CHAPTER I
Towards a Historiographic Understanding

The descriptions and explanations of the apparent lack of growth and development in the Indian economy produced during the colonial period were dominated by the nationalist critique of British rule and the imperial response to it. This debate was 'political in origin',\(^1\) revolving around the question of whether India had suffered or benefited from British rule. In economic terms it focused attention on the evident poverty of the mass of Indian people in the late nineteenth-century, and the prevalence of famine in the 1870s and late 1890s, suggesting that agriculture was unable to support the population. The nationalist argument was put forward by Dadabhai Naroji and R.C. Dutt\(^2\). The nationalist case was marked by assertions that the British had destroyed the pre-colonial Indian economy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. British rule it was argued had blocked indigenous sources of economic growth and power and replaced it with imperial agents and networks. Amongst the many negative effects that it had for the economy, included several welfare and distributional effects in the 'traditional sector' by


imposing foreign competition on handicraft workers and forced commercialisation on agriculturists.

The Indian economy undoubtedly underwent certain structural changes over the nineteenth-century. However, what is also evident from recent research is the fact that this complex process had much that was common with the pre-British economy. Historians have attempted to understand the crystallization of British rule in India, as either being marked by continuity or change. Recent research, however, has shown that any attempt to understand the political economy of the period by isolating a particular approach is problematic, as alongside continuities, changes were all too evident. Though historians have over-emphasized continuities between the British and the pre-British times, [3] the nationalists have equally exaggerated the changes as a result of British rule. Yet, Sumit Sarkar commenting on one of the major forms of expression of early Indian nationalism (the economic critique of foreign rule) argues, that, conceptually it was the economic critique that demarcated the

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post-1870 generation Indian intellectuals from their predecessors. The early nationalists, he states, in fact, formulated with a fair amount of clarity a perspective of independent development [4]. Central to the nationalist argument was the way in which Indian resources were drained off to Britain by the mechanism of imperial rule. The classic nationalist case was that Britain's entire favourable balance of payments with her colony represented the size of the drain of wealth.

Whatever definitions of the drain are used, it is hard to demonstrate that the poverty of the rural economy was the direct result of high rates of taxation to fund unrequited transfer payments to Britain. While Indian interests were clearly subordinated to British ones in important respects during the British Raj, it perhaps would suffice to point out that the Indian economic history was not simply that of a subaltern, subservient economy. Economic relations were also as unequal within colonial society as they were between the imperial power and its colonial subjects [6]. Whether the nationalist understanding of the colonial regime was accurate or faulty is not central to this project. What is important is the fact that the debate was a part of the nationalist discourse that set out to implicate imperial rule in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This had a major effect in shaping the course of the nationalist movement. Nationalist understanding of famine


5. Sarkar, ibid., p. 87; Tomlinson, The Economy, p. 11.
and its consequent effects on the political economy of India was part of the political discourse which set out to understand the effects of imperial rule.

The Indian National Congress was quick to include the 'issue' of famines on its agenda in an attempt to mobilize popular support by bringing the sufferings of the people to the forefront.

The nationalist argument was further strengthened by writers like William Digby [\(^9\)]. Stressing the authenticity of his work he wrote that:

> all my sources of information, are to be found in the scores of Indian Blue Books issued year by year from the Government Press at Calcutta or Simla, and from the presses of His Majesty's printers in London....Details relating to the condition of the people....are abstracted from a series of volumes marked confidential [\(^9\)].

In his work he tried to prove that India under British rule had become chronically famine stricken: "The British authorities were early alive to the evil, and much sympathized with it, BUT ALWAYS with an overruling consideration for revenue" [\(^9\)].

B.M. Bhatia’s Famines in India [\(^9\)] partly highlights the concerns of the nationalist writers. Since much of his understanding of the causes of famines is based on R.C. Dutt’s analysis, his work has been criticized by Michelle

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\(^7\). Ibid., preface.

\(^8\). Ibid., p. 124.

McAlpin. Though Dutt realized that an increased demand for agricultural products encouraged expansion of cultivation and raised prices, he nevertheless argued, that the gains from these processes expected to accrue to the agriculturists, were swallowed up by an increase in land revenue in the areas not under the permanent settlement. McAlpin argues that to say that the famines in the latter half of the nineteenth-century were unprecedented in frequency and severity is to do what "any excellent politician might wisely do to make political use of a crises" [10]. Indicating that R.C. Dutt and his colleagues in the nationalist movement indulged in such 'crises' oriented politics, McAlpin proceeds, then on the basis of Irfan Habib's work, to prove the severity of earlier famines.

