An Ecological History of Food and Farming in India

Vol. 2

SHARING EARTH’S HARVEST
Creating Abundance or Scarcity

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RFSTE / NAVDANYA
Delhi
2001
# Contents

_Acknowledgements_ ........................................................................................................ iv

_Introduction_ ................................................................................................................... v

1. **Sharing Earth’s Harvest** ......................................................................................... 1  
   Peasant Uprisings in Medieval and British India ........................................... 41

2. **Annam Bahu Kurvitha – An Abundance of Food** ............................................. 67

3. **Hunger and Famines in British India** ................................................................. 75

_Bibliography_ .................................................................................................................. 107
In the early 1990s, when the parallels between the impact of the Structural Adjustment Policies related to liberalisation of agriculture on hunger and the devastating Great Bengal Famine of 1942 started becoming visible, we thought of bringing out an Ecological History of Food and Farming in India. Action Aid, in particular Dr. Amitava Mukherjee, ex-Director Action Aid (India) started us off by providing the initial finances required for this effort. We are thankful to HIVOS giving us the finances need continue the work.

Many people have contributed time and effort for this book, which was originally planned as a single volume. Though these acknowledgements are primarily to those who worked with us in preparing the second volume, some of them, as well as many others have been closely involved with the other volumes too, and will be acknowledged separately there.

Dr. Debal Deb, ecologist and Coordinator, Navdanya West Bengal, helped us immensely, with his extensive research on peasant uprisings and famines in Bengal, and many of the photographs that gave witness to the unspeakable suffering of the people of Bengal during the Famine of 1942.

Justice Debi Singh Tewatia used his vast knowledge of the Punjab Land Alienation Acts of the early 20th century to reconstruct for us the steps taken then for preventing rural indebtedness and land alienation of the farmers of Punjab.

We are grateful to Dr Irfan Habib and the Indian Council of Agricultural Research, particularly Dr. M.S. Randhawa, for allowing us to use their writings.

Though we sent numerous letters to Thompson Press (India) for permission to use excerpts of Elizabeth Whitcombe’s Agrarian Conditions in North India Vol. I, we did not receive any reply. However, as her book is integral to understanding the economics of agriculture in the Doab region during British rule, we have used selections from it as evidence of agricultural productivity and of the impact of trade-driven policies on rising hunger and food shortages.

Sh. Gian Ahuja drew most of the numerous sketches used throughout the book.

Almost all the staff of Navdanya and the Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology were deeply involved in the research that went into the book. We appreciate particularly the efforts of Sh. J. Kumar, Ms. Padmini Krishnan, Ms. Srilata Mohandas and Sh. Rajiv Chaurasia.
Throughout history, the famed wealth of India that drew adventurers and conquerors to her shores, has been based on her agriculture, which provided livelihood, food security to vast majority of the people of the country, and agricultural surplus for trade. Today, India has come to be linked with famines. The face of Kalahandi, to many, is the face of 20th century India.

In a country where the major source of livelihood is production of food, the large-scale famines of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries have been seen as evidence of the low productivity of Indian agriculture. Answers have been looked for in technological fixes like the Green Revolution, the seed-chemical-water package that has destroyed the soil, created acute water shortage, polluted our food and water, and pushed farmers to the brink of suicide.

A significant change that is currently taking place is the change in the trade regimes, placing food security on the market. Traditionally, the Indian notion of food security has rested on the participation of the individual and community in ensuring local food security. National food security was always the primary responsibility of the state. Almost all classical texts in India reiterate the responsibility of the state in ensuring freedom from hunger for its people. Farming for food security was the basis for Indian economy in the past. The high productivity of Indian farming systems also resulted in genuine surpluses that were traded, both regionally and internationally.

Three aspects of agriculture determine the food security of a country. The first is resource use. Traditional Indian farming was low-input high-output agriculture that maximized resource use. Not only do resource wasteful agricultural technologies pollute land, water and biodiversity, they also displace labour and destroy livelihoods.

The productivity of traditional Indian agriculture has always been high, besides providing balanced nutrition throughout the year. However, history shows how hunger increases when people lose their access to their natural resource base. The devastating famines of Chota Nagpur resulted primarily from cutting of people’s access to the source of their livelihood and food - the forests.

The second aspect that determines food security is the sharing of revenue. Indian history is replete with instances where rulers ignored equity, and famines and revolts followed. Inequitable sharing of revenue reached its apogee during the colonial era. As Dharampal has shown, before British rule, of the 1000 units of produce, the producer paid 300 units as revenue, of which only 50 went to the central authority. The British started to extract 650 units from the producers as revenue, of which 590 went straight to the central authority. Combined with the destruction of the commons that provided livelihood and food, this extraction of revenue left Indian villages impoverished and Indian peasants hungry and destitute.

The third aspect of food security is trade. India has always traded in agricultural products, and cash crops have been an integral part of Indian agriculture. When trade imperatives rather than food security imperatives design agricultural policies, there is an escalation of hunger and poverty. When surpluses are extracted without leaving enough food for the soil and for farm families, ecological decay and hunger and malnutrition follow. In such a situation, surpluses are pseudo surpluses, not real surpluses. Trade grows while people starve and soils die.

Even in the grain heartland of the US, children are going hungry and farmers are committing suicide because surpluses have been extracted unjustly by corporations that control agriculture. The cheap prices of US exports do not reflect efficient or profitable farming from the point of view of farmers. It is profitable from the point of view of corporations.

The trade-driven regime of British India led to the Great Bengal famine of 1942, which killed 2 million people. The trade-driven policies of today are pushing millions into penury, creating pseudo-surpluses because of the declining purchasing power of consumers and negative incomes for farmers.

Rising food stocks are linked to rising hunger of the
people. The people are buying less food because food prices have increased. Food prices have increased both because costs of production have increased, and because food subsidies have been removed. While the poor in India have been denied subsidised food, the rising wheat stocks resulting from their declining consumption are being exported at subsidised prices. The new agricultural policy has focussed on corporatisation of farming. Contract farming was the norm when peasants in Bihar and Bengal were growing indigo for western markets. What lessons do the Indigo Revolts of the 18th century and the Champaran Satyagraha of the early 20th century hold for the present push towards contract farming?

Taking the long-term view is a pre-requisite for sustainability. *Sharing Earth’s Harvest* is an attempt to remember and to draw lessons from the past to avoid catastrophes in the future.

As Milan Kundera wrote,

*The struggle of people against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.*

—— Vandana Shiva.
SHARING EARTH’S HARVEST

CREATING ABUNDANCE OR SCARCITY

The various kinds of grains brought in by the Director of Agriculture, constitute agricultural produce.

The aggregate tax, the one-sixth share, provisions for the army, tribute, tax, the lap, the side, compensation for loss, presents, and income from stores, constitute revenue from the countryside.

The work of pounding, splitting, frying, fermenting, and grinding from those who live by these, the pressing of oil from oilmen using the hand press and the round press, and the work of extracting and treating juice of sugar canes - these constitute labour in place of taxes.

— Arthashastra 2.15.33:2-3,8
Hazaras paying tribute to Babur. It includes sheep, a buffalo and gaini cows. An illustration to the Babur-nama, 1597.
When the people were oppressed by the law of the fishes, 'bigger fish swallowing the smaller one', they made Manu, the son of Visavat, the king, fixing one-sixth part of grain, and one-tenth part of the goods and money as his share as the contractual price for ensuring their security and their well-being.

— Kautilya

Tax during the ancient and medieval periods was generally on the produce of the land rather than on the land itself. In the Mauryan period, cultivators possessed land for their lifetimes only. Those who did not cultivate could not possess land. Labourers on land got fixed wages and a share of foodgrain for themselves and their families. If there was no prior agreement, the tiller usually got 1/10th of the produce, and herdsman 1/10th of the butter produced from the herd in his charge. Other sources of revenue from natural resources included timber and non-timber forest produce and duties on imported foods.

Inscriptions of the Chalukya period inform us that the tax on agriculture in general varied from 1/6th to 1/10th of the produce.

My Brother’s Keeper–The Indian View

One morning, Guru Nanak was passing near Kartarpur village in Punjab, when he saw a farmer with two unequal-sized heaps of grain. When questioned, the farmer replied that he and his younger brother farmed together, and they were dividing the produce. He had allocated the larger heap to his brother, who had a bigger family and so deserved the larger share.

When returning in the evening, Guru Nanak saw the younger brother transferring grain from his heap to that of his elder brother, and wanted to know the reason for this.

The younger brother replied that his brother was a very hospitable person and entertained numerous guests, and thus he deserved the larger share.

Catch the Thief—the British View

Unless actively supervised, the peasantry conceal or make away with the grain, and local collectors, on their part, cheat both the peasant and the treasury.
The ancient texts stressed that only those who cultivated land could own it. This fundamental right was not really challenged during the later dynasties - during the rule of the the Guptas, the Kushans, the Chalukyas, and later the rulers of the Slave Dynasty and the Mughal Dynasty. The cultivator was rarely, if ever, alienated from his land.

In *The History of India as Told by Its own Historians*, Elliot and Dowson inform about the Arab rulers who preceded the rulers of the Slave Dynasty:

> The land tax was usually rated at two-fifth the produce of wheat and barley, if the fields were watered by public canals; three-tenths if irrigated by wheels or other artificial means; and one-fourth, if altogether unirrigated. If arable land was left uncultivated, it seems to have paid one drhirham per jarib, and one-tenth of the probable produce. Of dates, grapes and garden produce, one-third was taken, either in kind or money.\(^3\)

The early rulers of the Slave Dynasty, followed the Kankut (grain sharing) system of taxation, where the yield per unit area was worked out, multiplied by the total area under the crop and the share as revenue fixed, usually between 1/3rd and 1/4th the produce. Allaudin Khilji, of the Khilji Dynasty, increased taxes to one-half, without any deductions for hindu farmers. However, he fixed the price of grain through regulations and tariffs so that it was within the reach of the poorest sections of society even in conditions of scarcity. These prices were maintained till his death.

### A comparison of prices during the reigns of Allaudin Khilji, Muhammad Tughlaq and Firoz Tughlaq

*prices in jitals per maund)*\(^7\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commodities</th>
<th>Allaudin</th>
<th>Muhammad Tughlaq</th>
<th>Firoz Tughlaq</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wheat</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barley</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paddy</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pulses</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lentils</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sugar (white)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>120/140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sugar (soft)</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheep (mutton)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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1. Under Jalal-ud-din Khilji, when there was a famine, corn was sold at one jital per seer. Under Muhammad Tughlaq, in exceptionally severe conditions, the price of corn rose to 16 and 17 jitals per seer. As a result, people began to die of starvation. When Firoz Tughlaq attacked Sind and scarcity followed as a result, the price of corn rose to 2 and 3 tankas per maund (or 3.2 and 4.8 jitals respectively per seer). On his subsequent attack on the same province, the corn rose to 8-10 jitals per 5 seers and the pulses to 4 and 5 tankas per maund. (Ashraf)

Regulation 1 of Allaudin Khilji

**Fixing the Price of Grain**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commodity</th>
<th>Price per maund</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wheat</td>
<td>7 1/2 jitals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barley</td>
<td>4 jitals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rice per maund</td>
<td>5 jitals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mash per maund</td>
<td>5 jitals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chana per maund</td>
<td>5 jitals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moth per maund</td>
<td>3 jitals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

He also issued regulations that the revenue in the Doab region be paid in kind to the royal granary to ensure that there never was want of grain in the market.

When the rates were too high, and no provision was made for making cheap food available to the people, disaster followed. In 1330, when Muhammad Tughlaq of the Tuglaq Dynasty increased the revenue demand from the cultivators of the Doab, the peasants rose in revolt.

During the time of Muhamad Tughlaq, the cost of living worked out at five tankas per month for an average-sized family. The minimum wages for an average employee of the Sultan during this period was 10 tankas per month. (64 jitals equalled 1 tanka). The official maund of the time was equal to 13.05 kg. of today. Ashraf gives the price of foods during the times of three of the Sultans.\(^4\)
The Sultan (demanded) more tribute from the lands of the Doab. The cesses were collected so rigorously that the raiyats were impoverished and reduced to beggary. Those who were rich and had property became rebels; the lands were ruined, and cultivation was entirely arrested. When the raiyats in distant countries heard of the distress and ruin of the raiyats in the Doab, through fear of the same evil befalling them, they threw off their allegiance and betook themselves to the jungles. The decline of cultivation, and the distress of the raiyats in the Doab, and the failure of convoys of corn from Hindustan, produced a fatal famine in Delhi and its environs, and throughout the Doab. Grain became dear. There was a deficiency of rain, so the famine became general. It continued for some years, and thousands upon thousands of people perished of want. Communities were reduced to distress, and families were broken up.5

Sheik Nuru-I-Hakk gives further details:

The whole of the Doab became unable any longer to bear up against the grievous rack-renting and oppressive taxes. The people in despair set fire to their barns and stacks, and, carrying away their cattle, became wanderers in the wide world.6
India under Muhammad Tughlaq
These dominions are very well cultivated and very fertile, and are provided with quantities of cattle, such as cows, buffaloes, and sheep; also of birds, both those belonging to the hills and those reared at home, and this in greater abundance than in our tracts. The land has plenty of rice and jowar, grains, beans, and other kinds of crops which are not sown in our parts; also an infinity of cotton. Of grain there is a great quantity, because, besides being used as food for men, it is also used for horses, since there is no other kind of barley; and this country has also much wheat, and that good. The whole country is thickly populated with cities and towns and villages.

— Domingo Paes, who visited the city in the 16th century.

According to Vijayanagara historians, three major tenurial categories existed in Vijayanagara times. These were: amara, bhandaravada, and manya; and they refer to the manner in which the shares of income from villages were distributed. The smallest category were bhandaravada, or ‘crown’ villages, some portion of whose income went to support Vijayanagara forts in various parts of the macro-region. A larger number of villages contributed a portion of their output to the support of Brahmans, temples, mathas or manya (or ‘tax-free’) villages. The largest portion of villages in the macro-region are regarded by most Vijayanagara historians as falling within the category of amara villages allegedly alienated by the Vijayanagara rulers to amaranayakas.

This greatly simplifies what was a complex tenurial system. First of all, rights over village land refers to shares of income, not abstract, legal ‘proprietary’ rights in land. This share conception applies particularly to the form of tenure called ‘amara’. This tenurial category is treated as a residual category, referring to how the income of some villages was distributed after specific reductions for other purposes (e.g. support of forts and Brahmans) had been made. That is why the category is believed to constitute three-quarters of all villages. The claim upon income from village income by those with local political authority during the Vijayanagara period was theoretically, at least, a limited claim. This is evident from the term amaramakani, a term which is interpreted by most historians to mean ‘an estate’ or ‘a fief’ but literally means a ‘one-sixteenth share’ (makani) to those with local political authority (amara). Amara tenure does not replace the term used in Tamil inscriptions during the Chola period, vellan vagai, which meant ‘cultivators’ share’ and was in fact the category in which all land was regarded unless specifically alienated to other purposes. While the nattar of the previous period controlled the distribution of income from the land as possessors of the vellan vagai, this control did not pass to those with local dominance in the Vijayanagara period. It is more correct to see the various, complex and public rights of persons and categories of persons during this later period as representing a partitioning of the vellan vagai, only one part of which passed to those with political dominance.

Other shares of village income went to a group of families whose services benefited the village as a whole. These shares were realized through allotments of fields within the village, an important innovation in Tamil country. Village servants of ‘ayagars’ …consisted of twelve or so functionaries (including) the headman (e.g. ‘maniyam’, ‘reddi’, or ‘gauda’), accountant (e.g. ‘karnam’, ‘senabhova’,
and a policeman or watchman (e.g. ‘talaiyari’). To each of these offices a portion of village income was alienated by the recognition of rights in particular plots of village land. Such plots were not liable for regular tax payments, hence they were regarded as ‘manya’, or tax-free though holders of such plots might be subject to a fixed quit-rent payment. The same method of payment was followed for the remaining village servants who possessed no governance or management function within a village, but did provide services for the village community. These latter ‘ayagaras’ included providers of services important for ritual purity, such as wasermen and priests. Others provided goods and services. Among these were leatherworkers whose products included the leather bag used in lift-irrigation devices (mhote or kapila), potter, blacksmith, carpenter, waterman (niranikkar) who controlled and maintained irrigation channels, and moneylenders. In the nineteenth century, these rights to income shares came under scrutiny as ‘mirasi’ and ‘inam’ rights. During the Vijayanagara period such Persian words were not known or used; instead Dravidian or Sanskrit terms ‘umbali’, ‘kodage’, ‘srotriya’ are found. The meanings appear to be the same. They refer to rights of income from agricultural production which were exempt from the customary dues on agricultural income in lieu of direct payments for services. In rare cases there were direct payments for services, payments in kind usually being designated. ‘danyadaya’, those in money, ‘suvarnadaya’ or ‘kasu kadamai’.

More conventional manya rights over land also changed during the Vijayanagara period. Special tenures for individual Brahmans. (ekabhogam) and groups of Brahmans continued to be granted and protected as were grants to mathas, including those to non-Brahman Saiva Siddhanta and Virasaiva gurus. There was one significant change in the pattern of beneficial land rights. This was the great increase in devadana grants as compared with all other. Temples during the Vijayanagara period became major landholding and land-managing institutions, and larger temples held hundreds of villages which had been granted to the gods they sheltered. This is to say that the temples enjoyed a major portion (melvaram in Tamil country) of the income of these villages. Special officers of the temples oversaw the management of devadana villages to assure that the income endowed by the grant of rights in a village was applied to its specified purpose.
The revenue of the countries now held by me (935 AH. [1528 AD]) from Bira to Bihar is 52 krurs 12, as will be known in detail from the following summary. Eight or nine krurs of this are from parganas of rais and rajas who, as obedient from of old, receive allowance and maintenance.

Revenues of Hindustan from what has so far come under the victorious standards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trans-sutluj-Bhira,Lahur,Sialkut, Dibalpur,etc.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>15,989</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sihind</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>31,985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hisar-Firuza</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>75,174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The capital Dhihi and Mian-du-ab</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>50,254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miwai, not included in Sikandar’s time</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>81,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biana</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>14,930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agra</td>
<td></td>
<td>29</td>
<td>76,919</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mian-wilayat(Midlands)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gualiari</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>57,950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalpi and Sehonda(Seondha)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>55,950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qanauj</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>63,358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sambhal</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>44,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhur &amp; Baksar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>82,433</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khairabad</td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>65,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auda(Oude) and Bahraj (Baraich)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1,369</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junpur</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>88,333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karra &amp; Manikpur</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>27,282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bihar</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>60,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarwar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>17,506½</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saran</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18,373</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Champaran</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>86,060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kandla</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tirhut from Raja Rup-narain’s silverblack (i.e. copper)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>55,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rantanbhur from Buli, Chatsu, and Malarna</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagur</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>00</td>
<td>00,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raja Bikramajit in Ratanbhur</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalnari</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raja Bir-sang-deo(or,Sang only)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raja Bikam-deo</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raja Bikam-chand</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The immense wealth of the Mughals came from the rents paid by the people of India, the agriculturists in particular. Babur gives an example of the rents he received in 1528 A.D., once again giving evidence of the productivity of Indian agriculture.
The productivity of the agriculturist is tied inextricably to his freedom to farm. During Akbar’s reign, Stephen Dale, in his *Indian Merchants and European Trade, 1600-1750*, says: ¹¹

*A sense of the fertility of this region and the population it supported in the 1580s was conveyed with an almost intoxicated sense of elation by the Mughal historian and administrator, Khwajah Nizam al-Din Ahmad, who wrote of Akbar’s territories that:*

*In a description of the countries ruled over by the servants of His Majesty, let it not remain concealed, that the length of the country, which is today in the possession of the powerful State, from Hindu Koh on the borders of Badakhshan to the country of Orissa, which on the further side of Bengal, from west to east is one thousand and two hundred Akbar Shahi Karohs by the Ilahi yard measure - and its breadth from Kashmir to the hills of Bardah, which are at the extreme limit of the country of Soorath and Gujarat is eight hundred Karohs Ilahi. At present there are three thousand and two hundred towns, and one or two or five hundred or a thousand villages appertain to each of these towns. Out of these there are one hundred and twenty great cities, which are now well populated and flourishing.*
Akbar’s land reforms

Akbar spent over two decades on land assessment, details of which are given in Abul Fazl’s Ain-i-Akbari. Arrangements were made for both cultivated and uncultivated land. The result of this minute and detailed investigations was a series of tables, which showed the collection per bigha on twenty spring crops and thirty autumn crops over 18 years (1560–78) in the regions of Agra, Oudh, Allahabad, Delhi, Malwa, Multan and Lahore. Assessment was made on the crops produced, rather than on the land itself. Thus, keeping the acreage under the crop in mind, tax was assessed.

For example, the tax for linseed was almost approximately 10 times lower than that on sugarcane. The settlement was usually for ten years. However, at times, when it was for more than ten years, one-sixth share was taken for the first year, one-fourth for the second, one-third for the third, and one-half for the fourth. When the settlement was for from ten to four years, one-fifth was the share for the first year, one-third the second, and the usual rate (one-half) for the third. (when the settlement was) for from four to two years, the share was one-third for the first year and for the second, one-half.

