspired by still robust Maratha martial traditions, broke with the Sabha's moderation. "The destruction caused by the famine," Dublish explains, led Basudeo to "vow to destroy British power in India by means of an armed rebellion." Betrayed by a companion

while organizing a raid on the treasury to buy arms, the "Maratha Robin Hood" was deported and died in prison—"the father of militant nationalism in India"—in 1883.[110] His abortive 1879 conspiracy stood in a similar relationship to the holocaust of 1876–77 as did the Young Ireland uprising of 1848 to the Great Hunger of 1846–47: which is to say, it was both postscript and prologue.

Famine and Nationalism

No Englishmen understood this point more clearly than Lytton's secretary of agriculture, Allan Octavian Hume. Odd man out in a Tory government that scorned Indian aspirations to self-government, Hume (whose father was a well-known Scottish Radical MP) was deeply sympathetic to the grievances of the Hindu and Muslim elites. Even more unusual, he had sensitive antennae tuned to the rumblings of revolutionary discontent among the poor. In the aftermath of Basudeo's plot, he "became convinced," according to William Wedderburn, a leader of the parliamentary opposition on India, "that some definite action was called to counteract the growing unrest among the masses who suffered during the famine."[111] The first step was to resist the viceroy's punitive and incendiary scheme to foist the costs of future famine relief entirely on the shoulders of the poor.

Originally advocated by Lord Northbrook, the idea of a "famine insurance fund" was revived in 1877 by Hamilton and Salisbury to pre-empt the Liberals from making the terrible mortality in India an issue in the next election. Lytton, aware that radical members of the House of Commons favored financing the fund through a combination of wealth taxes and reductions in military expenditure, embraced the plan with the proviso that funding be entirely regressive, without harm to ruling classes or the army. He vehemently opposed a proposal from Hume, whom he forced to resign, that would have imposed a modest income tax "on the ground that it would affect the higher income groups, both European and Indian." His own preference was for a famine tax on potential famine victims (that is, a new land cess on the peasantry): a measure that would have inflamed the entire country and which, therefore, was rejected by Salisbury and the Council of India. As an alternative, Lytton and John Strachey drafted a scheme that was almost as regressive, reviving a hated license tax on petty traders (professionals were exempt) in tandem with brutal hikes in salt duties in Madras and Bombay (where the cost of salt was raised

from 2 to 40 annas per maund).[112]

After the purge, Hume joined the small but influential chorus of opposition to Lytton that was led by Wedderburn, Cotton and Nightingale (whose campaign for Indian sanitary reform had been snubbed by Lytton). Digby, the famine's chief chronicler, would also return to England in 1880 to champion Indian grievances in Liberal politics. In dozens of town meetings, as well as in the London press and the House of Commons, they argued that selfish and disastrous British policies like the salt tax, not nature, had paved the way for the Madras famine, and advocated a new policy based on reductions in ground rent and military expenditure, new spending on irrigation and public health, cheap credit through a system of rural banks, and a progressive famine fund. Nightingale was a particularly fiery campaigner against the salt tax, whose enforcement, she reminded audiences, had required the construction of a literal police state: "a tower commands the salt works, occupied by a policeman all day. Moats surround the works, patrolled by policemen all night; workmen are search to prevent them from carrying off salt in their pockets …"[113]