Both Bhatia and D.R. Gadgil [11] have explained the declining political concerns with drought and famines in the decades after 1900. This was a result, they argued, not only of government activities in the field of irrigation which reduced the chances of a declining output but also from a change in the method of revenue collection and suspension. They also argue in favour of reforms that moved India towards self-governance as being important in generating such changes. Increase in government responsiveness was seen as a result of increasing Indian representation. Though the level of land revenue


was still seen as being destructive, it was primarily the change in the method of collection that reduced the likelihood of famines.

McAlpin in her work challenges Dutt's diagnosis of the causes of Indian famines in the late nineteenth-century as being a result of the increases in land revenue and the drain of wealth. Arguing in favour of effective management under the colonial regime, she traces the evolution of food crises in Western India from "true famine" to the "lack of purchasing power" [12].

The emphasis of her work is on the declining rate of mortality from the turn of the century. While mortality from periods declared to be famines was high up to 1901, subsequent declared famines produced much smaller increases in mortality. The high mortality of the decade 1901-1911 and 1911-1921 was due not to famines but to plague and influenza. The reasons for decline in the mortality rates was related to the increase in the income of the cultivators and the demand for artisanal products. Between 1860-1920 productivity increased due to irrigation, there was growth in the capital stock used in agriculture, such as wells, carts and the prices for agricultural goods were on the rise. To govern effectively the British needed to mobilize information about agricultural production and to organize resources to enable them to make decisions and implement policy. In preference to the explanations offered by Bhatia and Gadgil, McAlpin argues for an alternative set of factors. She stresses changes in the economic environment and behavioural responses to those changes but

completely excludes political factors [13].

Paul R. Greenough studies the 'historical shift' of popular welfare in the British Indian Province of Bengal, from a state of relative prosperity to one of relative misery during a period of less than a hundred years, suggesting that the famine of 1943-44 was the culmination of a long period of food scarcity and rural distress in Bengal. Famine, he argues, is not only a result of declining material resources but that it could also occur within a "cultural context of ideals". A cultural construct of prosperity refers to the pattern of symbols that represent a society's conception of good life. The ideal of prosperity is real and informs both consciousness and action, though there are variants (i.e. class, community and the like). Indulgence (or the act of providing) for family life, landlord-tenant relations and popular religion were cultural idealizations which though not 'real' were yet deeply ingrained and to that extent effected the conduct of superiors or providers [14]. Bengali prosperity is conceived in such a fashion "that its verbal, textual and artistic representations refer to an ideal rather than an actual state of affairs" [15]. Highlighting the effect of British innovations in the nineteenth-century on rural subsistence and welfare, he argues that by the 1880s the attitude of the zamindars had hardened towards their tenants even though they were familiar with the ethos of

13. Ibid., p. 218.


15. Ibid., p. 38.
zamindari paternalism. This was a result of their declining control over local trade and investment and the almost complete disappearance of new privileged tenures like the rent free land grants made by the Mughals. This forced the zamindars to look for alternative modes of benevolence and philanthropy, modes which would meet with the approval of the British power. This resulted in the emergence of a mixed pattern of charity partly modern and partly traditional. During the drought preceding the famine of 1866 the landlords organized relief but their resources were exhausted much before the famine began. Official relief, when it was organized, took the form of encouraging committees of zamindars and other men of substance to set up and manage government financed relief. The zamindars, argues Greenough, were clearly responsive to British pressure to change the form of their charities when they agreed to serve on committees. The collapse of the zamindari system did mean that the concentration of paternalist functions by a handful of landlords in each locality came to an end. While the zamindars as a whole had been withdrawing from an intimate relationship with their tenants and dependants over the course of the nineteenth-century, protection and nurture continued to be the responsibility of all who asserted authority over the cultivators.

David Arnold's Famine is a pioneering attempt to study famine "not only in its familiar guise as demographic catastrophe and economic malaise but also as a phenomenon of far reaching political, social and cultural importance" [18].

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It is a general study which throws up important issues and themes, but is not intended to be India specific. His basic argument is that "historically food was one of the principal sinews of power....food was, and continues to be power in the most basic, tangible and inescapable form" [17]. He also points out that the state's interest in greater responsibility for famine relief was partly a result of the serious threat that a famine posed to revenue from land [18].

His more significant work for our purposes is on 'Famine in Peasant Consciousness and Peasant Action' [19] which seeks to determine how peasants perceived and responded to the crises created by drought, dearth and famine, concentrating on the region of Madras in 1876-78. He emphasizes how village religiosity was marked initially by village solidarity and collective mobilization which was evident through the village rain-making rites. As the fears of famine grew, this village solidarity began to break, heightening social realities, deepening divisions between raiyats and labourers and reflecting class interests. He points out that "subaltern expectations and demands arose primarily from their own needs and consciousness" and from customary practices. Elites responded due to the merit attached to charity and philanthropic attitude towards the poor, "but even this cultural approbation

17. Ibid., p. 3.
18. Ibid., p. 114.
had political significance" [20].

Another study on the famine of 1837-48, though not pertaining to our period, analyses various aspects of popular action in the N.W. Provinces related to famine problems, which was described by the state as 'crime'. Sharma suggests that relief during 1837-38 was influenced by the scale of popular action and 'crime' [21]. Arnold also makes a similar point when he says that often charity arose from a "fear of or anxiety to forestall greater unrest" [22].