20 ways to ensure that peasants are not cheated

Rather than alienate cultivators from their land, Akbar ordered Rajah Todar Mal, who conducted the financial and administrative affairs of the empire, to protect the agriculturists from the rapacious bureaucracy. Amir Fath Ullah Shirazi counsels Raja Todar Mal on how the officers cheat and exploit the cultivators.

Firstly - The accountants have not rendered clear statements, and have not observed the sacred regulations. They have based this business, which rests upon inquiry and investigation, on conjecture and approximations. In the year when the whole empire became crown-land (khalsa), the officers, on account of excessive work, could not go to the bottom of the business and wrote down large sums as arrears. They decided the matter upon the fifth or sixth share of the produce. The cunning got the joy of their hearts, while the honest fell into soul-exhausting trouble. Those who had gone a little astray were kept back from paying by the enormity of the demand. If accounting were done according to knowledge, the former inconveniences would cease.

Secondly - It was a regulation that the collectors of revenue should give receipts (yafta) to the ryots and they should make a list, and that the clerks should base their accounts thereon. Now, that arrangement (serishta) has been given up and whatever the khalsa-collections write in the names of the cultivators, and which they make the cloak of their embezzlements, is accepted. It is right that in future the two documents above named should be used.

Thirdly - The accounts are made up according to a perfect year (sal-i-kama) or according to krorbandi papers which have been written by hasty and inconsiderate persons. In consequence of this many have been imprisoned. The just course would be to base the demand, simply and honestly, on a series of years (paiwasta sal).

Fourthly - Owing to the somnolence of the collectors, the agents (gomastagan) have been powerful and have robbed the cultivator. The Patwari rejects from his accounts (garar waqa) private documents and vouchers - commonly known as “crude papers” (kaghaz-i-kham). The proper course is that whatever appears in them should be entered in his name and he should be responsible for the contents. If he (the patwari, or perhaps the collector) does not produce what his agents have taken, he should be obliged to refund it. Otherwise the oppressor will escape from his obligations. Whatever stands in the names of extortionate persons such as qanungoes, maqaddams and pakars, should be accounted for by such individuals.

Fifthly - Any over-plus which in this way is brought to light should be credited to the arrears due by the ryot, name by name, or should be carried to account in the next year, and there should be no second demand for it, nor should it be again demanded from the collector. And as the computers of the current revenue (siyaq navisan-i-hal) demand village expenses (malba) which in clerical phraseology are termed istiswabi and akhrajat, this also should be deducted from the demand.

Sixthly - The fluctuations of cultivation are apparent to
every one. If in a village some land falls out of cultivation, one endeavours to increase cultivation elsewhere. Similarly, if a crop be lost or damaged, compensation for this should be sought elsewhere. The accountants (ahl-siyaq) look only to the diminution and tighten the load of the demand. If they would look to the total assessment, the ryots would be relived.

Seventhly - The mastaufi (auditor) holds in deposit one-fourth of the collectors (salary) for the purpose of clearing off arrears. If the arrears result from desertion or contumacy of tenants, and the efforts of the collector are without avail, or if they are the result of his having been untimely removed, they are not due to his fault. If there have been remissness in making demands that reason should be entered on the arrears, on condition that the arrear appear in the revenue-roll.

Eighthly - Some persons are occasionally appointed to assist the collector, and their pay is allowed to them for a fixed time. Sometimes, they remain longer and draw their pay for that time, but no such allowance is made to the collector. If their being kept on be necessary, he should be allowed the expense thereof, and the circumstance be reported.

Ninethly - It would also be just if the (cost of) calling for the accounts of the former collector and his subordinates were allowed among his expenses.

Tenthly - After the collectors have been removed, they remain in the pargana for the purpose of collecting the arrears. If their pay for that time and for the period before the notification of dismissal has reached them and for the period of travelling (to court) be allowed among their expenses, it would be just.

Eleventhly - If the collector’s pay, and that of the branding officers, be allowed, after they have been removed, for the period that they are on duty at court, and be included in the amount credited to them under the countersignature of the record-keepers of the attendances (cauki-navisan), this would be a relief to them.

Twelvethly - Sometimes the pay of the auxiliaries (kumakian) has been entered as payable from the arrears left by a former incumbent; and on account of the ryots being non-existent, or not acknowledging the debt, or of their contumacy, these arrears have not been realized. If the collector shall, owing to the contrivance (karsazi) of that set (the auxiliaries), have paid the wages, he should get credit for them.

Thirteenthly - Officers are arrested because they have not submitted reports. They reply that they did submit reports to the court and got no answer. If the registrars (waq anavisan) would look after this department and would make over the replies to the collector’s agents, such defences would be impossible.

Fourethly - It would be comfort to the collector if he got half his pay by assignment.

Fifteently - For the purpose of the work of collection footmen (piyadas) should be given, equal in number to the troopers, or to the half thereof. If it is indispensable that the former collector be kept under surveillance, respectable men should be appointed to guard him (?).

Sixteenthly - Great profit accrues to the Qanungoes. If a man from each pargana remains at court, assuredly there will be more enlightenment on this subject.

Seventeenthly - The pargana treasurers have to make large advances. Some able and upright men should be appointed to carry on this work.

Eeightethly - The statements of arrears made by former collectors should not be acquiesced in without scrutiny.

Nineteenthly - Whoever keeps his fief in a good state by attending to the distribution of corn at a time when other estates are suffering loss and are in a bad condition, should, when there is a question of increasing the revenue, have such increase applied to the augmentation of his rank and allowances.

Twentiethly - A soldier’s horse dies, and he immediately buys another, and produces a correct descriptive roll of it; or sometimes he gets a new horse after two years and more. In the first case the soldier suffers loss, and in the second the king’s property is injured. Also on account of the distance he cannot bring the animal to be branded. If his pay be deducted from the date when he ceased to have a horse it will be hard. If they transfer the aznas to the new horse, and so do not make a deduction from his pay, he will be relieved.
Changing cropping patterns in medieval India: The role of the market

The size of the surplus dictates who appropriates the surplus and how rather than agricultural productivity per se. Southern India saw the massive temples appropriating agricultural surplus, a phenomenon that Bhimsen (17th century) in Nuskha-I-Dilkusha explained by presuming that the subsistence needs of the south Indian population to be far below that of the north Indian.  

The surplus produced can be appropriated and shared in two basic ways - the first through rent payable by the producer to the appropriator, and the second through savings effected by the producer himself. The former way was the way the Mughal empire garnered its wealth. And to make matters easier for itself, it introduced the concept of collection of rent in cash. For the jagirdars (who were frequently transferred) and the mansabdars, the intelligentsia and the idlers appointed by the emperor as revenue collectors and grantees, receiving the surplus in kind held far less value than receiving cash in lieu of it.

The assessment, whether of the individual or of the village as a whole, was a set portion of the produce, which was not mitigated except occasionally in case of famine or extreme drought. In a year of low yields, the peasants had to part with a larger share. This was true even when the village was the unit of assessment, as the larger farmers and the zamindars passed off their share on to the smaller and poorer peasant.

The collection of land revenue in cash, in preference to kind, created conditions favourable for the establishment of the rural market. On one hand, the producer was forced to sell his produce for cash in order to be able to pay revenue. On the other, even when surplus was collected in kind, it was put on the market, leading to a production system that was not for use but for commodity production. This introduction of money into the agricultural system had several impacts - it led to the pauperisation of the peasant through price fluctuations of commodities; it engendered a shift from the production of food to the production of high-grade crops and cash crops - from coarser millet to wheat, and to cotton, sugarcane, indigo, poppy, etc. This shift required larger investments in cattle for more frequent ploughing and watering, in installations to process the produce such as sugarcane press, boilers, indigo vats, etc.; and heavier risks in respect of harvest and prices. This in turn led to both the larger and the smaller peasants contracting debts to pay the revenue or to obtain subsistence, food, and cattle, and in a way, led to the formalising of the relationship between agricultural producer and the moneylender. In addition, the zamindar, in his dual role as both claimant of (often hereditary) zamindari rights as well as a talukdar (intermediary) collecting revenue for the emperor, exerted far more pressure and authority on the peasant than earlier.

The payment of land revenue in cash and the sale of zamindari rights became quite common. The peasants frequently fled agriculture, and there was a general decline in cultivation during parts of the Mughal period.

The shift away from subsistence agriculture to cash crops took two forms: orchards, and direct cultivation of agricultural lands by the zamindars (Khwud Kasht).

Almost all members of the royalty and higher classes of society, zamindars, and even some rich farmers cultivated orchards. Firoz Shah Tughlaq had grapes planted on acres of land outside Delhi. Yet this extensive horticulture could not and did not replace peasant agriculture to any significant extent.

Khwud-kasht, on the other hand, was directly linked to the market. The bigger farmers had easier access to credit, and this kind of farming saw the introduction of wage labour in agriculture for ploughing, sowing, reaping, and watering the fields. The labourers were given fixed wages, either in cash or in grain. Khwud kasht led to commodity farming, and there is mention of a headman of a village near Broach in Gujarat in 1630 having contracted to sell 1000 Gujarati maunds of wheat to the English at Surat. Of this, half of the wheat belonged to the patel himself, and the other half was to be procured from the other villagers. In the case of indigo trade, merchants turned into farmers, producing what they sold.

The expansion of cash cropping appears to have been kept somewhat in check by an official ban on converting raiyati food growing lands into khwud-kasht. For example, records of an autumn harvest in a pargana in eastern Rajasthan in 1690 informs that only 8 percent of the total area sown was under sugarcane and cotton, while 72.9 per cent was under foodgrains.

### Cash returns on selected crops: A comparison of the rates for food grains and cash crops in Meerut in 1595 and in 1922

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food</th>
<th>1595 (Wheat)</th>
<th>1595 (Cotton)</th>
<th>1922 (Wheat)</th>
<th>1922 (Cotton)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wheat</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rice</td>
<td>82.5</td>
<td>66.6</td>
<td>77.7</td>
<td>77.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barley</td>
<td>65.3</td>
<td>55.5</td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td>44.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bajra</td>
<td>38.4</td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td>211.5</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cash crops</th>
<th>1595 (Wheat)</th>
<th>1595 (Cotton)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wheat</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cotton</td>
<td>153.0</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sesame</td>
<td>76.9</td>
<td>44.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sugarcane (ordinary)</td>
<td>211.5</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The East India Company came to India to trade, but stayed on to rule. Their final quest was for total political control. In 1717, they obtained a firman from Emperor Farrukhsiyar in Delhi, which, among other concessions, made the company’s trade custom-free throughout the imperial territories, in return for an annual tribute of Rs. 3000. This edict was to become the foundation of the British commercial and political policy in India. Bengal fell in January 1757. In the name of trade and under the guise of protecting trade, the English nation’s station was made ‘sure and firm’ in India. They were no more ‘mere merchants’. They were now the rulers of India. And, for this, the victorious Robert Clive received gifts of £ 234,000.

The Coming of the British

![India Map 1772](image-url)
For the British, who followed the Mughals as rulers of India, the immense revenue was not sufficient. They were not merely rent collectors, but owners of the land. The ‘proprietors’ of India introduced new forms of ownership of property, devised new methods of taxation, and, most importantly, appropriated the commons that were the cornerstone of Indian agriculture: forests, fallows and water.

**The New Landlords**

*It is immaterial to government what individual possesses the land, provided he cultivates it, protects the ryot (cultivator) and pays the public revenue.*

— Lord Cornwallis

To not all the British was a manifest sign of proprietorship absolutely necessary. For Cornwallis, the governor-general of India in the late 18th century, the role of the government was to administer justice, and justice meant ensuring the interests of the maintenance of private property.

In the British view India had no exact written definition of private rights and private property, nor any codified laws on it; the state existed and was administered according to customs and traditions. The concept that only produce could be taxed, and not the resource of land itself, and that the members of the various hierarchies, such as the talukdars and the jagirdars were merely the collectors of taxes (however vicious this collection was) was beyond the ken of the British.

Again, the collection of public revenue was paramount, and someone needed to be taxed. However, to assess the tax, one needed proprietors of land with whom the British could deal, who would bear the onus of collecting the rents from the cultivators and passing it on to them.

The answer to the problem was extremely simple - create landlords. As Lord Cornwallis put it in *Regulation II of 1793:*  

*Government must divest itself of the power of infringing, in its executive capacity, the rights and privileges, which, as exercising the legislative authority, it has conferred on landholders.*

**The Zamindars**

The task of finding the landlords was not too difficult - who better than those who already were used to collect rents from the peasants for the state? The revenue collectors formed the majority of the new landlords - the Zamindars (proprietors of land).

**Who Was the Zamindar?**

A motley collection of rural overlords in late-eighteenth-century Bengal conveniently and misleadingly went under the single name of zamindar. To compound the confusion, these varied elements in the Bengal countryside bore no resemblance to the village zamindars but rather were more akin to the talukdars of northern India. The Bengal zamindars embraced at least four separately identifiable categories: (1) the old territorial heads of principalities, such as the rajas of Tippera and Cooch Behar; (2) the great landholding families who paid a fixed land tax and behaved like...
The Origins of the Zamindar

The subjugated rural aristocracy that was created by the Turkish conquests merged into a single class with a single designation - Zamindar. It implied a claim to a share in the produce of the soil which was completely distinct from, although it might be laid side by side with, the land-revenue demand. This claim took many forms. It might consist of a cess, levied in kind or cash, on the cultivator; or it might be made up of the difference between the zamindar’s actual collection of land revenue from the peasants, and the amount assessed by the state; or it might be compounded by the authorities for a definite share, either out of the land revenue or by allotment of revenue-free land. In the last case, the conventional share of the zamindar was called malikana and amounted to 1/10th of the revenue in northern India. In Gujarat it amounted to a fourth, the land left revenue-free to the zamindar being called banth. Besides holding this right to a share in the produce of the soil, the zamindar also levied a number of other cesses and exacted certain customary perquisites from the peasants under him.21

Titles in Mughal Times

The talukdar: the dominant member of a regional society, appointed as revenue official under the Nawabi of Oudh.

The watan jagirdar: this was a lower chief who had enrolled in the service of the emperor, and had his own territory. This chief was granted a mansab; his pay had to be met by the income of his home territory, which was treated as a hereditary jagir.

A further system existed whereby land was granted for their lifetime to theologians, scholars, retired officials, women and others of aristocracy and respectable families. If the grant included raiyati or peasant-held land, then they collected land revenue; land they tilled themselves or with the help of servants, hired labour or peasant labour (usually waste land to be brought under cultivation) was theirs without any dispute. This right was made hereditary by Aurangzeb.

feudatory chiefs, such as the Rajas of Burdwan, Dinajpur, Rajshahi, Jessore and Nadia; (3) the numerous families who had held offices for collecting land-revenue over a number of generations; and (4) revenue-farmers since the grant of Diwani to the company in 1765. In a bad ‘case of mistaken identity’ Cornwallis, by a grand proclamation on 22nd March 1793 followed up by a barrage of ‘regulations’, conferred the prized private property right in land to this diverse group of rural overlords unified only in nomenclature.20
And sometimes, the cultivator owned the land...... Raiyati Rights

There is no doubt that the idea of a right in land, on the ground of first clearing and establishing tillage, has at all times been cherished in India; but when all kinds of conquering rulers have claimed to be proprietors of the soil and have for generations past employed Revenue contractors of local land-officers, all of whom reduced the theory to most rigid form of practice by habitually rack-renting the land holders, by putting in this man and turning out that, from year to year, simply with the view to securing or enlarging the Revenue, it is hardly to be wondered at that the idea of private right in land should in some places grow weak, and the people be more anxious to be allowed always to relinquish land that they could not manage profitably, than to have a title which would also carry a certain fixed responsibility.

In this state of things, it has been usual to avoid calling the raiyat owner of his land co nomine. In Bombay he is called the 'occupant', and his right as such - herditable, transferable and liable only to the Revenue assessment and to any other payment that may be due to some superior - is defined by law. In Madras there is no general Land Revenue Act, and there is no legislative definition of the raiyat's tenure; but the question has been discussed in the Law Courts, and practically the right is the same as that defined by the Bombay Code: in common language, it is a right which is theoretically, rather than practically, distinguished from a proprietary right.

— Baden-Powell, Land Tenures, (pp. 75-76,125)

The system of Raiyati Rights or the ryotwari system of Madras and Bombay was introduced by Thomas Munro in 1812 in the former and jointly by Mr. Goldsmid, Sir G. Wingate (then Lieutenant), and Lieut. Nash in the latter in 1847.

The essential difference between these system and that introduced in North India, was in the rights of the peasant to hold the land. The cultivation in these areas is basically 'dryland' cultivation dependent on the extremely uncertain rains. A fixed assessment was impractical; new ways had to be devised to extract the maximum possible revenue. Thus the raiyat was made individually and directly responsible for the revenue payment: either pay, or get out.

The cultivators or Raiyats of India belonged basically to three categories.

- The Hari or Mirasi (or Maurisi) raiyats held permanent rights to the land, paying a fixed rent.
- The Fasli raiyats paid variable rents depending on what was produced, its quality, quantity and value; they formed the largest category.
- The third category was that of the khamar raiyats, who worked on the lands of the zamindars and the talukdars, and generally shared the crop.
The permanent Settlement of Bengal, Benares, and North Madras, etc.

Temporary Settlement in Bengal

Village Settlements

Oudh Landlords (Taluqdars)

Raiyatwari Settlements of Madras & Bombay

Other systems (in principle Raiyatwari)

Note: On this small scale it is impossible to distinguish the landlord estates in the N.W. and Central Provinces.
The Brotherhood of the Village

The most interesting form of the sharing on a non-ancestral principle, is that which was originally called Bhaiachara or ‘custom’ (achara) ‘of the brothers’ (bhai). Here the whole area available was studied and was classified by the panchayat into good and bad, better, best, &c.; and then a suitable number of lots were made, each consisting of specimen strips of each kind of soil, scattered over the whole area. Each lot so made up would be called the baiwadi-bigha, or tauzi-bigha — an artificial land unit, which had no relation to the ordinary or standard measure; then, according to the requirement of the numbers in the families, a certain number of such units would be handed over to each section and subsection... Whatever was done, it was always with the desire of equality — adjusting the share to the burden to be borne... As a matter of fact, I believe, this system originated in days of heavy Revenue assessment, when such an equalisation of the burden was inevitable in almost any form of joint village, whether originally bhaiachara or pattidar...

—Baden-Powell, Land Tenures (1907)

Chakravarty-Kaul informs that the term Bhaiachara also applied to villages where land was divided on the basis of ploughs or ancestral shares to determine the share of the commons, or even where each family could cultivate as much of the commons as it could without putting pressures on other members of the community. The common factor of bhaiachara holdings was that revenue was paid only on what was actually cultivated by the family. 22

While not all bhaiachara villages went in for strip farming, this was most evident in regions vulnerable to climate and other forces. Scattering promoted cooperation and collective action.

Scattering was an institutional device to provide insurance to individuals against uncertainty, provided they cooperated... The propensity to act collectively increased if risk could be shared and if access to varied resources could be equalised... scattering of the arable land went hand in hand with compact grazing and collective management of the field channels of irrigation wells and ponds.23
Sanad-i-milkiyat-i-istimrari and other titles to land

Excerpts from Baden-Powell’s Land Tenures in British India

The British Government, while determining to limit and render moderate its own demands on the land, and to give up for ever the inordinate pretensions of the rulers it superseded, found itself face to face with the task of giving legal security and definition to various degrees and kinds of right or interest in the land; from that of the great landlord who received a ‘title-deed of perpetual ownership’ [sanad-i-milkiyat-i-istimrari] to the humbler ‘subproprietor’ or ‘tenure holder’ or ‘occupancy tenant.’

This recognition and definition, it will be observed, was not only necessary to give a secure position to the person directly responsible for the Revenue, it was equally necessary for the due apportionment of the remaining profit (after the Revenue was paid) arising from the land.

(L)and is held in three ways:

1) In various forms of landlord-tenures; the estates varying in size from half a district to a few acres, but generally being of at least considerable extent; in these there is one person (or at most a few joint owners) distinctly vested with a proprietary or landlord character; and the system accordingly lays one sum of revenue on the whole estate, and makes the landlord (or co-sharers together) liable for it.

2) In smaller estates, really of the same character as the first, but with certain features which render it convenient to distinguish them, - these being in general, village estates where the village (or part of two or more villages together) is held by a co-sharing body or community; here the community is treated as jointly and severally liable; the body regarded as a whole is, in fact, the (ideal) landlord.