The India opposition's emphasis on a "civilizing" (as Nightingale called it)[114] rather than "imperial" strategy in India corresponded closely with a parallel shift in the thinking of such Liberal pundits as John Stuart Mill, and converged with the platform of moderate nationalists like Dadabhai Naoroji and Romesh Chandra Dutt, who thought that Indian home rule within the Empire could best be achieved through collaboration with humanitarian English Liberals. Steeped in Millsian political economy, Naoroji and Dutt laid indigenous foundations for what a hundred years later would be called the "theory of underdevelopment" with their sophisticated critiques of Britain's "drain of wealth" from India. Although their most famous essays, Naoroji's *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* (1901) and Dutt's *Famines in India* (1900) and his two-volume *Economic History of British India* (1902 and 1904), would be produced in the aftermath of the 1896–1900 holocaust, their basic polemical strategy—mowing down the British with their own statistics—was already discomforting Lytton and his council. Indeed on the eve of the famine in 1876, Naoroji had read his landmark paper, "The Poverty of India" (later reprinted as a pamphlet), to a crowded meeting of the Bombay Branch of the East India Association. The Parsi mathematician and former professor of Gujarati at University College London demolished the self-serving rhetoric about "free trade" that the government used to mask India's tributary relation to England. "With a pressure of taxation nearly double in proportion to that of

England, from an income of one-fifteenth, and an exhaustive drain besides, we are asked to compete with England in free trade?" It was, he said, "a race between a starving, exhausted invalid, and a strongman with a horse to ride on."[115]

Such intellectually formidable critics were a major annoyance to Calcutta. Although the government was able to steamroll the passage of the license and salt taxes, Lytton was forced to reassure the Indian and English publics in his usual longwinded fashion of their benevolent purpose. "The *sole justification* for the increase which has just been imposed upon the people of India, for the purpose of insuring this Empire against the worst calamities of a future famine … is the pledge we have given that a sum not less than a million and half sterling … shall be annually applied to it … [T]he pledges which my financial colleague was authorized to give, on behalf of the Government, were explicit and full as regards these points. For these reasons, it is all the more binding on the honour of the Government to redeem to the uttermost, without evasion or delay, those pledges, for the adequate redemption of which the people of India have, and can have, no other guarantee than the good faith of their rulers."[116]

But the Viceroy was lying through his elegant whiskers. Famine insurance was a cynical facade for raising taxes to redeem cotton duties and finance the invasion of Afghanistan. The truth can be found in Lytton's correspondence: "Lord Salisbury thinks that we are trying by our present measure to get more revenue than we absolutely need. And writing to you confidentially, I cannot deny that, in a certain sense and to a certain extent, this is quite true. But if we do not take advantage of the present situation … for screwing up the revenue, we shall never be able to reform our tariff which grievously needs reform."[117]

Indeed, from 1877 to 1881, the "whole accumulated fund was used either to reduce cotton goods tariff or for the Afghan war." It did not take the Liberals long to expose such an egregious deceit and during his famous Midlothian campaign in 1880 Gladstone repeatedly stirred the crowds against Tory perfidy. "Has the pledge been kept?", he thundered. "The taxation was levied. The pledge was given. The pledge has utterly been broken. The money has been used. It is gone. It has been spent upon the ruinous, unjust, destructive war in Afghanistan."[118]

The intrigues over the famine fund were paralleled by the government's manipulation of the royal commission to investigate the disaster. Although the "manoeuvres surrounding the creation of the Famine Commission were mainly

controlled by the Strachey brothers," its impetus seems to have come directly from Salisbury, whose worries, in the face of a Liberal resurgence, were strictly partisan. "Strachey will also explain to you," he wrote Lytton in November 1877, "what I have talked a good deal to him about—the necessity of some commission on Famine measures in the future, in order to save ourselves from the Irrigation quacks. They will undoubtedly make a strong fight: for I observe that under the Presidency of Cotton, they have been beginning some sort of League … for the Parliamentary campaign." It was suggested that the viceroy could steal his opponents' clothes through a harmless endorsement ("provided it could pay its way") of irrigation as a famine safeguard. The presidency of the commission was safely entrusted to Lt. General Sir Richard Strachey, who as member of the India Council and brother to Lytton's finance chief was unlikely to find fault with himself or his sibling. Convened in early 1878, the commission did not submit a report until June 1880.[119]