Amartya Sen's highly influential 'entitlement approach' [23] has formed the basis of most scholarship since the 1980s. Central to his argument is the 'distribution' of food between different communities and the ability of the people to command food through the legal means available in society including the use of production possibilities, trade opportunities, entitlements vis-a-vis the state and other methods of acquiring food. The approach has been particularly useful in highlighting that famines can occur without there being a substantial decline in food availability. Baird Smith in 1861, Sen points out, was the first to argue that famines in India were 'rather famines of work than of food'. The same verdict was arrived later by the successive Famine Enquiry...

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20. Ibid., p. 86.


Commissions [24]. He qualifies that consensus on this question should, however be, approached with caution, as it was a view propagated by the official Famine Commission Reports, which leaned heavily on the initial calculations of the Famine Commission of 1880, and might have been misleading. Sen, however, examines twentieth-century famines in Asia and Africa, for which the statistical data is more reliable. However, he admits that the entitlement approach cannot be applied to the famines of 1896-97 and 1899-1900. In these two cases, famine occurred against an exceptional background of massive crop failures throughout the country. Sen has also been criticized for underestimating the relationship between famine and food shortages as well as ignoring population growth and its effects on food output [25].

Sen's entitlement approach has been popular not only among historians working on India but also those whose interest is European history [25]. E.P. Thompson, in praise of his advanced statistical approach argues that the merit of Sen's approach lies not only in his argument that a famine is triggered


[26] This approach has also been found relevant for dearth in eighteenth-century Europe see Louise Tilly, 'Food Entitlement, Famine and Conflict', R.I. Rotberg and T.K. Rabb eds., Hunger and History, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. 135-52.
by the breakdown of such entitlements. But that it also examines "why some groups had to starve while others could feed themselves". Thompson argues, that this argument is valid even for eighteenth-century Britain, even though the English poor were sheltered by poor laws and charity from outright starvation. This was so because both the Smithian and Malthusian explanations of years of dearth rested heavily upon crop failures. Thompson's work too highlights the "relationship of people to food", which he argues involves systems of power, property and law [27]. Yet he warns that one should not misread the 'entitlement theory' to conclude that there was no such thing as failure of grain supply, and that every dearth is man made [28].

Existing scholarship has emphasized the the various economic and cultural aspects of famines, mostly to the exclusion of political factors. The attempt of this project is to understand famine as an economic disaster within a changing cultural context, but also within a larger political frame of reference. Those existing works of scholarship that consider the politics of the period do not give these issues enough significance except by logical implication.

I am not arguing that famines decreased due to increasing Indian representation, but that famines, scarcities and epidemics alike did generate a political debate that was intrinsic to the anti-colonial struggle. This debate


[28] Ibid., p. 298.
till the end of the nineteenth-century, was conducted largely within the official circles and between the government and the Congress. While public criticism of government actions would be of significance, it assumed increasing importance in a colonial context. And by the beginning of the twentieth-century it expanded to include a wider public and diverse local and regional groups.

The orientation of public action depended on the feasibility of different courses of action. These feasibilities related not merely to the causal factors but also to the nature and power of the agencies involved. There was a close relationship between public awareness and understanding, on the one hand, and the nature, forms and vigour of state action on the other. Political pressure played a major part in determining actions undertaken by governments [29]. Public awareness involved both institutional features and the nature of social and political movements in the country. It is important to see the people as agents and not as passive elements of a society even in the context of relief work.

The contemporary understanding of famine, then, it may be deduced from our historiographic review, was less the specific result of natural factors alone. Whatever the variety of analytic methods, and notwithstanding the different dimensions of emphases between the various historiographic trends, they all seem to bear out the nationalist critique or at least its locational or period salience in any understanding that we might evolve of the social  

generalization of the idea of relief especially since British policies were seen to be at variance with local needs. The severe and recurrent famines of the late-nineteenth century coincided with, and in part helped to stimulate the growth of a nationalist critique of colonial rule. While the historiographic construct of famines and epidemics furthers our understanding of the historical context within which they occurred in the late-nineteenth century, the nationalist construct is of equal historical significance. Though the nationalist understanding of the effects of colonial rule was often inaccurate or exaggerated it was, perhaps, not false; nor was famine merely a convenient platform for nationalist rhetoric alone.