3) In single independent holdings; though aggregated locally in villages, the group of holdings does not form one estate; the circumstances of past history have either caused the disappearance of any landlord (person or class), or such an interest has never existed; and the direct occupant is dealt with individually. (pp.64-64)

In consequence of (the) gradations of right, it is possible to represent landed interests in India in a kind of scale or table. Regarding the Government with its Revenue rights, and its occasional direct ownership of land, and as the fountain head of rights, as the first degree in the scale, and the actual cultivator, whether he has any permanent right to occupation, as the last degree, it may be there is one, or two, or more, interests intervening. (p. 129) Thus,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>One Interest</th>
<th>Two Interests</th>
<th>Three Interests</th>
<th>Four Interests</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The government is the sole proprietor (Khas estates, alluvial islands, &amp;c. in Bengal).</td>
<td>1. The Government</td>
<td>1. Government</td>
<td>1. Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The raiyat or ‘occupant’ with a defined title (not a tenant). (As in Madras, Bombay, Berar, &amp;c.).</td>
<td>2. A landlord (Zamindar, Taluqdar or a joint -village body regarded as a whole.)</td>
<td>2. Landlord</td>
<td>2. An overlord or superior landlord</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The actual cultivating holders, individual co-sharers, &amp;c.</td>
<td>3. Sub- proprietors, or ‘tenant holders’</td>
<td>3. An actual proprietor or landlord (usually a village body)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The raiyats or actual cultivators</td>
<td>4. The actual cultivating holders, individual co-sharers, &amp;c.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
By the mere stroke of a pen

With the acquisition of diwani in Bengal and the Northern Circars, the British could now treat India as gross profits. The resultant ‘drain of wealth’, according to Furber, came to 1.78 million pound sterling per year during the decade 1783-84 to 1792-93.24

The source of these immense profits came not from trade, but from land by way of tax payable on all ground capable of cultivation. If the rent was to be realised at the maximum potential, all ground had to be cultivated, and the zamindars (and consequently the peasantry) were put under intense pressure to meet revenue demands, which, more often than not, they could not do. This in turn led to the British auctioning off temporary revenue farms to the highest bidder.

Sir John Shore, in Minute of 18 June 1789, para 68, Fifth Report II, informs that the actual collection of revenue from the diwani lands in Bengal was pushed up from Rs. 64.3 lakh in 1762-63 to Rs. 147.0 lakh in 1765-66, the first year of the Company’s diwani.

At the same time, the price of the staple of Bengal - rice, was rising. In Murshidabad district for example, one rupee purchased 320 seers of rice in 1739-40; in 1776-77, it purchased only 50 seers of rice. The people of Bengal - both zamindars and cultivators - could not stand up to this pressure, and the result was the famine of 1769-70, which carried off a third of the cultivators.

The famine, however, did not result in the lessening of pressure for land revenue, as can be seen from the fact that the revenue from Bengal increased from Rs. 2.26 crore in 1765-66 to Rs. 3.7 crore in 1778-79 (Figures calculated at £1=Rs.10).25

Lord Cornwallis, alarmed by ‘the consequences of the heavy drain of wealth’ and by ‘the langour which has thereby been thrown upon the cultivation and commerce of the country’, declared that the zamindars be ‘given some prospects of private advantage to themselves’ so that they would ‘continue to be a solid support to British interests’.26

The compromise effected with the zamindars was the Bengal Regulation I of 1793, commonly known as the Permanent Settlement, which according to Capper, created a ‘large class of landed aristocracy by a mere stroke of a pen’ and which resulted in the bondage of twenty million small and marginal farmers and peasants.
The Burdwan raj [in Bengal] pioneered the strategy which gave shape and form to the revenue-collecting structure. Faced with a palpable lack of a mechanism to collect rent punctually and effectively, this zamindari granted leases to be held in perpetuity at fixed rents to middendor, known as patnidars, subcontracting as it were a permanent settlement of its own. The patni system was given formal legal sanction by a regulation of 1819 after which it became quite widespread in west Bengal. Patni (literally constituency or settlement) rights were often held over a whole village or even a cluster of villages, with occasional subletting of the rent-collecting function to lower grades of darpatinidars and sepatinidars. In east Bengal, it was more common to have a plurality of revenue-collecting landlords known as zamindars and talukdars within villages. Tenureholders occupying the space in the rent-collecting hierarchy between the revenue-payer and the raiyat were also known by the generic term talukdars. In the southern parts of the littoral districts like Bakerganj... the haoladars [substantial farmers] and their subordinates presented a picture of complex and elaborate tenure-trees. [The rich farmers in the northern tracts of Rangpur and Dinajpur were called jotedars].

— Sugata Bose

The ‘permanent settlement’ has produced more distress and beggary, and a greater change in the landed property of Bengal, than has happened in the same space of time in any age or country by the mere effect of internal regulations.

— Fifth Report of Finance Commission of Bengal

Permanent Settlement

‘As in religious matters, the British rulers of India have swept away heathenism and its morality, and replaced it by infidelity and no morality, - as in the administration of justice they have rooted out the old simple codes and effective establishments, and substituted for them a legal patchwork administered by functionaries of whom nearly all who are not incompetent are corrupt; so in the more important part of their fiscal system, they have overthrown the labours of many ages, scorning the lessons of dear-bought experience, and, except in the countries of the north-west, have supplanted the righteous taxation of Hindoo rulers by the most impracticable and the most ruinous systems which it ever fell to the lot of politico-economical quacks to hazard.’

Thus did John Capper, late editor of the Ceylon Examiner, write in 1853. He was describing of British taxation practices in India, and within it, the permanent settlement in particular.

Capper goes on to describe the impact of the permanent settlement on the people.
The taxation of a country may be vicious in two very different shapes, - either by its excessive amount, or, being moderate, by the mode in which it is levied.

The bulk of the people of India, unfortunately, suffer from both these evils.... In Great Britain the taxation gives, as nearly as possible, 33s. per head of the population, about seven times that of our Indian fellow-subjects. To estimate the actual earnings of the great mass of Hindoos, wages in the cities and towns must not be taken as a criterion; for whilst in England the townspeople are the greater tax-payers, in India 70 per cent of the taxation falls upon the mass of the people not dwelling in towns....

It appears, therefore, that whilst the Englishman contributes sixteen days' labour in each year to the maintenance of institutions which provide him with the utmost security to life and property, the Indian ryot contributes an equivalent to the labour of fifty-three days for the support of institutions which, so far as they tend to afford him any security from oppression, or in any way ameliorate his social condition, might as well be swept from the face of the earth, deep into the Indian Ocean...

In his endeavour to fix the land-revenues of Bengal upon a firm and profitable footing, Lord Cornwallis perpetrated one of the greatest wrongs, committed one of the most enormous blunders, that is to be found on record... He propounded a scheme by which the proprietary right in the whole soil of Bengal was to be vested in the zemindars or hereditary superintendents of land, not for one year, or ten years, but for ever... The scheme, hollow and unrighteous as it was, seemed to promise such security to the revenue by creating this large class of landed aristocracy by a mere stroke of the pen, that the authorities at home were deceived into compliance, and the fiat went forth by which twenty millions of small landholders were dispossessed of their rights, and handed over, bound hand and foot, to the tender mercies of a set of exacting rack-renters...

Lord Brougham, in speaking of this celebrated settlement, said that it wrung from the ryot eighteen shillings out of every twenty. His assertion was laughed at as a figure of speech; but unfortunately he spoke literally within the mark.

The injustice of this gigantic robbery, great though it seems, was not by any means the whole of the cruelty. Wrong upon wrong was committed; fraud upon fraud... It was ordered that the amount of the assessment should be made in conformity with the average yield of the former years (but the) rate was above fifty to sixty per cent of the produce of the soil! More than this; although the regulations of 1793 expressly determined the rate to be paid by the newly-created Cornwallis-aristocracy as above stated, not one word was said as to the amount they might levy on the ryots. What that amount has been, there is Unfortunately but too little doubt. The only limit to the exaction seems to be the utter inability of the wretched people to pay any more.

In a single season there was in one district, that of Burdwan, thirty thousands suits of zemindars against ryots!
The zemindars did not fail to use the new power given to them to the utmost stretch. Summary process was allowed them against the ryots, and this begat such misery, strife, and litigation, that the law-courts were literally overwhelmed with land-cases.

Ever in poverty, the ryot is compelled to seek aid from the mahajun or money-lender... at the end of the year, however favourable the season may have been, whatever the amount of crop, the mahajun, uniting his claim as money-lender to that as Talukdar or sub-renter, makes it appear, with the aid of fifty per cent interest, false entries, and increased rent, that the whole belongs to him. Should the ryot appear in sufficiently good health to toil on for another season, he may obtain from the mahajun further advances for seed, tools, and his own miserable existence, which is barely supported on pulse, roots, and wild herbs, with occasionally a little salt, taxed five hundred per cent by the government, and another five hundred per cent by dealers’ profits and cost of transport!

To the above must be added the iniquitous practice of extorting abwabs, or presents, from the villagers upon every possible occasion...

To seek protection in the final courts of justice, the poor wretch knows from sad experience is worse than useless. There the renter is all-powerful with the amlahs of the court, and there he is powerless. He toils on, dispirited and hopeless, feeling certain that before long he shall be worn out, and then flung aside to make room for a younger and stouter ryot... The rule is misery and starvation - the exception, a bare subsistence.

What (the Permanent Settlement) has left undone, the inefficiency of our local executive and the corruption of the courts have consummated, until trade has died away, agriculture become a desperate and hopeless struggle, and the native community merged into two classes - a monied aristocracy, and a beggarly race of peasants, who, though nominally free-born British subjects, are more degraded and less cared for than the slaves of Cuba or the serfs of Russia. Yet these are the men through whose ill-requited labours the Indian government derive fifteen millions sterling of their annual income, about two-thirds of their entire revenue.

The Permanent Settlement also tried to answer another fundamental problem for the British in India: defining the roles of the state and the individual.

The zamindars’ share was fixed at an eleventh part of the total land revenue to be assessed on the peasants. Of the 3.25 crore surplus of Bengal in 1789, Shore estimated that Rs. 2 crores went to the company, while the rest went to the zamindars and other intermediaries.

A fall in the prices of rice in 1795 meant the zamindars could not collect enough rents from the peasants to meet revenue demands, and the result was that number of zamindaris were foreclosed or mortgaged or passed by sale or auction to merchants and bankers. The main buyers were other zamindars, followed by their employees and government officials. Traders and merchants came third in the list.
The Mahalwari System

If the Permanent Settlement made zamindars the true landlords, the Mahalwari system (village assessment) of the Ceded and Conquered Provinces (annexed 1801-03) and Bombay gave full scope for extracting the maximum revenue.

The first task was of finding ‘landlords’ or proprietors of land who could be taxed. Once again, the upper rural hierarchy - the rent collectors - were transformed into owners of land, with proprietary rights, and corresponding duties to pay the revenue, failing which, the government could and did sell off the land to the highest bidders. ‘Beneath them’, explains Whitcombe, ‘came a bewildering series of “sub-proprietors”, other maliks who could not be squeezed into the tenant categories and who suffered, legally, from a conspicuous lack of precise definition as to what the range of their proprietorial authority might be. The vast mass of the population was classified as “tenants”.’

Let us suppose for example two villages in a (mahal) A and B. Each has 1,000 acres; but A’s is made up of 300 acres of ‘black soil’ and 700 ‘red soil’. B’s, on the other hand, consists of 600 black and 400 red. By experimental reaping of crops, by analysis of rents and other sources of information, it is found that the productiveness of ‘black’ to ‘red’ soil is as 20:12. We can then reduce the area of A and B to units of equal value and see whether the existing rent is equal in incidence or not.

For A’s area: 
= (300x20=6,000) + (700x12 = 8,400) 
= 14,400 units of equal value

For B’s area: 
= (600x20 = 12,000) + (400x12 = 4,800) 
= 16,800 units of equal value

Now suppose that each village rental is at present R. 1,000. Dividing this by the number of equal soil units, the unequal incidence at once appears: A is in fact paying 1000/14400 = 0.11 anas, while B is paying 1000/16800=0.95 anas. And so if we can find out a general fair rate, we can raise one or other or both. Suppose we find out that 2.0 anas per soil unit is a full but proper rate, the first village would be raised to R. 1,800 and the second to R. 2,100, and yet we should be sure that the new assessments would be relatively equal.
Revenue increases in the first half of the nineteenth century

- By 1838-39, the amount assessed in the North-Western Province (old Ceded and Conquered Provinces) was Rs. 4.6 crore, the collection Rs. 3.6 crore.
- In 1847-48 the respective figures were Rs. 4.3 crore and Rs. 4.2 crore.
- For the Agra Province (all areas excepting Banaras, Ghazipur and Jaunpur, which were permanently settled), there was a 70% increase over 23 years: from Rs. 2.10 crore in 1806-7 to Rs. 3.06 crore in 1819-20 to Rs. 3.60 crore in 1829-30. Actual revenue receipts show that Rs. 5.60 crore was collected as revenue in 1844-45.

When one considers that the price of the crops stayed fairly stable during the same period, with some depression in the price of wheat, jowar and bajra, it is clear that there was a substantial increase (almost 70%) in the revenue in real terms in the first half of the 19th century.

While in the Ceded and Conquered Provinces, the prices of foodgrains had remained steady, in the Bombay Presidency the price of staples - jowar and bajra in particular - had declined steadily over the same period as the increase in assessment.

Thus even when the government reduced its rental from two-thirds to half, the new form of assessment ensured higher revenue earnings. This was in addition to charges for roads, schools, postal services, salaries of various staff, etc.

In canal irrigated areas, there were separate rents for water. (The rent retainable with the zamindar did not change: it remained at 25%). Thus it was that (throughout the cold season, year after year, the officers wound their way through the districts with their assistants and amins (field clerks), maps, plane tables, measuring chains, rule books, and discretion, enquiring as to the outturn of last season’s harvests from the principal inhabitants of each village and calculating the rent rate pargana by pargana) for as Baden-Powell put it, ‘while people are shy about telling the true rent paid for this or that soil per acre, they will disclose (and other means are also open for discovering) how one soil is valued relatively to another’.

---

Distribution of Zamindars’ Charges in Jhansi

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In Every Rs. 100 of ‘Rental’</th>
<th>Rupees</th>
<th>Annas</th>
<th>Pies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government demand</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cesses, road fund, school fund, dak (postal cess), moiety</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaukidar’s pay</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullahar’s pay</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patwari’s pay</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lambardar’s cess (5 per cent)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss on exchange of local coin into British currency at actual payment of demand</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A system of haq or rights had evolved over centuries in the rural Indian society.

The haq of the cultivator: The farmer had cultivation-occupancy haq-l-raiya establishing him as cultivator of a given area with prescribed limits; right of way over land cultivated by others; right of access to water resources; grazing rights for cattle; right to groves, which provided supplementary foods during lean periods.

The haq of the service provider: or chungi haq were rights of those who provided essential services to the cultivator, usually given as produce.

• The barahi or carpenter for each plough 7.5 to 12 pakka seers of coarse grains, 2.5 seers of grain specified by name for making and repairing implements. For a sugar press, he received 2 sheaves of corn, 2 seers of gur (molasses), a few canes from each field, and a share of the juice distributed to the workers.

• The lohar (blacksmith) had similar rights.

• The nai (barber) and the dhobi (washerman) received 8 to 10 seers of grain/plough/harvest.

• The chowkidar (watchman) received 5 pakka seers/plough.

• Labourers and the weighing man received grain at the rate of 12.5 seers/100 maunds/harvest.

• The local priest took a fixed share of the produce as his chungi haq; gurus, pandits, and visiting priests usually each took two handfuls of the grain heap of each cultivator.

The haq of the mahajan or bania (money lender): While this was not formal in most communities, it nevertheless existed, primarily to ensure that the moneylender had a permanent source of income during harvests, rather than a one-time payment repayment of the total loan. The charges, which were thus very high, could be either a share of the produce (in the case of loans for seeds and food), or money (in cases of loans for marriages, etc.). Thus the debt accumulated, and was carried over season to season, generation to generation.

With the revision of settlements, the haq kashtkari - dues in return for the recognition and maintenance of cultivation rights, - became the strongest rights. By recognising the powerful rent collectors of earlier bureaucracies as maliks (owners) with rights to guarantee the passage of revenue from the cultivator to the government treasury, the British created a new set of haqs - haq zamindari and haq talukdari. These took many forms, and were often levied together.

Batai (sharing on the threshing floor) or kankut (sharing of standing crops) which could be as high 21/40 (very stringent) of the produce. He also got 1/5th of the chaff. Sawai and gaon kharch were cash payments with which the zamindar paid his employees, servants and village workers such as the chowkidar. The in-built restrictions on what could be extracted - fear of the cultivator absconding, or seeking the protection of the numerous competing zamindars - eroded, and by the third quarter of the 19th century, the cultivator was so deep in debt that he was often unable to access food till the next harvest, let alone invest in it.
Village servants and craftsmen, including the carpenter, the blacksmith, potter, shoemaker, ropemaker, barber, washerman, astrologer, temple-keeper, mosque-keeper (often the butcher as well), others engaged in sweeping, watching, and other menial tasks, who provided service to the village as a whole and not individual peasants in the Deccan, were paid balute or remuneration at the two harvests. They were also given certain shares of temple offerings and other perquisites. The permanent balutedars' right to serve and the right to receive remuneration in cash and kind for this service was a mirasi or watan (recognised) right that was heritable and transferable. Non-permanent balutedars were entitled to these rights as long as they worked in the village, but their rights were neither heritable or transferable.

Far from being controlled by the conditions of the harvests, the realisation of the revenue demand depended on the zamindars' capacity to mobilise their resources and pay it... The total yield had to cover the Government's demand, the claims of dependants, and the requirements of conspicuous consumption for the maintenance of prestige; in many cases it also had to satisfy a simple urge for rapacity.

Increases in the revenue demand under the revised settlement necessitated increased exploitation of these resources by the zamindars, but the rate of increase of their wealth could be effectively cancelled out by the satisfaction of prior claims...the 'equitable' claims of Government could represent an increase of from 40 percent to 100 percent over the previous jma within a single tehsil...Even the well-to-do proprietors found it difficult to meet the new demand; to others who had suffered even under light assessments in the past it brought absolute ruin.

'The larger the number of shareholders, the more mouths dependent on the surplus profits,' R.G. Currie wrote. 'It is not a mere matter of some luxury being temporarily given up, but perhaps one meal a day given up or a daughter left unmarried for several years for want of means...' Nonetheless, Currie ordered reductions in the demand only where 'considerable' increases had occurred.

Expansion of cultivation offered little by way of a solution... it almost automatically entailed an enhancement of the revenue demand and the result could not be other than a vicious spiral. Far more commonly... almost if not all the extra and abnormal demands made on the zamindar by government were passed on by him to the tenants...
**Balance sheet** of Dewan Singh, a Jat cultivator with a family of 11 persons, living in Muzaffarnagar district, as reported to the Famine Commission in 1878.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total estimated value of fasli year (of adequate harvest from 31 bighas of land) from wheat, sugarcane and ghi</td>
<td>Rs. 289.14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deductions for fodder</td>
<td>Rs. 55.12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Payment to zamindar</td>
<td>Rs. 64.0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service charges of field labourers and artisans such as potter, carpenters, etc.</td>
<td>Rs. 56.13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase of water bucket, bullocks, household utensils, cloth, spices, salt</td>
<td>Rs. 46.8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charge due to mokuddam malik (usually village-headman-turned-malik)</td>
<td>Rs. 20.0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Payment of interest for debt of Rs. 400 (including original debt of Rs. 45 taken for purchasing cow 7-8 years earlier)</td>
<td>the rest of the money or grain, after keeping back enough to last for a month or two at the most.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There were **164 cultivators in Dewan Singh’s village; only one was not in debt.**

Advanced Mathematics of Dispossession = 50% taxation
Edited excerpts on assessment of settlements from Baden-Powell’s Land Tenures

The Case of Madras

The basis of the assessment is, in theory at any rate, that it is not to exceed 50 per cent, of the net produce. To find out this, the gross produce is first ascertained and valued at average prices; the costs of cultivation, & c. are then deducted, and half the balance is taken as the Revenue (omitting fractions). In many cases this calculation had to be laboriously worked out. The first question was what ‘produce’ should be taken into consideration? for different fields bear different crops. A sort of average or standard produce was taken as fairly representing the cultivation of a whole taluk; the guide being the recorded statistics, which showed what percentage of the whole taluk was under cultivation for each type of grain. Food grains were dealt with always; other crops could be allowed for on the basis of a comparison of their value with that of food grains.

Taking the statistics of a taluk, for example, it might be that (for dry crops) the largest percentage of the area was cultivated with Ragi (a millet) and another grain called Varagu, and that other crops are so approximated to them in value, that, speaking broadly, we might treat the whole cultivation as consisting of or being equivalent to, half Ragi and half Varagu. By the rest of experiments, on a given soil, we find that an acre of Ragi gives (say) 320 Madras measures, and Varagu 440 measures; then as each acre is treated as bearing, half of it one, and half of it the other, its produce is 160+220 measures. Now the money values of these are Res. 7-I-7 and Res. 6-I-II respectively. The total gross produce value is thus Res. 13-3-6. It is also known (as the result of inquiry and calculation) that the cost of production may be taken to be, per acre (say) Res. 9-3-6; the the net result is Res. 4-0-0, and the Land Revenue is Res. 2-0-0.  (pp. 203-4)

The Ryotwari System

The Ryotwari system gave rise to new methods of fixing assessment.