"The establishment of the Famine Commission," writes one historian, "was carried out as a political exercise to produce a favourable report, rather than as a measured response to one of the most significant problems of the Government of India. General Strachey protected his brother's policies …"[120] The whitewash, however, was not unanimous. Two of the commissioners—the old India hand James Caird and Madras civil servant H. Sullivan—dissented along lines similar to Buckingham's policies in 1876–77. They urged the government to buy and store grain in the most famine-prone districts, and in the future to relieve the weak and infirm in their home villages. Both of these commonsense recommendations were subjected to scalding criticism by the majority who, instead, reaffirmed Lytton's policy of dormitory work camps and distance, task and wage tests, supplemented as need be by poorhouses. Although the Commission recognized that the "essential problem was shortage of work rather than food," the majority clung to the Benthamite principle that relief should be bitterly punitive in order to discourage dependence upon the government.[121]

The report, as intended, categorically absolved the government of any responsibility for the horrific mortality. As Carol Henderson emphasizes, "The 1878 Famine Commission set the tone for the [future] government response by asserting that the main cause of famine was drought 'leading to the failure of the food crops on which the subsistence of which the population depends.'"[122]

In his 1886 critique of the commission, Hyndman caustically observed that famines "are looked upon as due to 'natural laws,' over which human beings have no control whatever. We attribute all suffering under native governments to native misrule; our own errors we father on 'Nature'."[123] Naoroji likewise thought "how strange it is that the British rulers do not see that after all they themselves are the main cause of the destruction that ensues from droughts; that it is the drain of India's wealth by them that lays at their own door the dreadful results of misery, starvation, and deaths of millions … Why blame poor Nature when the fault lies at your own door?"[124]

The report convinced a majority of Parliament (and some gullible modern historians) that energetic measures were being taken to prevent future catastrophes. Just as misleading promises cloaked the misappropriation of the famine fund, deliberate confusion seems to have been sown about the accomplishments of the commission Contrary to the popular belief that the commission had legislated an obligatory "famine code," the report was surprisingly toothless and only adumbrated "general principles" conforming to utilitarian orthodoxy. "By the mid-1880s, some four or five years after the Famine Report was published, most of the provinces had famine codes but, apart from a reliance on public works for famine relief and injunctions about interfering with the grain trade, they were not uniform."[125] Just as Calcutta had reserved in fine print the right to loot the famine fund ("there was no legal contract," Temple argued in 1890, "between the Government of India and the Indian people to the effect that the Fund should be exclusively devoted to famine purposes"), so too it refused to bind itself by code to "ill-directed and excessive distribution of charitable relief."[126]

Convinced, however, that such famines were not only inevitable but would bring revolution on the tide, Hume again took up agitation for a political safety-valve for Indian discontent. Fearing the rise of Maratha or Bengali counterparts to Ireland's violent republican brotherhoods, he proposed the pre-emptive organization of a moderate home-rule movement that could act as a unified interlocutor to a British Liberal government. The issue became urgent with the return of the Tories to rule in 1885, and Hume (with considerable sympathy from the departing Liberal Viceroy Lord Ripon) engineered the foundation of the Indian National Congress in December with himself as general secretary. The mood of the delegates, writes McLane, "was somber and restrained. They gathered in the aftermath of a series of failures to obtain

reforms. In the recent controversies over military expenditure, volunteering, impartial justice, and Indian admission to the civil services, nationalists had made few gains."[127]

Naoroji meanwhile went to England to run for Parliament in London—Wedderman called it a "flanking movement"—with the aid of radical-Liberals and Michael Davitt's Irish National Land League. Although their friend H. M. Hyndman was already warning that "the time has gone for imploring, if ever existed," Hume, Naoroji and the distinguished membership of the Congress were wagering India's future precisely on a principled appeal to English conscience.[128] As the violent reaction to Irish home rule over the next few years should have warned them, however, the age of Gladstone and J. S. Mill was giving way to jingoism and the New Imperialism. New famines, terrible beyond all apprehension, were already incubating in the loam of India's growing poverty.