Spelling Doom for the Raiyat: The Madras Settlement Register

It forms a complete doomsday book, recording accurate information regarding every separate holding, whether large or small. The area is given in acres and cents (hundredths of an acre) and the assessment thereon stands in parallel columns. A single field on the survey map may be actually divided amongst twenty raiyats. In such a case there will be twenty subletters, and each raiyat will have a separate line in the register, giving full particulars of his holding, even though the extent of it (as sometimes happens) is no more than the one-hundredth part of an acre.

From the Register is prepared a ledger known as the chitta, which gives each raiyat’s personal account with the Government. Every field or fraction of a field held by the same raiyat is picked out from the Settlement Register and entered into his ledger, under his name, with the particulars of area, assessment, and other details. The total of the area shows the extent of his different holdings in the village, and the total of the assessment is the amount due thereon by him to the Government. A copy of this, his personal account, is given to each raiyat, with a note as to the date on which each instalment falls due, and his known as his patta.

— Madras Settlement Manual

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Sliding Scale of Assessment in Bombay

Let us suppose a case where the field [of dry soil variety] includes four kinds of soil. The classifier will divide his diagram into four parts; on each he will mark, by means of one or more dots, that it belongs to the first, second or third ‘order’; the depth (ascertained by actual digging) he will also enter in figures; if there is any accidental defect he will mark its conventional sign. Suppose that the first compartment has one dot (first order), and is one and three-quarter cubits deep; that would be in the first class; but it has also two defects, and one so badly as to be marked twice; here the class comes down from one to four. Then the number ‘4’ is written in the upper hand corner. Let us suppose that by a similar process the other three divisions are marked fifth class, third class, and eighth class; then we have a field composed of the four values 10 as + 8+ 12+ 3, and the average value is 33/4 or 8 as nearly; the whole field will then pay half the full rate, whatever it is. (209-10)...

When there is part of the land ‘irrigated’, an additional rate be put on for this... ‘Rice land’ and ‘garden land’ have rates of their own... The relative value being thus accurately graded, we have only to find out the full or ‘16 ana’ rate; and this will be applied to each field according to its fraction value by simple division: - the ‘12 ana’ fields paying three-quarters of the rate, and so on, down to the ‘1 ana’ field which pays only one-sixteenth. (210)

First the total settlement of the tract is ascertained by calculating the previous 30 or more years’ revenue history. That amount is then apportioned, pretty much the same way, on different villages; and the total assessment of each village is distributed over the assessable fields in accordance with the classification which has determined their relative value. (pp.210-11)
The complicated ryotwari system created much confusion in Bombay. The same situation was met in the Madras Presidency where Thomas Munro, who had first conceived of the ryotwari system, made the assessments. Capper quotes a civilian on the workings of the various settlements:

_The assessment is rather fieldwar than ryotwar. The government deals directly, not only with each ryot but with each field. Instead of assessing each village, it assesses each plot of ground. A field is not, in India, a large piece of land fenced and hedged, but a minute portion, suited to the minute tenantry, divided from the rest by a little gathering together of the earth about six inches high.... Moreover, instead of assessing at a fixed sum for a series of years, there is fixed on each field a maximum rent to be paid for good seasons and good crops... (This was the basis for the standard settlement. A final inspection was conducted later.) When the crops are nearly ripe, the collector goes out into the district to look at them and make his annual settlement. The village accountant makes out a statement showing the cultivation of each ryot, his crops and circumstances, the number of his cattle, sheep, and children... At this time all who think they should not pay full rent apply for reduction. All these cases are settled, and then only does the collector make up his annual settlement, grant formal leases, and take formal engagements for the crop, which by this time is past and generally paid for. The settlement is not made up till after the crop is ripe, in fact, generally does not reach the collector's office till after most of the money has already got there, and after making all the remissions and reductions of the season from the standard assessment._

The system of making reductions and remissions on various grounds at this late stage of the crop led to abuses like extortion, speculation, chicanery, and intrigue of all kinds.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Revenue in Pounds Sterling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1804-5</td>
<td>15,403,409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1809-10</td>
<td>15,525,055</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1822-23</td>
<td>19,645,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1835-36</td>
<td>16,391,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1837-38</td>
<td>16,070,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1838-39</td>
<td>16,320,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1839-40</td>
<td>15,512,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1841-42</td>
<td>16,834,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1843-44</td>
<td>18,284,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1845-46</td>
<td>18,998,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1847-48</td>
<td>18,748,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1848-49</td>
<td>19,442,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1849-50</td>
<td>21,686,173</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Capper, _Three Presidencies of India_, p. 485
The new assessments - whether through Permanent Settlement, or of the Mahalwari or Ryotwari systems - created immense pressures on the both the cultivators and the zamindars, leading to an explosion in agricultural debt and displacement of cultivators. The worsening situation of the peasants in Bengal was a stark example of what was happening throughout the country.

Bengal

Zamindari and eviction of peasants

By the 1790s, it was obvious that the landlord could not compel the peasant to give more rent, as demanded by the state. The state stepped in, arming the zamindars with the Law of Distraint (Regulation 7 of 1799), allowing the landlord to distrain crops for arrears of rent, and compel the tenants to attend the courts. This was followed by Law of Eviction (Regulation 5 of 1812), where the zamindar could make whatever terms he wished to with the tenant, who could be evicted and replaced with a new tenant.

It should be noted that during the early decades of the 19th century, the rents were low, to entice peasants to produce. However, as commodity production increased farming became intensive, resulting in raised rents. By the 1830s, the rents were in general almost three to four times the rents of 1800.

The distress of the peasants was intensified by the removal of the restriction on the holding of land through the Charter Act of 1833. European indigo planters in particular, who now acquired ‘zamindari rights’ could now use the threat of the Law of Eviction to compel cultivators to grow indigo. They often kept rents low, as the profit margins of indigo trade were huge. This affected the revenue receipts of the state, who passed the Rent Act (Act X) of 1859, giving raiyati rights to cultivators.

The underlying hypothesis of the new set of Raiyati rights was that the peasant could be induced to cultivate cash crops (particularly as credit could be made available at the time the peasant needed it most) if he was given rights to the land he cultivated on.

Under the new tenancy legislation, occupancy tenants were given the position of owner-cultivators provided they paid the controlled rent. The rights were hereditary. These new legislations also tried to restrict land alienation from agriculturists to non-agriculturists, by providing that settled raiyats who had worked for 12 years on the same land could not be evicted (Bengal

The Zamindars’ Cut, 1830

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Revenue Demand</th>
<th>Rent Collected</th>
<th>Balance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Birbhum</td>
<td>14,508</td>
<td>23,871</td>
<td>9,363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>27,360</td>
<td>34,652</td>
<td>7,291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhaka</td>
<td>2,248</td>
<td>3,225</td>
<td>977</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dinajpur</td>
<td>66,562</td>
<td>110,041</td>
<td>43,479</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessore</td>
<td>110,224</td>
<td>225,037</td>
<td>114,813</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midnapur</td>
<td>5,045</td>
<td>12,906</td>
<td>7,861</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murshidabad</td>
<td>101,882</td>
<td>189,631</td>
<td>87,749</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mymensingh</td>
<td>115,941</td>
<td>316,732</td>
<td>200,791</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadia</td>
<td>23,823</td>
<td>43,204</td>
<td>19,381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24-Parganas</td>
<td>6,625</td>
<td>8,601</td>
<td>1,976</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajshahi</td>
<td>40,474</td>
<td>84,263</td>
<td>43,789</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rangpur</td>
<td>25,656</td>
<td>57,587</td>
<td>31,931</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tippera</td>
<td>20,464</td>
<td>31,128</td>
<td>10,664</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tenancy Act of 1885). However, this right did not in itself guarantee the raiyat proprietary rights in the land. Pressure groups representing landlords succeeded in getting the courts to recognise transfers based on ‘custom’. Profits from cash cropping depends on the availability of adequate credit, international demand, the state of the inter-national market economy, climate, and a host of other factors outside the control of the peasant.

The crisis of credit

Credit availability was becoming increasingly important in the commodity driven agriculture of Bengal. Towards the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, interest on loans replaced rent as the biggest expenditure of the peasant. By 1910, for example, the total annual interest charged in Dhaka district was 21 million rupees, over five times the rental demand. Interest rates varied from 36% (very rare) to 48% or more. Interest rates were highest in the jute-producing areas. By 1930, the total agricultural debt of Bengal was Rs. 1000 million, more than 6 times the rental demand. 40

Credit itself took two forms - paddy and cash. The chief source of credit were jotedars in Western and northern Bengal, where they extended grain loans in return for the total produce and labour. With the collapse of the market in the 1930s, the jotedars tried to relocate their rural investments in the urban sector. In other parts of Bengal, the mahajan (moneylender) was the principal source of credit. This was particularly prevalent in the jute producing regions of eastern Bengal. Paddy loans were needed as jute replaced rice as the principal crop. Cash loans were required as the jute production required intensive labour, which often had to be hired. Ordinarily, the interest rate was 50%, but as the payment became due once the crop was harvested in a few months, the actual rates of interest worked out to over 150%. By 1930, the informal grain-lending system had been replaced in many parts by the system of selling grain on credit. As the liquidity crisis intensified, landless labourers and small cultivators with no money to purchase rice became the chief debtors. The number of mortgages increased by leaps and bounds.

The turbulent years between the 1890s and the 1930s, with their lack of credit for agriculture and rising food prices, saw a tremendous transfer of raiyati rights. The 1938 amendment to the Bengal Tenancy Act abolished landlords’ fee and shifted the preemptive right to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Sales</th>
<th>Aggregate value of Sales</th>
<th>Number of complete usufructuary mortgages</th>
<th>Value of complete usufructuary mortgages</th>
<th>Total number of mortgages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>79,929</td>
<td>13,016,351</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>588,550</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>129,184</td>
<td>20,092,584</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>510,974</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>105,701</td>
<td>13,133,716</td>
<td>41,353</td>
<td>3,013,472</td>
<td>376,422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>114,619</td>
<td>12,445,879</td>
<td>41,752</td>
<td>2,920,060</td>
<td>338,945</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>120,492</td>
<td>11,749,507</td>
<td>38,294</td>
<td>2,516,784</td>
<td>313,431</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>147,619</td>
<td>13,988,950</td>
<td>51,066</td>
<td>3,230,561</td>
<td>349,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>160,341</td>
<td>13,986,133</td>
<td>60,715</td>
<td>3,873,536</td>
<td>357,297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>164,819</td>
<td>14,597,687</td>
<td>77,232</td>
<td>4,941,457</td>
<td>302,529</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>242,583</td>
<td>26,731,027</td>
<td>53,374</td>
<td>3,254,495</td>
<td>164,895</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>500,224</td>
<td>63,215,376</td>
<td>62,491</td>
<td>3,681,815</td>
<td>154,780</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>502,357</td>
<td>71,042,013</td>
<td>74,200</td>
<td>4,837,479</td>
<td>160,152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>634,113</td>
<td>151,553</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>151,553</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td>749,495</td>
<td>106,088</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>106,088</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1943</td>
<td>1,532,241</td>
<td>183,371</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>183,371</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
purchase raiyati holdings from the landlord to the co-sharer, as well as limited the period of usufructuary mortgages to a maximum of 15 years. The result was:

valuable land was sold by the small agriculturist to the larger agriculturists... for a small quantity of rice or paddy.\(^{42}\)

particularly in east Bengal, with the chief beneficiaries being the richer peasants, zamindars, and traders, particularly grain-dealers.

The impossibility of getting credit to purchase food, combined with the war and the total appropriation of grain as well as transport resources for military purposes, culminated in the famine of 1943. Between 1940 and 1945, a total of 4.3 million occupancy or part-occupancy holdings were sold outright. Food could now be purchased only by selling the cultivator’s source of livelihood.

**North West Provinces**

The North West Provinces exemplify how agricultural debt and land alienation intensified under the Mahalwari system.

The rigid system of revenue settlements and their appropriation intensified the need for agricultural credit. The principal creditor was the mahajan, who gave cash as well as grain loans, and whose chief motive was to keep his income alive through interest collection, rather than through recovering the capital. He was aided in this by the timings of the loans. As the price of grains rose during the lean season, when the loan was taken, and fell during the harvest season, when the loan had to be repaid, the cultivator often had to give back as interest twice or more grain than originally computed. Thus he had no reserves of stock/seed for the next sowing, and had to borrow again. Often, cultivators with larger holdings and zamindars also became sources of credit. The latter, particularly, was in a strong position to recover the loan.

The introduction of canals and other development projects caused a shift to commercial agriculture, in the hope that increased market values of commercial crops would mitigate the problem of indebtedness. However, the reverse happened. The zamindars forced the cultivators to grow these crops, which once again needed loans. The interest rates were also higher, reflecting their higher market value. In the case of sugarcane and indigo, often the loans were from the owners of the factories that processed these products; once again the zamindars were the main factory owners.

Under the earliest settlements in the NWP, the title of proprietorship was both heritable and transferable. The zamindar could also take out legally recognised mortgages by offering the land/title as security. The British government further declared its right to sell the property in case of default of payment of revenue.

The British government acted on the principle of political economy that ‘insolvent proprietors must be allowed to waste away their estates for unproductive purposes; their properties must be cleared of its debts (legally termed ‘encumbrances’) and sold off to relatively few efficient capitalists who were able to transform a number of broken-down estates into a large-scale, viable economic unit which by judicious investment would become prosperous.’\(^{43}\)
The principle on which the whole machinery of the British Government works is of giving every one his exact due, at the same time exacting rigorously its own rights to the uttermost farthing.  

In pursuance with this philosophy, in the 19th century, the government’s right confiscate the defaulting zamindar’s property was expanded in accordance with the principles of equity to private creditors. Thus, the zamindar’s title, which earlier had passed to the government, who could auction it off, could now pass to the creditor, who might also be the auction purchaser. The expansion also covered the appropriation (against compensation) of land for public purposes. Such expansion led to massive litigation and transfer of titles.

The pressure of land tax led to distress sales of land, and in Aligarh district alone, 50% of the land changed hands between 1839 and 1858; in Muzaffarnagar, a quarter of the land was sold by the agriculturists between 1841 and 1861. The buyers were mainly the moneylenders and traders.

**Punjab**

Punjab, according to Malcolm Lyall Darling writing in 1925, is ‘agriculturally the most prosperous province in India and it is also probably the most indebted.’

In 1849-50 we converted collective into individual ownership of land, plus the right to alienate it at pleasure. By doing so we made an unconditional gift of a valuable estate to every peasant proprietor in the Punjab, and raised his credit from the former limit of the surplus of an occasional good crop to the market value of the proprietary right conferred...  

The *Jullundur Settlement Report* of 1881-85 (pp. 13-14) went further.

Indebtedness seems due not to be the impoverished condition of the people... but rather to increased value of the land, which has given the zemindar greater facilities for borrowing by improving the security he has to offer.

At the beginning of British rule, mortgage was rare. Between 1874 and 1891, in less than twenty years, mortgages quadrupled from over one million acres to nearly four million.

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**Peasantry and the relevance of legislative response like the Punjab Land Alienation Act 1900**

— Justice Debi Singh Tewatia

Imposition of free economy on colonial India by her British Rulers led to the impoverishment and consequent indebtedness and loss of their holdings to such an extent that British India was forced to enact Punjab Land Alienation Act of 1900.

The value of the payments in kind were calculated at a time when the debtor had forgotten about the prices that prevailed when he made over his crop to the money lender. Even, otherwise, by custom the money lender was to capitalize the payment in kind, in rates lower than the prevailing market rates.

Under the general practice in Punjab province, the sahukar could take away the entire produce of the debtor from the thrashing floor itself. The result was that the debtor had to borrow foodgrain etc. from his money lender for his family’s sustenance till the next harvest.  

The debtor farmer’s exploitation did not end here. The money lender almost compulsively used, not
only defective scales, but false weights and measures. He used one set of weights and measures when supplying to his debtor from his shop and a different set of weights and measures when he bought the produce of his debtor.

The Banking Enquiry Committee noted that

out of 1,407 scales tested in five districts, 69% were found to be incorrect and out of 5,907 weights 29% were found to be false. (p.52)

It further observed

... of 2,777 weight checked - 1,164 or 42% were found to be incorrect. 75% of the 2.50 seer weights were wrong and in the category above that the percentage of inaccurate weights was never less than 36%. Some of the shopkeepers are said to keep two sets of scales and weights, one for buying and other for selling. Various purchases were made, which on re-weightment, were found to be incurred. (pp.219-220)

The Punjab Alienation of Land Act 1900 was a measure enacted by the Central Government of India to put restrictions on the transfer of agricultural land in Punjab with a view to check its alienation from the agricultural to non-agricultural classes and thus stem the expropriation of the former by the latter.

- Section 3 (2) read with Section 3 (1) 3-a envisaged permanent alienation of the land of the agriculturist to non-agriculture outside his own tribe or the money lender agriculturist of his own tribe, only with the sanction of the Deputy Commissioner.
- Section 6 restricted to 20 years the temporary alienation of agriculturist land by way of mortgage, lease or farming etc.
- Section 7 envisaged return of the usufructuary mortgage etc. to the mortgages without payment at the expiry of 20 years.
- Section 8 declared as void a condition of sale attached to the mortgage.
- Section 16 prohibited sale of land of the agriculturist in execution of money decree obtained before or after this Act and also envisaged that the temporary alienation in execution of the Court Decree could not be for more than 20 years by way of mortgage with possession.

While this law eased the situation to some extent, it did not fully remove the problem.

In 1921 the total agricultural debt in the Punjab amounted to 90 crores. In 1920 the Punjab Banking Enquiry Committee fixed the total agricultural indebtedness in Punjab at 135 crores, rising by 50% within a span of 8 years.

The then Punjab Minister of Agriculture Sir Chhotu Ram, writing in 1933, estimated by the year 1932, the total debts must not be less than 200 crores, when regard is had to the fact that the depression in prices had set in from 1929 and peasantry could not have been in a position to retire the existing debt amounts, adding that the debt must have gone up to 90%.

![Net increase in usufructuary mortgage debts (proprietors and occupancy tenants)](image-url)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year Ending</th>
<th>Net Increase in Crores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1899</td>
<td>9.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1909</td>
<td>5.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td>10.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>34.22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Punjab Banking Enquiry Committee in statement No. 36 estimated the gross value of annual agriculture produce for the years ending with 1928-29 at an average of 99 crores which depressed to an average of 65 crores for the three years 1932-33, 1933-34, 1934-35. This
devaluation was the result of a steep decline in prices of agricultural produce after 1929 as would be presently referred to. (p.376)

The total estimated gross annual agricultural produce was 65 crores inclusive of fodder used almost exclusively as cattle feed, values of which was estimated to be about 15 crores. So only 50 crores worth of agriculture produce was to sustain the peasantry in the given year.

Out of this the agriculturist of the Punjab had to pay annually a sum of Rs.12½ crores to the Government by way of land revenue, abiana, cess and local rate. Which left them with agriculture produce worth only 37½ crores. While the interest alone on their indebtedness at 2% amounted to Rs. 48 crores and when counted even at the lesser rate of 1½%, the interest amount came to Rs. 36 crores which was almost equal to the total value of what was left with them out of their total produce of the given year, as a result of which they would have to go in for further debt to keep their body and soul together.

The steep decline in prices of the agricultural produce, beginning from the year 1929-30, continued, and fell further in the thirties. In 1931-32 the prices of all products except cotton were appreciably lower than those prevailing in 1905-06. The price of bajra, one of the staples of the population, was almost half and the price of gur was 43% lower. This increased the financial vulnerability of the agriculturist many fold.

Thus, a debt which could be paid up in 1918-19 with 100 mounds of cotton, required 300 mounds for its extinction in 1931-32. The farmer's misery was compounded by the fact that prices of goods that he had to purchase did not register the same steep decline. To top it all, government dues as a result of fresh settlement were considerably increased, particularly the water rates.
The Punjab Government looked beyond Indian borders both for the inspiration and precedent for dealing with the problem of destitution of peasantry compounded by depression in second and third decade of 20th century.

The Unionist Party which assumed power in Punjab in the twenties supplemented the beneficial provisions of the Land Alienation Act by effecting amendment in the said legislation as also by enacting the Punjab Debtors Protection Act of 1936. The Provincial (Punjab Amendment) Act, 1939, Regulation of Accounts Act-1929, the Punjab Agriculture Marketing Act and Restitution of Mortgaged Lands Act.

The Punjab Debtors Protection Act provided that the land of the scheduled agriculturist could not be temporarily be alienated for a period exceeding 20 years and that too only by the Deputy Commissioner and not by Civil Courts. It was also provided that so much of the land of the scheduled agriculturist as would be considered necessary for the maintenance of his family shall be exempted even from temporary alienation. Besides this, the ancestral lands in the hands of the successors was exempted from alienation in execution of money decree for debts incurred by the predecessor-in-interest.

Earlier receiver appointed by the insolvency court could alienate scheduled agriculturist debtor insolvent’s land. But Section 3(1) of the Provincial (Punjab Amendment) Act - 1939 prohibited the alienation of the land of a scheduled agriculturist insolvent. And further by virtue of the provisions of Section 3(2) so much land of such insolvent as would be necessary for the maintenance of his family would be exempted from alienation.

The Restitution of Mortgaged Lands Act resulted in restitution of 835,000 acres of land alienated prior to the enactment of Land Alienation Act, 1900, to 3,65,000 peasants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Settlement Rates (in annas)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commodity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sugarcane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cotton(desi)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wheat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapeeseed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bajra</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Australia a Wheat Bounty Act was passed in October, 1931 under which “payment is made to wheat growers at a flat rate of 4.50d a bushel on all wheat grown in Australia irrespective of selling price” in addition laws were passed reducing accumulated interests and payments of interest by easy instalment. For future low rates were prescribed and restrictions were placed on the sale of land in execution of decrees.

In Bulgaria an Act was passed in the 1932 authorising to write off by 50 per cent all debts upto 2,00,000 levas (about Rs. 8000/-) and incurred before 1st January, 1931. This act exempted from attachment of the farmer.

- Food required upto the time of the new harvest, both for the family and the livestock.
- Seed
- Agricultural equipment upto the value of Rs. 2,5000 levas (about Rs. 800/-)
- Land upto 5 hectares (about 7.5 acres) and
- And a given number of sheep, pigs, goats, hives of bees, one pair of work animals and one buffalo.

In Denmark Government earmarked a fund from which the creditor was to be paid 35% of the debt amount if he agreed.

Additionally the Government allocated Rs. 80 million crown (about Rs. 2 crores) for distribution among owners and tenants in order to lighten the burden of taxes and interest on mortgages. This amount was to be repaid in instalments beginning from July 11, 1937 only if prices of butter and bacon during the year 1932-36 rose at least 30 per cent above the average for the later half of 1931.

In East Prussia, the arrears of interest could be remitted altogether and the rates of future interests could be reduced. But if remission and reduction failed to give adequate relief, then without reference to the creditor and capital debt could be reduced by 50 per cent and with consent even higher proportion could be reduced.

In Romania the debt, in the case of farmers owning not more than 10 hectares (about 2.5 acres) were reduced by 50 per cent and even this reduced amount was made payable in installments extending over a period of 30 years.
Peasant Uprisings in Medieval and British India

Heavy taxation, land alienation and lack of access to food have been causes for popular revolt throughout history. Such uprisings were common in medieval India, often contributing to the fall of kings and dynasties. Besides the uprising by the farmers of Doab when Muhammad Tughlaq increased taxes, there were other uprisings in medieval India.

The land revenue had increased from £18,650,000 in 1594 under Akbar to £30,000,000 under Shah Jahan in 1655 to £43,500,000 in 1697 under Aurangzeb. This increase in demands made by the rulers of medieval India led to numerous peasant uprisings. It is interesting to note that most of these uprisings either merged with or were led by the zamindars, whose interests over their share of the surplus conflicted with that of the ruling class.

There are, in the 17th and 18th centuries, numerous instances of peasants refusing to pay revenue and/or fleeing the area during the time of Jehangir, who has described one such defiance in the area around Agra:

At this time I received a report that the villagers (ganwaran) and peasants (muzarian) of the other (eastern) side of the Jamuna river (near Mathura) constantly engage in thievery and robbing travellers (rahzani), and, sheltered behind dense jungles and fastnesses difficult to access, pass their days in rebellion and defiance, not paying the authorised land revenue to the jagirdars. I ordered Kahn-I-Jahan to take a number of high mansabdars with him and do his best to mete out stern punishment and chastisement, and going on with slaughter, enslavement and rapine, raze their fastnesses and forts to the ground, and root out this thorn-field of mischief and villainy. The army crossed the river and attacked hot and proper the next day. Since they (the villagers) had no time to flee, they were compelled to commit the folly of a frontal battle. Large numbers of them were put to slaughter, their women and children enslaved, and large booty secured for the victorious troops. 48

A similar event took place twelve years later under Shah Jehan (1634) and another in 1650.

A unique feature of a few of the uprisings of the 17th and 18th centuries was the combining of peasant revolts with religious (mainly monotheistic Bhakti) movements. The leaders of these movements, like Kabir, Namdev, Nanak, Raidas, etc. were predominantly from the lower castes, and, in some cases like that of Dhanna, the peasantry. Social egalitarianism was an important component of their teachings.

1669-1707 - Jat uprising

According to Habib, this uprising, which was built upon the numerous jat peasant uprisings of the past, was 'in formal terms a successful one, ending in the establishment of the Bharatpur state.' This uprising was led by three zamindars - Gokula Jat, Raja Ram, Chauraman and Surajmal. The only result seems to be the inclusion of numerous jat peasants in the zamindari class; it does not seem to have inspired any further uprisings.

1672 - Satnami revolt

The Satnamis, numbering around 5000, were a Hindu sect in the paraganas of Narnaul and Mewat. The sect included mainly agriculturists; however, other working classes - carpenters, goldsmiths, weavers, sweepers, tanners, and petty merchants were also members of the sect. They adopted the name Satnami (good name) - as an external symbol of their belief in an honest and upright life - lawful life (particularly in acquiring wealth), dignity of existence (not giving in to oppression or unlawful authority or force). The uprising started when a footsoldier of Aurangzeb hit a Satnami guarding his harvest on the head with his staff, and the Satnamis retaliated by killing him. Historical records speak of the bravery of the Satnamis, who were joined by the zamindars of the area. The revolt was finally suppressed after thousands of Satnamis were killed.

The Sikh uprising

The Sikh uprising is also essential an outgrowth of a religious movement that sought to remove caste differences and work towards oneness. Guru Gobind Singh’s first baptised apostles were a katri, a jat (both agriculturists), a washerman,
a water-carrier, and a barber, each representing a different part of the country. The religion also received five new external symbols - unshorn hair, a sword, a steel bangle, a comb, and a pair of knee length shorts. In addition, tobacco was banned. The banner of the uprising was ‘Raj Khalsa’ or people’s democracy. In particular, the uprising led by Banda Bahadur, the son of a poor peasant and a follower of Guru Gobind Singh who formed the Khalsa, was the abolition of zamindari in East Punjab. Kushwant Singh describes the extent of the revolt.

The revolt spread across the Sutlej over the whole of the Majha country. Starting from Amritsar, the peasant armies marched northwards towards the hills, taking Kalanaur, Batala, and Pathankot. Then they overran the tract between the Sutlej and the Ravi. The Punjab became like a surging sea of free peasantry with only two small islands of Mughal authority in its midst - the capital city of Lahore and the Afghan town of Kasur. From the Jumna to the Ravi and beyond, the only person who mattered was Banda, and the only power that commanded respect was that of the peasant armies.49

While it is a given that the agrarian crisis of the Mughal empire was the chief contributor to its downfall, the revolts led by a variety of people other than peasants, rarely furthered their interests, and were, more often than not, unsuccessful. However, their major contribution was in raising the peasants’ awareness about their conditions, and preparing them for the national movement of struggle against later colonisation. Peasant struggles became more frequent with the trade-oriented agricultural policies of the British. The relation between cash-cropping on a large-scale, hunger, and revolt is best evidenced by the case of indigo.
How the Indian peasant supported the Empire

The costs of the (Indian) Mutiny, the price of the transfer of the Company’s rights to the Crown, the expenses of simultaneous wars in China and Abyssinia, every governmental item in London that remotely related to India down to the fees of the charwomen in the India Office and the expenses of ships that sailed but did not participate in hostilities and the cost of Indian regiments for six months’ training at home before they sailed, - all were charged to the account of the unrepresented ryot. The sultan of Turkey visited London in 1868 in state, and his official ball was arranged for at the India Office. A lunatic asylum in Ealing, gifts to members of a Zanzibar mission, the consular and diplomatic establishments of Great Britain in China and in Persia, part of the permanent expenses of the Mediterranean fleet and the entire cost of a line of telegraph from England to India had been charged before 1870 to the Indian Treasury...

— L.H. Jenks, Migration
**Indigo**

Indigo is indigenous to India, and has been an important item of export since the ancient days. It was known and used by the Greeks and Romans. Later it was imported by Europe and was increasingly used by the dyers there, interfering seriously with the use of woad. In the late sixteenth century it was strictly banned in the Austrian dominions by means of an imperial proclamation, and earned the name of ‘Devil’s Dye’. In addition, the people of Nuremberg compelled the dyers of their city to take an oath each year, not to use indigo.

At the beginning, the London East India Company purchased the dye from the Indian markets for about a shilling a pound, and sold it at five times the price. The imports between 1664 and 1694 almost touched 60,000 lbs. annually.\(^{50}\) The finest dye was produced at Agra, followed by Lahore and Golconda. Surat, Berampur, Indore, Awadh and Bengal dyes were considered to be of a lower quality.

Towards the end of the 17th century, the market for Indian indigo had almost collapsed in the face of stiff competition from West Indian planters and colonists of America. However, they soon lost interest in the dye, particularly after the American War of Independence, and the market for Bengal indigo expanded; by 1786, export had reached 245,000 lbs. annually. In 1788, the Company’s directors identified indigo as an article which, considered from the political point of view, has every claim to... attention, as having a tendency to render the Company’s possession in Bengal more valuable by creating from the soil and labour of the natives an export commerce, capable of being carried to a very great extent.\(^{51}\)

While the company did make limited advances to the Indigo planters, who were primarily British, the main source of financing for production and trade were the Agency Houses (until their collapse in 1833), chartered banks, and Managing Houses.

There was also a government sponsored system of hypothecation. The volume of indigo exports from Calcutta to London rose from 40,000 maunds in 1800 to 120,000 maunds in 1815, and during the period of severe instability - 1826-30 - averaged 118,000 maunds. This required an annual capital of over two crore rupees, advanced by the Agency Houses.\(^{52}\) And the six giant Houses who dominated the trade were Alexander, Colvin, Cruttenden, Mckillop, Fergusson, Mackintosh and Palmer.

Capper describes the speculations that were rampant in the indigo market both at Calcutta and in London.

Having almost the entire supply of the manufacturing world dependent upon this article, it follows that any unlooked-for or sudden falling off in the supply of the plant must be sensibly felt; and with a commodity so valuable, the room left for profit in any emergency of this sort is necessarily ample. For many years past, speculative men on both sides of the world have been in the frequent habit of turning these periodical disturbances in the supply to account; sometimes to their enormous advantage, but as often only to bring ruin on themselves and many others around them...where natural causes for a rise in the indigo-market did not occur sufficiently frequent for the gambling propensities of some of the Calcutta merchants and bankers, aids were put in requisition, in the shape of false reports of inundations and short crops, or by what is technically termed ‘working the market’, which is simply making speculative purchases of the article, and by these means running up the price sufficiently high to leave a large profit on the transaction; and having done that, selling out be degrees at the ruling rate. It not unfrequently happens that these speculators burn their fingers...\(^{53}\)

Elsewhere he notes:

Indigo, silk, cotton, sugar, all had been deals, or rather gambled in, to an extent that was only limited by the impossibility of obtaining any further means for carrying on the game. It mattered little whose funds were jeopardised. The savings of the veteran
officer, that were to have purchased promotion for his son; the widow's store; the orphan's sole fortune; the private soldier's pittance, scarped from his pay and prize-money; all these were converted into sugars, shipped home in the shape of dye, or perchance, sunk in the alluvial soil of an indigo factory.54

The volume of credit to the indigo planter in Bengal and its price levels were determined by the state of demand in European markets, and the depression in world markets after the peak reached in 1823, led to the collapse of the House of Palmer in January 1830. The government sympathised but did little to bail out the banks and Agency Houses. Instead, it passed Regulation 5 of 1830, enabling the planters to use the power of distraint to enforce indigo contracts on an already emaciated peasantry.55

The Agency Houses were replaced by the Managing Houses (see box: How to make a fortune in India) and finance came from two sources: the East India Company's scheme of hypothecation and the Union Bank of Calcutta. Starting with a capital of Rs. 1.2 million in 1829, the bank expanded till its paid-up capital touched Rs.10 million in 1840.

A large portion of these funds was given out in loans to indigo planters. The bubble burst in 1847. (See box: The Story of the Union Bank). The liabilities of the Managing Houses and the Bank had reached 20 million sterling by October.

One immediate result of this collapse of the Houses and banks, and the drying up of capital was that the planters became increasingly reliant on coercion to maintain indigo production. As the advances to peasants came to a standstill, this production started declining in Bengal and the stage was set for the indigo revolt - Blue Mutiny - of 1859-60.

The indigo revolt by the peasants in 1860 had lasting effect, and the cultivation of the plant in Bengal declined. According to the Report of the custom department of 1874-75, the exports in 1861 were the 'smallest' ever. By 1868-74, the cultivation in Jessore had fallen to nearly half the earlier acreage. It was the same all over Bengal. As the British closed their indigo factories and planters gave up their cultivation in Bengal, Indian zamindars moved in. Their produce was used mainly for the domestic market. However, the decline of indigo in Bengal continued, and soon Bihar rose in prominence as the centre of indigo cultivation.

**Bihar overtakes Bengal in indigo production**

The effects of the collapse of indigo production in Bengal did not affect that of Bihar. In fact, an increase in the latter state resulted in huge exports. By 1848-9, indigo exports had reached 9,920,000 lbs., of which three-fourths were sent to Great Britain alone.56
MAP OF BENGAL, BIHAR & ORISSA
[BASED ON RENNELL'S MAP–1779]
Besides the decline in cultivation in Bengal, there was another reason for such rapid growth. The sugar crisis led the sugar entrepreneurs to shift their capital from that commodity to another that promised quick results. In fact, many of the sugar factories were converted into indigo factories.

According to Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri, this rise in indigo cultivation in Bihar was drastic. 57

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Bengal</th>
<th>Bihar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1880-81</td>
<td>23,000</td>
<td>66,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881-82</td>
<td>17,200</td>
<td>58,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1883-84</td>
<td>17,000</td>
<td>58,500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Indigo cultivation under factories belonging to the Indigo Planters Association increased from 70,000 bighas in 1878 to 85,000 bighas at about the end of the century—an increase of 21.4%. The following are the statistics of indigo cultivation in Muzaffarpur, one of the most important indigo districts of Bihar (see chart below). In Saran, the cultivation increased from 22,000 bighas in 1860 to 65,000 bighas in 1877-78.

The late 19th century saw the entry of a chemical dye that made indigo redundant. The decline that set in could not be arrested.

The violence of Indigo Cultivation

The history of monopoly in indigo trade or cultivation is replete with incidents of peasant uprisings. In 1633, Shahjahan granted Manohar Danda the monopoly in indigo trade throughout the empire, and the price of the crop was depressed in the Agra region. As a result, 'the cultivators...rooted up their plants.' 58 Given the cost of labour and inputs involved in the cultivation of indigo, it is probable that these were better-off cultivators.

In the 17th century, English planters arrived with capital to undertake indigo cultivation. An average plantation comprised of 4000 acres, yielding an average of 1000 maunds of 82 lbs. each. The annual outlay for labour, seed, etc. was almost a million and a half pound sterling for just this one industry. If the soil was good and the season favourable, a planter could start break even and start reaping profits in less than a dozen years.

Indigo cultivation by Europeans so infuriated both the local landed and other peasantry, as well as the British civil service they were permitted to reside in Bengal only by an act of courtesy on the part of the government. In fact, in any suit between an indigo-planter and an Indian, before any of the local officials, judgement was given invariably in favour of the latter. In one instance, when an indigo-factor ventured to argue with the judge in open court, the judge ordered his peons to gag him, an order which was apparently carried out with great enthusiasm.59

Indigo plantations took up precious land that the peasants could scarce afford to give up. In addition, the cultivation of indigo required intensive labour, and the English planter was a bitter rival of the zemindar for the labour of the ryots. This gave birth to the lattial system-club law. The peasants, armed with lathis-long stout wooden sticks-expressed their disenchantment with this system of indigo-culture by attacking the planters’ people at harvest time, and seizing the produce. Soon the planters started retaliating in kind. And in no time, mercenary lattials could be hired, a rupee a head. The violence led to deaths and arson. The planters showed the blood money in their accounts as under the head ‘cases in court’.

The Famine Commission of 1871, which blamed local officials of Bihar and Bengal for many of the injustices associated with the then prevailing tenancy laws, also took note of this violence. Its strictures also applied to landlords, including European, whose methods of indigo cultivation

involved an amount of lawlessness and oppression, in the shape of illegal seizure and retention of land, and to a minor degree, in the shape of extorted agreements to cultivate, and of seizure of ploughs and cattle.60
Impact of indigo production on Indian agriculture and the peasantry

There were two main forms of indigo cultivation—that on raiyati lands and that on nij lands. Of these, the former was more prevalent, with almost 61,000 bighas (80%) out of the 75,000 cultivated by the Bengal Indigo Company in 1860, belonging to the former.

The balance between Raiyati and Nij in the indigo sector

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Indigo concern</th>
<th>Raiyati Bighas</th>
<th>Nij Bighas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bengal Indigo</td>
<td>61,000</td>
<td>14,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadia</td>
<td>Khalbolia</td>
<td>14,000</td>
<td>5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadia</td>
<td>Kallipole</td>
<td>6,300</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadia</td>
<td>Bansberia</td>
<td>14,000</td>
<td>4,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadia</td>
<td>Shikarpore</td>
<td>20,000</td>
<td>6,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadia</td>
<td>Loknathpore</td>
<td>8,000</td>
<td>2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadia</td>
<td>Nischindipore</td>
<td>26,000</td>
<td>4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadia</td>
<td>Katchikatta</td>
<td>16,375</td>
<td>2,825</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pabna</td>
<td>Hizlabut</td>
<td>7,700</td>
<td>4,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pabna</td>
<td>Coomedpore</td>
<td>6,800</td>
<td>1,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessore</td>
<td>Sinduri</td>
<td>35,486</td>
<td>4,762</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessore</td>
<td>Nusibshahi</td>
<td>15,500</td>
<td>4,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessore</td>
<td>Hazarapur</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessore</td>
<td>Sericole</td>
<td>8,000</td>
<td>3,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajshahi</td>
<td>Rajapore</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajshahi</td>
<td>Salgurmurdia</td>
<td>10,655</td>
<td>2,573</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birbhum</td>
<td>Dambazar</td>
<td>32,000 (approx.)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bankura</td>
<td>Bancoora</td>
<td>35,000 (approx.)</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faridpur</td>
<td>Cossimpore</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One reason for this preference could be that the peasant held on to his raiyati land by paying a very high rent, and often discounted the price of family labour. Thus an extension of advance would go a long way towards helping with the rentals.

According to Sugata Bose,

in the first quarter of the nineteenth century indigo was not quite the kind of forced cultivation that it became after 1825. Faced with a build-up of population pressure on land as well as a revenue and rent offensive, peasants in west Bengal districts may well have opted for what looked like a higher-value and more labour-intensive cash-crop which not only promised a larger income but came with cash advances which could be used to pay the rent. Rammohan Roy’s observation in 1829 that indigo-growing peasants looked ‘better clothed and better conditioned’ than their neighbours might well have referred to a carryover from the era of relative well-being. In 1830 the magistrate of Dhaka referred to the ‘misfortune’ of receiving indigo advances which reduced the raiyat to ‘little better than a bond-slave to the factory’.

This however, was not the case in Bihar, where zerat (similar to nij) lands were used for indigo cultivation in the late 19th century. In addition, while the zamindars of Bengal were often in direct competition with the planters, in Bihar the landlords appeared to invite British capital in monetary form. Their power flowed from their use of extra-economic coercion over the peasantry. In contrast, the power of the Bengali zamindar emanated from his status as rentier as well as creditor. The latter role became particularly important following the dramatic rise in the price of rice from 1854 onwards. Various records state that both cash and grain loans were given - interest on the former ranging from 12% to 24%, and on the latter upto 37.5%; grain advances were charged an interest as much as 50%.

The Charter of 1833 allowed the English planter purchase land and landed rights. They used the instruments of intimidation embedded in the zamindari system to force indigo cultivation. ‘We require zamindari power’, avowed the general manager of Bengal Indigo, ‘to conduct our business in the mofussil’. One favourite ploy was to call the peasant to the kachcheri (court), and use the threat of rent enhancement to force them to grow indigo.

The advance the peasants received for growing indigo was typically Rs. 2 per bigha of indigo cultivation. A contract was signed on stamped paper, enforceable in a court of law. The peasant was paid a variable rate – a rupee for anything from six to eight “bundles” held together by a six-foot chain strung around the centre of the plant’.

Debts were more than common: of the 864 peasants contract to the Nschindapur concern in Nadia, only

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i. Lands held permanently by the raiyats (cultivators) for which they paid fixed rents.

ii. Demesne lands of zamindars and talukdars, worked on by cultivators for a share of the produce.

iii. For this reason, when the advance stopped after the crash in 1849, the raiyat was no longer interested in cultivating indigo for the planter.
were free from debts; in the Mulnath concern, the figure was 237 peasants out of 1,378. Debts were considered hereditary. The net result was that labour was free for the planter.

**Indigo revolts**

Indigo cultivation engendered a series of measures of defiance even before a full-fledged revolt broke out in 1860. The peasants, battling both the zamindars and the planters, often took the age old strategies to high rents - desertion and refusal to fulfil indigo contracts after taking advances - in the early days. They often took advances from more than one planter to pay their rents and debts. This, however, led to a further toughening of the laws against them, and reduced the effectiveness of such strategies. The crisis in the indigo economy from 1830s to the 1850s pushed them deeper in poverty in absolute terms. According to a magistrate of Dhaka, the 'frauds' brought to his notice in 1830 had by the planters, had shown appreciable increase; he however declared that these frauds had 'originate(d) with the planters themselves'. He further elaborates:

No man is more alive to his own interests than a Bengali ryot, and if he can gain 4 annas more by cultivating indigo than by cultivating any other crop, he is not likely to forego the advantage. If, on the other hand, which is too frequently the case, an advance has been forced upon a needy ryot, either by the overbearing power of the planters or by the more weighty pressure of his own wants and necessities, and the amount received does not afford him a sufficient remuneration for his labour, there is no wonder that he should be found wanting in the fulfilment of the planters' expectations.

In addition, there was one striking rebellion, in 1831, led by Titu Mir, who had spent his youth as a mercenary in the service of landlords. Mir was later influenced by his pilgrimage to Mecca, and started preaching against the evils of usury, often taking an anti-landlord stance. The immediate cause of the revolt was that a local landlord announced a beard tax of Rs.2½ on all followers of the ‘Wahabi’ faith, and failing to collect it, he razed the mosque in Titu Mir’s village. This revolt centred on Barasat. Though it started off as an action against rent-collecting landlords, it quickly spread to include the indigo planters among its targets. The bulk of the rebels were peasants; they were also joined by some weavers. Titu Mir declared the Company’s government at Purnah illegitimate, claimed himself to be the representative of Muslim sovereignty, and demanded revenue from zamindars - both Hindu and Muslim. As his revolt spread across Nadia and the 24-parganas, peasants stopped paying rents and abandoned the cultivation of indigo. In November 1831, Titu Mir was finally overcome by the Company’s forces. One notable fact of the revolt is that there was no wanton destruction: however, papers related to indigo contracts and rents at indigo factories were destroyed.

The Farazi rebellion (1837-48), which was more sustained, began with similar motives. Dadu Mian, the son of the founder of the movement, gave it an anti-landlord and anti-planter stance, by declaring that paying taxes to zamindars and cultivating indigo for

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cost of Indigo Cultivation for the Peasant</th>
<th>mid-19th century</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cost to the peasant (including rent, stamp paper for making out the contract, seed, ploughs, sowing, weeding, cutting, transportation of produce/bigha)</td>
<td>Rs.3 Annas 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yield per bigha</td>
<td>20 bundles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sale price @ 5 Bundles per Re.</td>
<td>Rs.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net profit</td>
<td>Annas 12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cost of cultivating foundation seeds of sunflower for multinational seed companies in 1993</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cost of inputs including fertiliser, pesticides, seed, transport, irrigation Labour and excluding interest on bank and other loans and commission of 4% on sale price to the agent of the Agricultural Produce Marketing Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected output of seed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual output of seed on an average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sale price @ Rs. 2000/-qtl. If all seeds are passed by the company</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If the seed fails to pass, the farmer gets a maximum of Rs.800/qtl for the seed. If the output is low, his loss is overwhelming.

110 were free from debts; in the Mulnath concern, the figure was 237 peasants out of 1,378. Debts were considered hereditary. The net result was that labour was free for the planter.
The indigo plant has many varieties, of which the most popular one giving the finest dye was the *Indigofera tinctoria*. The hard and woody stem of the plant, which grows to about 3 to 4 feet in height, shows great variation in colour, being greyish around the root, green in the middle and reddish at the top. It is divided into a variety of knotty stalks, with small sprigs. Each sprig terminates in about 8 pairs of oval shaped leaves, which are thick, and a deep green on the underside. The flowers, which grow on the tips of branches, are reddish in colour and have no smell.

The leaves are macerated, beaten, washed, and the liquor produced is subjected to evaporation in boilers. The left over precipitate is put into moulds, pressed free of moisture, and dried, before it is sold.

The indigo crisis, the raised price of alternative cash crops and rice, the closure of the system of advances for indigo cultivation and the changes in the Rent Act of 1859 (introducing occupancy rights for tenants and becoming one more issue of conflict between the zamindars and the cultivators), were the main reasons for the ‘Blue Mutiny’ as the indigo revolts were called. What compounded the conflict was that the government was no longer strongly backing the planters. Chowdhuri informs that in March 1859, Magistrate Eden of Barasat upheld the peasants’ right to grow whatever crops they wished to, and in August of the same year, exhorted the police to protect peasants’ possession of land even if they had violated their indigo contracts.

*It is possible that the ryots whose promises or contracts are admitted may still have many irresistible pleas to avoid the consequences the planter insists upon.*

This news, which immediately spread throughout west and central Bengal, became the clarion call for peasants to throw off for once and for all, the yoke of forced indigo cultivation.

Throughout the districts of Nadia, Jessore, Murshidabad, Pabna, Rajshahi, Malda and Faridpur, peasants destroyed the crops, set fire to the indigo factories, and assaulted and killed the planters’ employees. They took oaths against the future cultivation of indigo. Mahajans, for reasons of their own, as well as the intelligentsia lent their support to the struggle, the latter often defending the revolutionaries in the courts. Bengali media played an
The London firms have a little credit and less money; but they can accept bills drawn against goods to be shipped either on the manufacturer’s or their Indian friends’ account. This done, the bills are discounted, and so the manufacturer is reimbursed. The goods - grey cloths from Manchester perhaps - are shipped; and then the London merchant, who has not paid a farthing for them, is enabled to draw against them on his India correspondent, through a bank, who takes the bill of lading for security; and in this way the shipper obtains hard cash, with which he buys another parcel of goods - metals, possibly - ships these, draws against them, and with these fresh means repeats the operation, which, it is clear, may be thus carried on to a large extent. Before the first parcel of goods can be sold at Bombay or Calcutta, the manufacturer’s bill upon the shipper falls due, and is met by a renewal; that is, by another bill drawn in a similar manner, and understood to be for the purpose of being discounted, to enable the acceptor of the first bill to take it up, in other words, to pay it when presented.

Meanwhile the goods arrive at their destination. The agent of the London bank who advanced money upon them holds the bills of lading; and to get these, and consequently the goods, the ‘Calcutta correspondent’ applies to his banian, who at once does the needful, redeems the grey-goods from their bondage, and sells them for his principal. The proceeds are now remitted home in sugar, or silk, or indigo, the bills of lading for which are forwarded to the London house, which at once draws against it, in order to meet the ‘renewals’ of the Manchester bills then falling due; finally, the produce-broker in Mincing Lane makes an advance to the importer on the arrival of the sugar or indigo, which enables him to redeem the bills of landing from the strong-box of the bank, and the goods are sold. So long as the selling prices at both ends leave a shadow of profit over and above the amount of commissions and other charges, all goes on well. The shipper, the banker, the correspondent, the banian, the London broker, the Manchester manufacturer, all are content. The operations are extended considerably, the commercial wheel is kept moving, money is made, the houses at both ends obtain the reputation of doing a large stroke of business, the partners are looked upon as sharp, shrewd men, and although there may be a few bad debts, a few losses, and now and then a heavy year, the books shew a large amount of commissions earned. Still the banian is a large creditor, though by interest, percentage, &c. he has cleared off more than the amount of their liabilities to him. One or two bad seasons follow rather rapidly; the house has invested largely in estates, an operation popularly termed developing the resources of the country; the banian becomes rather more troublesome and overbearing than of wont; the senior partner takes alarm, withdraws with a hundred thousand pounds, and twelvemonths afterwards the firm suspend payment for a million and a half sterling, at which nobody is in the least degree surprised, except the banian, who wonders how they managed to keep up for so long. This, reader, is a faint, and no doubt an imperfect sketch of the course of operations of an Indian commercial house of the present time; and it deserves a place in these pages as illustrative of that Saxon energy of character, that fine spirit of enterprise which so distinguishes the men of Liverpool and Glasgow, and by means of which they rear gigantic fabrics out of literally nothing. Here we have seen how a fortune of a hundred thousand, and an insolvency of a million and a half, had their first origin in nothing more than a few bales of Manchester ‘grey-goods’.
They were insolvent, and that a month or two at most would momentary gap, although the directors must have known that others, were disposed of, and the proceeds applied to stop a crisis. Bills sent them for sale and remittance, on account of were resorted to in the vain hope of averting the impending became evident. The most desperate and unprincipled means institution, and towards the end of the year a run on its treasury suspicion, however, was but lulled for a time. A fictitious integrity of the bank. Quite satisfied and the public at large were assured, of the immediate result was, that the unsuspecting shareholders felt found to audit the accounts, and pass them as all right; the declared. Of course, good-natured, easy gentlemen had been a dividend of three and a half per cent on the half-year was set down as quite insignificant; and description: enormous profits were announced; the amount of shareholders at the July meeting were of the most glowing in difficulties from the huge accommodations accorded to their share of the two most notorious banks in Calcutta found themselves of banks and merchants. In the middle of this year, the directors and proprietors of a bank, by the failure, in 1842, of a firm of some Indian respectability, when it appeared that the house had received not much less than half a million sterling from the coffers of the Union Bank. That this was no individual or exceptional case is clear from the fact, that on the failure of this very same bank, it was ascertained that some half a dozen firms were at the time liable to it for a trifle within a million sterling.

The story of the Union Bank
(As told by John Capper) 70

The years 1847 and 1848 will long be memorable in the annals of Indian joint-stockery; and even now as we are writing, not only are the effects of those years still felt, but the nefarious transactions of that period form the subject of grave deliberation and legal inquiry. The storm that was approaching was ushered in by several minor failures, which to prudent men served as beacons of danger. The public were first made aware of the extent to which mutual accommodation was accorded amongst the directors and proprietors of a bank, by the failure, in 1842, of a firm of some Indian respectability, when it appeared that the house had received not much less than half a million sterling from the coffers of the Union Bank. That this was no individual or exceptional case is clear from the fact, that on the failure of this very same bank, it was ascertained that some half a dozen firms were at the time liable to it for a trifle within a million sterling.

The year 1847 dragged its slow length along, big with the fate of banks and merchants. In the middle of this year, the directors of the two most notorious banks in Calcutta found themselves in difficulties from the huge accommodations accorded to their customer, i.e. their own proprietors. The half-yearly meeting of the Union Bank was held in the second week in July; but so pressed were the directors, that money had first to be raised to enable them to jog on and meet their most immediate liabilities. In spite of this, however, the accounts laid before the shareholders at the July meeting were of the most glowing description: enormous profits were announced; the amount of bad or doubtful debts was set down as quite insignificant; and a dividend of three and a half per cent on the half-year was declared. Of course, good-natured, easy gentlemen had been found to audit the accounts, and pass them as all right; the immediate result was, that the unsuspecting shareholders felt quite satisfied and the public at large were assured, of the integrity of the bank.

Suspicion, however, was but lulled for a time. A fictitious dividend, a fancy balance-sheet failed to give stability to this institution, and towards the end of the year a run on its treasury became evident. The most desperate and unprincipled means were resorted to in the vain hope of averting the impending crisis. Bills sent them for sale and remittance, on account of others, were disposed of, and the proceeds applied to stop a momentary gap, although the directors must have known that they were insolvent, and that a month or two at most would witness the termination of their fictitious existence, and which actually took place in January 1848.

To attempt a mere outline of the winding-up disclosures of the Union Bank would occupy many chapters; and yet how little of the truth was really disclosed! Whatever was gleaned was the result of accident. How planters and merchants had been befriended until the entire capital of the bank was absorbed; how indigo-factories were jobbed on private account with the bank funds; how bank post-bills, at a heavy discount, were received from directors as cash; how paper of all descriptions was floated; how liabilities of the president and the secretaries were transferred to the bank in the Company’s books; how young, half-fledged civilians were accommodated with loans at a heavy interest; how, in short, every thing was done that ought not to have been done, and how all ordinary precaution, all proper management, was flung overboard...

The last and corning act of the executive of this notable banking institution deserves a few lines, as illustrating the men and the time. By a deed of arrangement the creditors of this bank agreed to compromise their claims for a certain dividend, to be levied by an assessment on the proprietary body. The assessment was paid to the executive committee, and the work of appropriation went on. After a considerable delay, however, some parties not feeling that confidence in the committee which they could have wished, expressed a desire to have their proceedings scrutinised, and the accounts of their trust audited. This, after some grave opposition, was permitted; and the result was that although every obstacle was thrown in the way of the appointed committee of inquiry, such a report was drawn up and laid before a meeting of shareholders, as in any other part of the world but Calcutta would have caused legal proceedings to have been instituted against the executive. Yet, what was the actual result? Although that meeting was attended by two hundred persons, not one was found to move that the damning report be received! On the contrary, a vote of ‘confidence’ in the executive was proposed, seconded, and carried; precisely eleven of the two hundred present voted, the remaining one hundred and eighty-nine seconded, and carried; precisely eleven of the two hundred present voted, the remaining one hundred and eighty-nine slunk away abashed at the cool effrontery of their friends. This, reader, occurred not years but months since - in the middle of 1852, and that chairman, and his executive assistants, thus publicly ‘damned with faint praise,’ are, to this day, the favoured of Calcutta society, moving amongst the elite of the ‘City of Palaces’.
The primary difference in revenue assessment and taxation between the British and the earlier rulers of India was that, prior to the British, the revenue stayed within the country, and to that extent helped ameliorate to a small extent the conditions of the peasants. The rulers had a stake in preventing acute agrarian crises. The British viewed India as merely a sponge to be squeezed to extract the last rupee to be sent to England to maintain her vast empire. This created continuously deepening agrarian crises throughout the country. The people's response to these crises was reflected in the peasant uprisings in Bengal.

Numerous episodes of peasant uprisings in different areas have been discerned by scholars throughout the agrarian history of Bengal. However, revolts of the peasantry against oppression assumed significant intensities through involvement of poor peasants only after the British take-over of the country, especially because oppression in the agrarian sector became more severe in British colonial rule. We will draw here an outline of these revolts beginning with the British period.

Medinipur (along with Bardhaman and Chittagong) was ceded to the British East India Company in 1760. Later, in 1765, the Company obtained the grant of dewani of Bengal from the Mughal Emperor and was thereby empowered to collect revenues without administrative accountability, while the Nawab of Bengal remained entitled to administrative and judiciary responsibilities without governing power. This diarchy (1765-1772) spawned a chaotic governance, leading to frequent episodes of famine (beginning with the most severe one in 1770), followed by epidemics, and mass migration.

The British land use policy in India essentially reflected the social changes within Britain. After agricultural improvement programmes, woodlands in Britain were often synonymous with wastelands, which were either to be cleared or brought under control as tree farms by the crown and the landowners. From around 1750 the enclosed tree farms rather than wild forests were preferred as an enlightened management programme in Britain. With the European ideals of enlightened civilisation, the very existence of indigenous cultures based on forests was considered undesirable, and forests considered as 'an obstruction to agriculture and consequently a bar to the prosperity of the Empire'. Agricultural land was therefore given priority over forest lands, both for the extraction of revenues and export of industrial raw materials to Britain. The Company found it of foremost importance to establish a standard system of land use, in order to obtain a steady flow of revenue. A series of indecisive experimental systems were tried out, viz, five-year farming system (1772-1777), Annual Settlement (1777-1789), Decennial Settlement (1790-1793), and finally, the Permanent Settlement (or, the Zamindari System), enacted in 1793, which substantially increased the rate of land taxes.

An immediate ecological effect of the Permanent Settlement in Southwest Bengal was that in order to hold possession of land by paying off the increased taxes, the landlords (Zamindars) had to progressively clear the forests to bring them under cultivation. Since the British policy was to treat the jungles as unproductive lands that needed human care to clear wild vegetations, bringing them into cultivation was encouraged. The tribals of the Santal Parganas were given land for clearing jungles, only to be replaced subsequently with more skilled Hindu cultivators. This process seems to have been precipitated by fragmentation of estates, portions of which were put up to auction when the zamindar failed to pay the revenue. As Jameson reports,
How far this dismemberment of estates proceeded may be instanced from that of Kasijora, once the largest and most flourishing in the district [of Midnapur] which by 1800 had been split up into no fewer than 303 separate estates and the Raja owned - in his own name at least - not an acre of revenue-paying land in his ancestral property. This is an extreme case, but the same process went on elsewhere on a smaller scale for in 1803 the total number of estates in the district had risen from 1,000 to 1,900.77

Most of the forests (considered wastelands) were reclaimed for cultivation. The process of deforestation began at the close of the 18th century and accelerated after the 1830s, in order to generate revenue from the unproductive forest lands.78 Clearing of forests for cultivation continued into the early twentieth century. During the period 1910-1935, forests in Chota Nagpur diminished by 14.2%, whereas the net cropped area increased by 56.3 percent.79 The tribals, dislocated by the vanishing of forests, were then subjected to exploitations by usurers (mahajan) and landowners in Bihar and Bengal alike.

The new revenue system thus opened avenues for oppression of the tribals. The insecure land tenancy, and the inability of the tribes to pay interest to mahajans, rent to zamindars and government irrigation taxes resulted in ‘general transfer’ of their lands to non-tribals.80, 81 The Settlement thus completely eroded the economic and cultural autonomy of the local communities.
and sent fresh migratory waves of Santals in the early 19th century from Bihar, Medinipore, and Birbhum to the adjoining districts of Bengal and Orissa. The disgruntled local communities rose in protest in a series of insurgencies: the Chuar rebellion (1799-1800), Bhumij revolt (1832-33), and Santal uprising (1855-57).

Increasing rice export, shot up with the First World War, intensified rice cultivation, and replaced the traditional practice of multiple cropping with mono-cropping of rice, interspersed with forced cultivation of cash crop. The cotton manufactures of Bengal had been throttled by the East India Company in order for the English cotton industry
to monopolise the market. However, following American Civil War, which stopped the supply of American cotton and indigo, England turned to India for the supply of cotton and indigo. Bengal indigo, considered much superior in quality to the West Indian produce, generated an upsurge of indigo cultivation in Bengal by a large number of British planters. Indigo cultivation was, however, non-profitable for the ryots because of the various forms of exploitation by the planters, who forced the peasants to farm indigo at the expense of subsistence crops. The impatience of the ryots burst out in 1858 when a handful of zamindars whose interests often collided with the effrontery of the indigo planters extended support to the ryots.

In spite of several legal redresses, exploitation of the peasants by jotedars continued into the twentieth century, a fact which engendered repeated peasant revolts.

In what follows, we try to give a more or less comprehensive list of the most significant peasant revolts in Bengal, although there have been many with lesser extent and impact. Among those which are not described here are the Sandwip uprisings (1769, 1819 and 1870), the Rangpur revolt (1783), the 'Pagalpanthi' rebellion (1825-27), etc., which certainly gave worries to the administration, but did not plausibly have as much political coverage as the ones described below.
The Santal Insurrection
The Sanyasi and Fakir Uprising (1772-92)

Sanyasis and fakirs used to receive monetary support and grants of land from Indian rulers prior to the Company’s coming to power. When the grants ceased, the sanyasis and fakirs took to plundering impoverished peasants for subsistence. The economic condition after the 1770 Bengal famine compelled the sanyasis and fakirs to take up arms to rob the peasants, disabling them to pay taxes to the Company. This uprising, which began in 1772-73, continued for over 30 years, albeit in gradually lessening intensities. East India Company records show that by the winter of 1772 the number of bands of sannyasis and fakirs stood at 50,000. But the number of actual sannyasis and fakirs in such groups was not large. They had been augmented by the starving peasants, who resented the abrupt change in the social and economic orders imposed by the Company. Their rebellion was directed against the Company collectors and the zamindars.

The raids of Majnu Shah, the leader of the Madari fakirs, in northern and eastern Bengal, made the Company collectors and the zamindars anxious. The peasants petitioned for waiver of the increasing burden of land taxes, but the Murshidabad Council was unwilling to set a precedence. The Council declared that the peasants were bound to pay the taxes, regardless of such risks as robberies and raids, and that the government would not bear the responsibility of such losses. Company records tend to prove that in spite of the ryots sustaining huge losses due to the raids, the zamindars had forced them to pay taxes, and the distress of the ryots continued.

The activities of the sanyasis and fakirs continued throughout the year, and were strengthened by peasants joining the raiding bands. The Muslim ryots joined the ranks of the fakirs, the Hindus of the sanyasis. In 1773, the rebellion extended to western Bengal. Along with the activities in Sylhet and Nadia districts, there were reports that a large group of 6000 to 7000 sanyasis with 500 horses had camped in the vicinities of Khippai in Medinipur. Company sepoys fought losing battles with the sannyasis. Two army captains, who led the sepoys in different campaigns, were killed in northern Bengal. The progress and the activities of the sanyasis and fakirs could not be controlled even by deploying four battalions of sepoys. Collecting taxes had also become difficult due to the raids.

Bhabani Pathak and Majnu Shah were the most renowned leaders, commanding the largest bands of rebels, although Musa Shah, Sarbananda Gosain, Ganesh Giri, Hari Giri also carried on independent activities. Debi Choudhurani, the fictionalised heroine in Bankim Chandra’s eponymous novel, also led attacks against the zamindars and Company officials with her own band of followers.

The rebellion was tackled by continued military campaigns. Bhabani Pathak was killed in 1787 in a surprise attack. Musa Shah who had succeeded Majnu Shah was assassinated in 1792 in a power-feud which broke out within his group. This kind of internal feuds, lack of long-term programs, and absence of continuing leadership, coupled with religious differences led to the gradual petering away of the rebellion.

The Chuar Rebellion (1799-1800)

1799 A.D. is marked in the Midnapore annals as the year of the great chuar rebellion, ghastly with its tale of horrors and massacre; when all the evil passions of the infuriated Sardars and Paiks burst forth in an wild attempt to revenge the resumption of their Jagir lands on the Government, if not to compel it to order a complete restoration of them. All the lawless tribes of the Jungle Mahals made common cause with the Paiks and carried slaughter and flame to the very doors of the Magistrate's Cutcherry.
Bengal zamindars used to keep a band of private soldiers (paiks) who were given tax-free land for cultivation for subsistence. All private lands, including those of the paiks, were ceded in 1793 to revenue land under Permanent Settlement, and the zamindars were forbidden to keep paiks. In protest, the paiks in Dhalbhum, Medinipur and Bankura rose in arms against the Company in 1799. The paik was also known in western districts as Chuar or Layek, which gave the name of their uprising. The Chuar army was composed of local tribals, and received supports from the zamindars of Karnagarh and Bagri of Medinipur.

The Company officials took it for granted that the Chuars were criminals who could be subjugated only by ruthless means. In 1799 the town of Medinipur was under siege. The Company forces used arson and oppression to suppress the rebels. Gobardhan Dikpati died fighting, Jangannath Dhal was arrested, and 16 rebels were hanged in Salbani. However, the Company’s military campaigns were thwarted elsewhere by the Chuars, supported by Queen Shiromani of Karnagarh, much of whose lands had been ceded by the Company. The revolt was quelled in 1800 after her arrest in April 1799.

**Wahabi and Farazi Uprisings (1831)**

Begun in the early nineteenth century, the Wahabi (renaissance) movement was a religious movement which sought to restore the original purity of Islam and instil inspiration into the oppressed peasants. Whatever might be its character, the movement was probably the first nationalist movement against the British. One of the leaders of the movement was Syed Ahmed, who exerted much influence on Mir Nasir Ali, alias Titu Mir (1782-1831), a remarkable peasant leader.

The exactions of a Hindu zamindar of Punra in 24 Parganas district, and the imposition of an arbitrary cess on beard led the Muslim ryots and weavers to revolt under Titu’s leadership. Titu had begun his operations in 1831 in the villages of Punra. Subsequently, his campaigns took a stringently religious hue, in which he accreted a large body of Muslim followers, with whom he terrorised Muslims of other sects as well as Hindus in the districts of Nadia and 24 Parganas. Titu’s rebellion was a radical religious reform in form, but a peasant movement bearing a class character in content, which mobilised impoverished peasants against their oppressors - zamindars as well as indigo planters.

Titu created panic among the rich Muslims, Hindu zamindars and also raided a number of indigo factories and coerced the planters to contribute to the rebel fund. Finally, his reign of terror ended in November 1831 when 11 regiments of the British infantry razed his bamboo stockade at Narkelberia and killed Titu in the encounter. Masum, Titu’s trusted lieutenant, was hanged to death and 11 were imprisoned for life.

The Farazi movement, which preached strict adherence to the dictates of the Koran, was founded by Haji Shariatullah in the 1820’s in the districts of Faridpur, Bakharganj and Mymensingh (now in Bangladesh), and accreted thousands of poor ryots. Duddu Miyan, Haji’s son, forbade the Farazias from paying any taxes to the British government, based on the idea of dar-ul-harb (the country of the enemy), as preached by Haji. An alternative administrative system encompassing numerous villages was established across Maldah, Dhaka, Bakharganj, Faridpur and Mymensingh districts. Duddu united the oppressed peasants, and from 1840 onwards, began attacking the oppressive zamindars and indigo planters. The Farazi leaders boasted that they banished indigo planters from the district of Faridpur, and were able to ‘get rid of the zamindars altogether’. In 1846, a party of 500 armed peasants razed to the ground an indigo factory in Panch Char, Faridpur. They then attacked a zamindar who was an associate of the planter, following which Duddu was arrested along with other rebels. They were
acquitted after an appeal at the upper court. Duddu was arrested again, but released due to lack of evidence, as had happened many times earlier. Broken in health, Duddu died in Bahadurpur, his birthplace in 1862. Soon after his death, the movement fizzled out due to the lack of leadership, as well as police activities against the Farazis.

The Bhumij Revolt (1832-33)

During 1832-33, in the Jungle Mahals and Dhalbhum in Medinipur districts, the Bhumij rose in revolt against the oppression by zamindars, money lenders, corrupt police officials, law court clerks and revenue officials. Forcible dispossession of properties and other tyrannies galvanised the tribals into the uprising. Hinduisation and the decreasing importance of tribal religious headmen increased the discontent of the tribal community. Apart from the causal factors mentioned above, the 'personal grievances' of Ganga Narain and the squabbles among the 'petty rajas and zamindars' added fuel and complexity to the rebellion, which was led by Ganaga Narain, an outstanding leader. He exploited the credulity of his people by making them believe that he was endowed with superhuman powers. He united them for an organised revolt on a nationalist plane. The rich non-tribals, law officers and official police outposts were attacked.

The uprising was suppressed by a series of military operations. Ganaga Narain was killed in action in 1833, some other prominent rebels were hanged, and four imprisoned for life.

The lack of knowledge of tribal needs and customs had led the Bengal Government to extend the Permanent Settlement and British law court to these undeveloped areas. The revolt taught the authorities that what the tribals needed was social and economic justice, which they tried to restore through Regulation XIII, 1833.

The Santal Insurrection (1855-57)

Damin-i-koh (skirts of the hills), which was demarcated in 1832-33, spread over parts of Bhagalpur, Murshidabad and Birbhum districts. The Santals had migrated from the neighbouring districts of Manbhum, Birbhum, Hazaribagh, Medinipur, Cuttack, etc. to settle in this area. They resorted to an armed revolt in 1855 against the injustices wrought on them by non-tribal zamindars, mahajans (money-lenders), contractors, indigo planters, merchants, police officials, and British lessees.

Bir Singh, a tribal leader, plundered merchants and money-lenders with his band of followers in 1854. In the same year, an effort to apprehend him and his associates led to the arrest of one rich but innocent Santal named Gokko at the instigation of mahajans, in 1855. The growing discontent was set to explode into a rebellion.

In a bid to cast off the yoke of foreign oppression, and to exterminate Bengali mahajans, Sidho, Kanhu Chand and Bhairab, the four brothers led the Santals into open revolt, which involved nearly 10,000 Santals. In early July 1855 they killed 5 mahajans, at Panchketia in Santal Pargana. The police official, who had arrested Gokko, set out to apprehend them, but was subsequently beheaded by Sidho. As the rebellion gained momentum, all sorts of communication was disrupted, and the rebels boasted about the end of the Company's rule. Martial law was imposed upon the insurgent area, but the rebels went on killing mahajans in Pakur, Maheshpur, Murshidabad and Birbhum.

The insurrection was brutally suppressed by the combined efforts of the military and civil officers, zamindars and indigo planters. But the battle continued fiercely till early 1856. In the second week of February, Sidho was arrested from his hideout and immediately executed. By the third week, Kanhu also met the same fate.
The Santal Pargana was created, where all except European missionaries were denied entry. This was to check the possible dissemination of the seeds of revolt among the people of the country through mingling with the Santals. Following this uprising, some changes were made in the administrative structure of the Santal Parganas, and certain laws were amended, but the appeal to reduce taxes largely remained ignored by the Government.

**The Pabna Disturbances (1873)**

The governmental attempt to abolish abwabs (arbitrary cesses) in 1872 prompted zamindars of Pabna district (now in Bangladesh) to include abwab in the rate of standard and customary rent. They also resorted to false measurements of ryoti lands to enhance rent, and forced ryots to sign agreements to pay the new rent and surrender occupancy rights granted by the Rent Act of 1859.

The ryots initially reacted to this oppression by legal means at the law court, which endorsed their rights to land occupancy. Emboldened by these legal victories, the ryots refused to pay any taxes other than the pargana (standard revenue) rate. The revolt was led by jotedars (rich farmers, often non-cultivating farmers), who constituted a rising political power: Many of the professionals like rural lawyers and deputy collectors at the time were jotedars, wealthy enough to bear the cost of litigation. A quarrel with the zamindar of Yusufshahi Pargana over share of a taluk inflamed Ishan Roy, a trader and small talukdar of Sirajganj, to lead the revolt in Sirajganj. Khoodi Mollah, a Muslim jotedar, organised peasants against the zamindar of Salap.

The zamindars tried their best to quell the opposition by force. The zamindars of Salap and Shajapdpur reached a compromise, while the zamindar of Yusufshahi sought to wear out the ryots in prolonged law suits. The ryots disbanded with the onset of the famine of 1873-74.

**East Bengal Peasant Unrest (1919-33)**

During the First World War the scarcity of daily necessities and spiralling of food prices alongside a sharp decline in the price of raw jute stirred the east Bengal countryside into widespread unrest, and there were reports of a possible famine in Noakhali. Looting of markets and grain stores and sporadic attacks on the property of rural traders and moneylenders were the spontaneous expressions of peasants’ tensions. Grassroots peasant organisations such as the Krishak Praja Samitis started bargaining collectively with zamindars and moneylenders. During 1920-22, these Samiti activities were subsumed, albeit briefly, under the nation-wide non-cooperation and khilafat movements. In Tripura, the zamindars and moneylenders faced a mounting conflict with the Muslim peasantry, and 'the situation quickly assumed the shape of a fierce class conflict'.

After the war, agricultural prices rose, stimulating fresh inflow of finance capital, which restored the status quo of the rural credit relations. But the slump in jute demands in 1926-27 rejuvenated the conflict between the rich Hindu and the poor Muslim peasants. There was an obvious communal tinge because the large majority of mahajans were Hindus, while the majority of tenants and debtors were Muslims. Nevertheless, Muslim moneylenders were proportionately threatened and looted. Communal riots occurred in Calcutta, Dhaka, Bakarganj and Pabna. In 1930, a drastic slump in jute prices dried up the flow of credit for the peasants from mahajans. Amidst the propaganda of Congress volunteers for non-payment of taxes and debts and the counter-propaganda of local Anjumans for keeping the Muslim peasants from the Congress movement, houses of Hindu mahajans were attacked and looted in Mymensingh subdivision, with the primary objective of destroying the debt bonds held by them. The rioters, who had the impression that the Government would be supportive of them, were killed by police and army firing.
In Tripura and Kumilla, Congress tended to receive support from Muslim peasants. After the local leaders were released from prison following the Gandhi-Irwin Pact of March 1931, they took on the issue of economic grievances of the peasantry, and both Hindu and Muslim organisers led the movement. In April and May 1931 peasants of Tripura, Noakhali and Kumilla took resolutions in meetings not to pay interests to mahajans. Sporadic attacks on properties of mahajans continued in the region. The krishak samitis became widely popular, which were subsequently pushed underground by the Governments’ repression of the civil disobedience campaign. Further, Md. Ali Jinnah’s campaign created rifts among the Muslim peasants, and the political violence against the oppressors eventually fizzled out at the election contests for Muslim seats in different constituencies in 1936.

The Tebhaga Movement (1946-47)

After the 1943 Famine, Bengal peasants became increasingly aware of their rights. In 1946, the peasants organised themselves in parts of Bengal to terminate the illegal exactions by jotedars and zamindars. In September 1946, the Bengal Provincial Krishak Sabha formally initiated a movement demanding a share of two-thirds (tebhag) of the farm produce instead of the prevailing share of half (adhi). The vanguards of this movement were the adhiyas or bargadars (small cultivator-peasants who received a portion of the produce from the jotedar). The slogans of the movement were **Hal jar jami tar** [land belongs to the ploughman] and **Adhi noy, tebhaga chai** [We demand two-thirds, not half]. Moreover, they demanded that the produce should first be taken to the bargadar’s premises for the division of the share. The Communist Party workers of Bengal gave moral support and direction to the movement, which spread over the districts of Dinajpur, Rangpur, Jalpaiguri, Malda, Medinipur, Jessore, Khulna and Mymensingh. Tebhaga Committees, comprising the bargadars and actively supported by the Communist Party, were formed in the villages. The prolonged support of the Communist Party won the confidence of the peasants, to whom Congress and Muslim League represented the interests of the zamindars and jotedars.98

The movement brought together the Hindu, Muslim and tribal peasants. Many peasants, including women, were killed by the British police and the mercenaries of the jotedars and zamindars. In Dinajpur, the police killed 26 peasants, including their leader, Chiyarsai Sheikh. 99

A draft ordinance was put forward in January 1947 by the revenue minister, endorsing the Tebhaga demands. However, the governor refused to issue the ordinance. Subsequently, a Bargadars Temporary Regulation Bill was notified in the Calcutta Gazette on 22 January. The news of this bill renewed the vigour of the movement.100

There were incidents where the peasants turned militant to stake their claims. In February 1947, the militancy of the movement soared with the bargadars seizing crop for the exaction of the share they had been demanding. Attacks on jotedars’ houses and properties also occurred in many places. In the summer of 1947 the movement was formally called off by the Krishak Sabha in order ‘to give the new governments in India and Pakistan a year of grace in which to fulfil their promises to the people.’ 101 The attempt of the Communist Party to revive the movement in 1948-49 failed except in the Kakdwip area of southern Bengal.
The ryotwari system destroyed the old village hierarchies and community responsibilities towards the member of the community by making each landholder directly and individually responsible to the state. The peasant was now forced to seek credit without having the community intervene to protect him from the rapacity of the money lender. In addition, the peasants, who had exercised some kind of control through the village panchayats before the setting up of civil and criminal courts, now lost this traditional political power. At the same time, as raiyati rights were tied to the raiyat’s ability to pay revenue, increases in taxation resulted in increased power of the money lenders over the peasants.

Attachments of land or redemption of mortgages in cases of default by peasants increased by 100% between 1835 and 1839. By 1865, the money lenders had instituted numerous cases in the civil courts against peasants as the land prices shot up. In the process, the former proprietors became subtenants, cultivating the land for the new owners, who left them with bare subsistence.

Adding to the peasant-money lender antagonism was the concurrent fall in the price of grains from 1836 to 1866. As cotton prices increased during this period, due to the American Civil War, many peasants shifted over to the cultivation of cotton. But this boom was shortlived, and soon depression set in, causing a severe blow to the peasants’ incomes.

Revenue assessments added to the strain. In Bombay, the revenue demands exceeded the highest they had ever reached under the Peshwas. According to Choksey, the revenue collected in 1820-21 was Rs.1.82 crores while that collected in 1817-18 was Rs.0.69 crores. In 1842, it touched 2 million pounds sterling. The increase in revenue rates in the 1860s added fuel to the fire.

And the proverbial last straw was the failure of rains in 1871-72. The high taxation, the increased and unrepayable debt and the loss of harvest resulted in a number of peasants abandoning their homes and fleeing into neighbouring states. Large tracts of land were thrown out of cultivation; and in some districts no more than a third of the cultivable area remained in occupation.

The situation worsened each year, and in 1875, the peasants broke out in spontaneous rioting in Pune, Ahmednagar, Satara and Sholapur districts, burning the money lenders’ houses and shops, seizing and destroying agreements, contracts and other legal documents in particular. The riots lasted three weeks. Over a thousand peasants were arrested, and the government imposed collective fines.

The riots also led to the enactment of the Deccan Agricultural Relief Act of 1879, which required that all contracts and documents of credit transaction be supervised by village registrars and courts if necessary. However, like the Punjab Alienation of Land Bill of 1900, the Deccan Act did little to bring any real relief to the peasant from the money lender.
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Famine Victims of 1877
Annam Bahu Kurvita
An Abundance of Food

The one who eats before giving is consumed by the food that he eats, even before the food itself is consumed by the digestive fires... (He) is indeed like an animal... I forsake the one who eats without giving. I never forsake the one who gives before eating, I am the annadevata. I come and go according to my own discipline. I nurture the one for whom giving carries the same significance as eating. To him I reach in plenty. I remain out of reach of the other, who eats without giving.

— Annadevata (the god of food) in Taittiriyabrahmana

From the earth sprung herbs, from herbs food, from food seed, from seed man. Man thus consists of the essence of food... From food are all creatures produced, by food do they grow... The self consists of food, of health, of mind, of understanding, of bliss.

—The Taittiriyopanishad

Food is vital to life. Food, and feeding have been an integral part of the Indian culture.

The Taittiriyopanishad tells us Annam Bahu Kurvita—always ensure an abundance of food. This injunction is not merely restricted to the production of food, but to its distribution and consumption as well.

Jaladana and annadana - the gifting of food and water - are the greatest of all human actions. All religions that have contributed to the development of the Indian psyche reiterate this. Thus the offering of food to others has been part of the Indian householder’s daily routine.

The performance of darsapaurnamasa is anna for the devas, foodgrains like vrithi, wheat, etc., are anna for men; grasses and shrubs etc., are anna for animals; and vak, manas and prana, thought, mind and the vital winds, are anna for all living beings.

—Jagadguru Sri Shankaracharya of Puri
Sri Krishna in the *Mahabharata* concludes his exposition of Bhishma’s teachings:

The world, both animate and inanimate, is sustained by food. Life arises from food; this is observed all around, and there can be no doubt about it...

The giver of food is the giver of life, and indeed of everything else. Therefore, one who is desirous of well-being in this world and beyond should specially endeavour to give food...

Those who partake of the left-overs of yagna - those who eat after having offered proper shares to all others and of nature - are virtuous. They are cleansed of all sins. Those who cook for themselves alone are the sinners; in eating alone they partake of only sin.

All beings are formed of anna; anna arises from the rains, rains arise from yagna; and yagna arises from karma action...

This is the cycle of mutual dependence initiated by Brahman. He who does not act according to it, who does not keep the cycle moving, is a sinner who is immersed merely in the pleasure of the senses. The living of such a one, O Partha, is a waste.

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**The Fireplace was the Nucleus of the Tribal Society**

The domestication of fire provided a gravitating nucleus for the collective life of the tribe (Gana). As to what the tribal Aryans did around this central fireplace can be guessed from the original Yagna rituals which today are kept alive in the Yagnas as performed by Sadhus (i.e. ascetics and hermits).

The Yagna ritual re-creates all aspects of primitive tribal collective life. A contemporary writer describes the Yagna ritual as follows:

*(It) is a process in which almost all primitive social life has to be recreated. You have to produce fire by friction of two pieces of wood, to build a cottage where no iron is used but only specific wood and grass, to milk cows, make curds, pound corn with stone (not even a stone mill), boil and cook it...*  

This description brings out the fine semblance between the original Yagna ritual and the function of cooking for a tribal household. In the public Yagnas, like the Rajasuya and Ashwamedha Yagna that were sponsored in later ages by kings, many alterations and refinements were introduced but the original primitive features stuck fast. These royal Yagnas involved the coming together of innumerable Brahmins, the consigning to the central fire, generous quantities of sandalwood, camphor, ghee (clarified butter), grains, and even sacrificial animals and birds. All this corresponds to the central fireplace theory as the origin of the Yagna.

**Dana and Dakshina**

Since ancient times kings and noblemen have organised mass feeding ceremonies, distribution of grain and utilities. Such giving away of wealth without expecting anything in return except blessings, was termed Dana. On any occasions like marriage, thread ceremony, opening ceremony, rites at death etc., the priest who officiates over the ceremony gets in return for his services dakshina in the form of grain, cloth, gold and, nowadays, even cash.

The term dana is used in Vedic literature to describe the act of distributing wealth among members of a tribe. The original connotation of the word dana was thus not just to give but to distribute. And in the tribal way of life this distribution did not have the nature of one person giving away his wealth to another but as distribution among members of a tribe (Gana) the captured property that was under common ownership of the tribe as a whole, but for its consumption it had to be allotted to individual members.

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1. Another name for Arjuna, one of the Pandava brothers, whose chariot was driven by Krishna during their war with the Kauravas.
Aputran: Choosing Starvation Rather Than Eating Alone

Aputran (son of a cow) was born of Sali, who during a pilgrimage, was forced to abandon him. He was looked after by a cow for seven days, and thus got his name. Later adopted by a brahmana, he grew up trained in Vedic knowledge. Following altercations with other brahmanas of the village over a cow, he left his home for Madurai, where he took shelter in a temple dedicated to the goddess of learning. In the tradition of other brahmanas, he visited houses with his begging bowl every day, and collected food. Then he would call out to the blind and the sick, and the others who could not look after themselves, feed them first and then eat what was left. One day, very late at night, some travellers came. Aputran had no food to give them. Seeing him greatly distressed, the goddess of learning offered him an inexhaustable bowl, which would continue to contain food, even if there was no food left in the land.

Aputran used to bowl to feed all and sundry, humans and animals. This threatened Indra, the king of gods, and the king. These proceeds were no longer looked upon as common property to which every member of society had an equal claim. It now came to be looked upon as Rajasva, literally meaning that which belongs to the king (Raja = king, sva = own or self). But the practice of distributing wealth accumulated in the royal treasury and in the smaller private hoards of noblemen-warriors, among the kingdom’s of populace continued. Religious festivals and public events such as coronation were occasions for distributing wealth and this distribution was looked upon as dana. This practice was normally respected but it was not a compulsory or obligatory requirement. If the king followed it he was looked upon as virtuous if not then he was an evil king.

Dana and Dakshina are never given in the form of free physical labour or social work. This makes them different from the Christian concept of charity.
The Havana – a method of distribution of the common tribal wealth

The Rigveda mentions the incendiary wars that the different nomadic tribes fought in their search for better pastures and hunting grounds. The way of life both during peacetime and war was based on collective activity. In the tribal way of life even during peacetime the share (Havi) of every member of the tribe was distributed in a function called the Havana. Whatever was gathered, hunted or cooked was shared among all members of the tribe.

What a fast can save?
Fasting as a means of ensuring food security

The following piece appeared in Gandhi’s paper - Harijan, on 18.8.1946. It was reproduced from the Daily Mail Bag. The article is in response to British India’s decision to import grain from Indonesia to stave off food shortages.5

Fasting is an important feature of most religions. Many religions that were born in India emphasise on weekly fasts on grounds of health and piety. For Mahatma Gandhi, fasting was an important way of ensuring food security.

Indonesia has promised us 50,000 tons of rice
= 2,240 x 1/2 lakh lb.
= 1,120 lakh lb.
= 112 million lb.

This is enough to feed 112 million adults for one day at the rate of 1 lb. per head.

Therefore, if 112 million adults fast one day, the result is the same as though we got 50,000 tons of rice from Indonesia.

Suggestion:
All adults, except the very aged, invalids and manual labourers should miss the evening meal on Saturdays.

There are 240 million adults in India, of whom 80 million are manual workers.

Therefore, if the average saving by an adult missing a Saturday evening meal is 8 oz., the total possible saving by all adults (except manual workers) missing 26 meals on 26 Saturdays during the remainder of the year would be 2080 million lb. of cereals = .92 million tons of cereals.

This would remove the anticipated food deficiency. All parties, all Governments and individuals, papers, etc. should make a drive for the observance of the Saturday evening fast. The sharing by the Indian population of the starvation which is descending on parts of the country will mean in fact sharing of food.

Thus starvation can be staved off. Besides, those who observe the fast, will in most cases gain in health.

Even if the drive achieves only a 10 per cent success, the grain saved would be 92,000 tons - substantially more than the quantity promised from Indonesia. These 92,000 tons would have been obtained at no cost to the nation, and would represent (on the other hand) saving not only in food but in expenditure by individual families.
Let no one suffer from hunger and disease, or from extremes of heat and cold. No one in the kingdom ought to suffer thus, either because of general scarcity or because of specific design against him.

— The Apastambadharmasutra

**Food for all**

The King was the great householder (grhsta), who had the responsibility to provide for the sustenance of all beings, including humans, who happened to be in his care. But like an ordinary grhsta, he also had the responsibility to provide sustenance for those who lack sustenance in society. Thus the whole of the land became, in a way, his grhstya.

The theme of the king’s responsibility towards feeding his people reverberates in the *Mahabharata*. Even during his 12 years’ exile, Yudhishtra took on the responsibility of feeding his people, except in the last year, when he had to remain incognito. Draupadi’s fondest memories of their reign over Indraprastha during her moments of nostalgia are those related to feeding; she remembers the great kitchens that served food to all visitors - scholars, students, old, young, handicapped, and those who had no shelter or care - at all hours of the day and night. If Kunti urges Yudhistira to reclaim Indraprastha, it is so that he can fulfill his responsibilities of caring for the people of the land, which is his dharma. Bhishma concludes his discourse to Yudhistira on the responsibility of the king by comparing the king to a great tree growing in a temple, giving nourishment and shelter to all.

**Harshavardhan’s Yagna**

*Hieun-Tsiang, the Chinese scholar who visited India during the reign of Harshavardhana, describes in great detail the yagna performed by the emperor Harshavardhan (Siladitya-raja).*

The sixth turn related to the heretics, which lasted ten days. The next occasion was the bestowal of alms on those who came from distant spots to ask for charity; this lasted for ten days. The eight distribution was to the poor and the orphans and destitute, which occupied a month.

By this time the accumulation of five years was exhausted. Except the horses, elephants, and military accoutrements which were necessary for maintaining order and protecting the royal estate, nothing remained. Besides these the king freely gave away his gems, his clothing and necklaces, ear-rings, bracelets, chaplets, neck-jewel and bright head-jewel, all these he freely gave without stint.

All being given away, he begged from his sister an ordinary second-hand garment, and having put it on he paid worship to the Buddhas of the ten regions, and as he exulted with joy with his hands closed in adoration, he said: ‘In amassing all this wealth and treasure I ever feared that it was not safely stored in a strong place, but now having bestowed this treasure in the field of religious merit, I can safely say it is well bestowed. Oh that I (Siladitya) may in all my future births ever thus religiously give in charity to mankind my stores of wealth, and thus complete in myself the ten independent powers (dasaballas) [of a Buddha].

—Bhishma to Yudhishtha, explaining the duties of a king, in *Mahabharata*
If feeding the people is the greatest responsibility of the king, there is a concomitant responsibility - the responsibility of ensuring that enough food is produced to feed the people. The two great epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* dwell at length on this second aspect of the responsibility of the king. The kings are cautioned again and again not to let agriculture be at the mercy of vagaries of the weather; they are instructed to make sure that enough seeds are available to the farmers; to protect the cultivator in particular against theft and misadventure; and to ensure that taxation is not so heavy as to drive the cultivators away from their land. For, as Bhishma puts it in *Mahabharata*,

> It is indeed the cultivators who carry the burden of the king on their shoulders and also provide for the sustenance of all others. The devas, pīrs, and manusyas as also the reptiles and rakṣasas, and birds and animals, all of them, live on what the cultivators provide.

The attitude towards food and feeding percolated society at both the level of the state and at the domestic level for centuries. At the state level, particularly in the south and in the east, very often the responsibility of feeding was handed over to the temple.

**Temples as a source of food**

Temples and feeding of the hungry have always gone hand in hand. The prasad offered to the gods, however humble it may be, is then shared with all the devotees present. Often people with no other access to food gather at the temple during the time of prasad, and survive on what they get here.

In ancient times, temples officially had the responsibility of feeding and caring for the helpless and the shelterless. For example, in Tamil Nadu, the great temples were allocated large tracts of land to grow the grains required for prasadam (offering to the gods), which was then distributed amongst the people.

These practices continue till today in some of the larger temples in the south and eastern parts of the country. For example, at the Tirupathi temple, 30 cooks rustle up 70,000 laddus using 3 tonnes of urad dal, 6 tonnes of ghee, large amounts of raisins, cashewnuts and almonds for distribution every day. In addition, 3000 each of vada, dosa, rava appam are distributed each day, along with savoury and sweet pongal (made of rice), curd rice, sour rice, sweet rice made with milk, and other sweets. These are served to the pilgrims in the large dining halls at the temple complex.

The Dharmasthala temple in Karnataka feeds 30,000-50,000 pilgrims every day.

At the Jagannath Temple in Puri, 1000 cooks work the 750 stoves and ovens turning out over a hundred dishes using rice, wheat in various forms, pulses, traditional vegetables (the sweet potato is used and not the ordinary potato), jaggery, spices and ghee made from cows’ milk for the five prasad offerings made every day. These foods are then consumed by the pilgrims and other visitors at the spacious feeding halls around the temple.
God created this world with hundreds of thousands of things, some eatable and some not eatable. The plants take their food from earth, air and water. The animals fill their stomach with plants. By their instinct they know which is to be eaten and which is not. Vegetables and meat of animal is our food but not all meat. Those foods including meat which are harmful for people are strictly prohibited in Islam and known as ‘haraam’.

Islam has issued detailed guidelines for food and food habit among the people. It has been advised to chew the food many times before swallowing. This helps in digestion. Islam advises you to take 3 breads if you desire to take 4, i.e., one-fourth of the stomach should always be left empty; similarly one should not overeat at any cost. Use of sugar in any form has been recommended in food but the meals should begin with a dish having salt and end with a dish having salt. Now the medical people also recommend finishing the food with salt since it is useful in prevention of decay of teeth.

Food habits are no less important and Muslims have been told to observe the detailed instructions in this regard. The Quran advises people to wash hands before and after taking food. It also prohibits people to use food which has changed its shape or colour or which smells bad.

While sitting on a ‘dastarkhan’ the discipline is that the host will start first so that nobody may feel shy of starting the dinner. The host will finish the food in last so that nobody at the table may feel badly for continuing longer.

Though there was no conception of contamination 1400 years ago, Islam strictly prohibited people using left hand for handling food or taking food. Now after 1400 years we know that people use left hand for ablution and it has been tested under microscope that the germs do exist under nails and this has been the cause of spread of gastroenteritis disease.

The food is ‘haraam’, i.e. not allowed to be eaten if any one in the neighbourhood is starving. The neighbour has been defined as one living within 40 houses around your house. Muslims are supposed to feed the destitutes and poor before taking their meal. Islam is so particular on this point that a Muslim is supposed to break the Namaz if he finds that a dog is dying out of thirst, though Namaz is the most important prayer of a Muslim.

There is also a tradition among Muslims to distribute free food among poor people especially on festivals like Ramzaan, Id. In the 10-day mourning period of Moharram, Hazari, like Langar of Sikh community, are organised by individuals to feed the poor. It is real fact that there are several restaurants near Ajmer Sharif and Nizamuddin Mazar where beggars and poor people are getting free food the cost of which is paid by Muslims after fulfilment of their Desires (mannats) on the Mazaars.

The importance of feeding the poor can well be imagined from the fact that 1400 years ago, the 4th Khalif of Muslims Hazrat Ali strictly warned his governor not to sit in any dinner if poor people have not been invited.
In the heat of the North Indian summer, sikhs remember their martyred gurus by distributing cool, flavoured milk and water mixture to the thirsty passer by.

Guru Nanak with his disciples
Food has traditionally been a fundamental right of the people of India since ancient times. As has been seen in the earlier section, both individuals and the state bore the responsibility for making sure that no one went hungry. The state, in particular, had the overarching responsibility for ensuring true food security for its people. Besides feeding the populace (or making sure that it was fed), the state also took particular care to make sure that people’s livelihoods – particularly those of farmers and artisans, was protected. Chanakya’s injunctions to Chandragupta and Amir Fath Ullah Shirazi’s counsel to Raja Todar Mal on how to protect cultivators from cheating and exploitative bureaucracy during Akbar’s time is illustrative of the importance of the cultivator. In times when this was not so, as in the time of Muhammad Bin Tughlaq, food shortages and famine usually followed.

Food, while an important commodity for trade, was primarily for domestic consumption. Cash cropping, especially of cotton and indigo existed for millennia. However, the commercialisation of food became institutionalised during the British period, when cash cropping - indigo, tea, coffee, cotton and opium - became the norm for paying the high taxes. Food became a premium commodity, as is exemplified by the case of rice. And when market fluctuations (even in other commodities such as jute) dictated the price of food, food entitlements became insecure.

Hunger and famines result from people's lack of access to food for a variety of reasons. These include, besides natural calamities and climatic conditions,

- lack of access to biodiversity resources that provide or help provide food - forests, water, land;
- lack of access to income generation that helps buy food from the markets - inaccessibility of biodiversity based raw material for generating income:
- unemployment:
- unviable and nonsustainable agricultural practices that lead to debt, etc., and
- agricultural and food policies that price food out of people’s reach, especially when access to food stops being a fundamental right of all the people. This includes the commercialisation of food.

The following famines are illustrative of these causes.
All civilisations have encountered periods of food scarcities. Natural catastrophes, climatic vagaries and war have been the direct causes of famines, and find mention in ancient texts of India. However, the frequency of famines of the distant past, in Bengal in particular, is not discernible from the texts available. Texts of the medieval period indicate occasional occurrences of considerable food scarcity in Bengal Subah, but the extent of such scarcities can hardly be surmised beyond the fact that the peasant communities suffered extreme hardship, and that the state used to take certain regulatory measures, especially on the export of food grains from affected areas.

Clear documentation of Bengal famines began in the late eighteenth century, when the British East India Company wrought abrupt changes in traditional land use patterns. The colonial land use policies commercialised agriculture and destroyed the age-old social mechanisms of coping with food uncertainties. As a result, famines of varying intensities occurred several times in Bengal, which had once been the legendary land of plenty.

The Late Eighteenth Century Famines

In 1765, when the British East India Company obtained the grant of dewani of Bengal from the Mughal Emperor, it was empowered to collect revenues without administrative accountability. In order to maximize the revenue, the Company imposed increasing amounts of arbitrary taxes and cesses on the ryot (tenant cultivator). As a contemporary witness observed, ‘the truth cannot be doubted that the poor and industrious tenant is taxed by his zamindar or collector for every extravagance.' The burden of taxes, and the methods of revenue collection by the Company’s agents, became a disincentive for cultivation. Significant parts of the farm production were also extracted as revenue, so that the farmer-cultivator hardly had anything to thrive on in lean years. Thus, when the rice crop had failed due to drought in 1767-68, the farmer-cultivator lost his last stock of food grains after paying off the revenue. In the subsequent year, when the crop was relatively better, the Company bought off all the produce for its army, and increased the rent by 10%. Thus, the lack of entitlement to food, rather than a real scarcity of food, led to widespread hunger. A famine, one that appears to have been the most terrible in the recorded history of Bengal, appeared in the year 1769-70, followed by epidemics and mass migration.

The famine, called the Manwantar of 1176 (the year in Bengal style), seriously affected the whole of Bengal, except the districts of Bakarganj and Chittagong in the southeastern corner of the province (now in Bangladesh). An estimated 10 million people died, out of a population of 30 million, and the catastrophe left an indelible mark in Bengal’s culture. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, in the opening pages of his famous novel Anandamath (1882), gave a graphic description of the famine:
People began to beg for alms, - but there was hardly anybody around to give alms - so they resorted to fasting. Then contracted diseases. Then sold off cattle and the plough, ate up the seeds, sold off the homestead land, farmland. Then started to sell their daughters, then their sons, and then wives. Soon there was no buyers, everyone wanted to sell. Green leaves, grasses, and weeds were consumed for food. Lower-class people and forest-dwellers took to eating dogs, rats, cats. Many fled the village, and died of starvation in alien places. Those who did not, died [in the village] from eating inedible things, of starvation, of diseases. It was the prime time for diseases: malaria, cholera, consumption, pox. In particular, the pox became an epidemic, which took its toll from every home.

The loss of one-third of the population due to the famine resulted in a crunch of the famous cottage and craft industries of Bengal. Samuel Middleton, a Collector of Murshidabad Division, wrote in his letter dated 7 April 1775 to the Committee of Revenue:

*The consequences [of the famine] ... have been that a smaller portion of the lands are cultivated than before that event, and also that the manufacturers most particularly have suffered, as the manufacturing body are a particular caste, who dedicate themselves to any branch of manufacture, not from choice or abilities, but from the reason that their forefathers did the same, so that these members of this body who perished in the famine were a loss in great measure not to be repaired in future from the body of the community. When the manufacturers suffer, it is needless to say commerce must languish.*
its produce decreased, and the Company found it of foremost importance to establish a standard system of land use, in order to obtain a steady flow of revenue. A Committee of Circuit was formed in 1772, which recommended a number of changes in land and revenue policy of the Company. The recommendations include:

(a) farms to be let on lease for five years;
(b) farms not to exceed the value of one lakh;
(c) a diwan to be appointed who shall be joined with the collector;
(d) the rents of ryots to be fixed and not exceeded on pain of the forfeiture of the revenue farmer’s (jotedar’s) lease;
(e) a mohurrir (accountant-clerk) to be appointed to every farm to note receipt of rents and to send monthly reports to the collector at the district Sadar Cutchery (head quarters);
(f) the Committee are to search out means to obviate usury. Collector’s banyans forbidden to lend money, but farmers to continue the usual takavi (advance of seed and working necessaries) to ryots (tenant-cultivators).

The first point of recommendation, with modifications, was implemented later. However, English historians like Ramsbotham (1926) showed that recommendation (b) was never put into force. Point (c) divided authority and “increased intrigue” for to exploit the revenue farmers. Point (d) was nugatory, as “the Company never knew what the ryot paid and never succeeded in introducing a standard lease.” Point (e) “introduced fresh element of corruption.” The point (f) was impossible to be enforced. Ramsbotham observes,

Those who know the collusive methods which prevailed in Bengal at this period can only be surprised that such experienced men as the Committee thought fit to issue such a general prohibition.9

A series of experimental revenue systems were tried out to ensure the flow of revenue to the Company, viz., five-year farming system (1772-1777), Annual Settlement (1777-1789), Decennial Settlement (1790-1793), and finally, the Permanent Settlement (or, the Zamindari System) of 1793, which substantially increased the rate of land taxes (Sinha 1962; Umar 1978). Between the 1780’s and 1790’s, a number of small famines in different districts took place and large numbers of peasants, unable to pay rents to zamindars and interests to mahajans, were forced to sell their lands. Dispossession of lands by small and marginal farmers came to be a common occurrence.

The Nineteenth Century Famines

A watershed in Indian history, the Permanent Settlement made the class of zamindars to occupy a position similar to that of the landed nobility of Europe, while the actual cultivators were relegated to tenants-at-will. Permanent Settlement thus assigned a shaky occupancy right on land to the ryots but proprietary right to the zamindars empowered to distrain the raiyat’s property in case of difficulty in collecting taxes. This preposterous tenancy, coupled with the increasing burden of rack renting and abwabs (illegal cesses) imposed by the zamindars and their intermediaries pauperized the peasants.10

The Settlement made the land a freely transferable asset, and gave it a market value. With the increase in trade in agricultural produce and the rise in prices in the 1860s, land gained in value steadily. It became a valuable security, which increased the credit of the agriculturist, and with it rose the volume of agricultural debt. The high rates of interest charged by money lenders (mahajans), together with the insecure and low yields in agriculture made repayments of loans, once contracted, almost an impossible task. The result was the dispossession of the cultivating classes and rapid transfer of land to the moneyed class. The rack-renting, arbitrary cesses and exorbitant interests for loans ‘not only robbed the cultivators of their possessions, but also destroyed all his incentive for agricultural improvement’.11
The destruction of indigenous craft and manufacture industries, and the insecure land tenure in Permanent Settlement produced an increasing demand of land for rice cultivation. In addition, the increasing rice export intensified rice cultivation, and replaced multiple cropping systems with mono-cropping of rice. The general trend during the 1860’s was one of substitution of cash crops (e.g. cotton, indigo, sugarcane and poppy) with rice, but English planters forced Indian ryots to cultivate cotton and indigo after the supply of American cotton and indigo to England had stopped due to American Civil War. Poppy cultivation was also imposed by the government. Furthermore, the export trade drained off domestic stocks of food grains which in the past had sustained peasants during lean years. The consequence was a major decline in foodgrain production which, coupled with the growing export of agricultural produce, rising food prices and crop failures, led to severe famines in 1860-61 and 1865-66.

Cockerell’s Report of the 1865-66 famine informs that

The supply of food was reduced by the drain on old stocks caused by excessive exportation in the year 1864-65. The greatly extended cotton cultivation in the North Western Provinces, Bombay and other parts of the Empire during the years 1863-64 not only necessarily left a proportionally diminished area available for cereal produce, but also, by enriching the cultivators, tended to increase the consumption of food throughout the cotton growing country. This created a demand which could only be met by the Bengal Province.

As a result, the price of rice in Bengal increased steadily from Rs. 2 per maund in 1863 to Rs. 3 in 1864, Rs. 4 in 1864-65 and Rs. 5 in 1865-66, which was way beyond the reach of most villagers. An estimated 1,35,000 died of starvation and diseases related to the famine.

The Company had, by 1860, decided to adopt a policy of non-interference in famines. Blaird Smith, in his report, opined that past calamities had aggravated from ‘blunders of well-meaning persons’, blunders which included fixing maximum prices for the grain; constituting the government the great grain dealer of the country; and endeavouring to fulfill this impossible function through a mechanism equally impossible; and in brief an entire absence of all recognition of the truth that the order of nature, if it occasionally produces dire consequences, does also provide generally the most effective means for their mitigation.

This view draws directly on Adam Smith’s (1776) Wealth of Nature, which influenced the state administrators, who persistently refused to control prices or regulate supplies. This non-intervention policy served to spread food scarcities due to local crop failures over large areas, scarcities which were often shaped into famines by the continuing export trade in foodgrains, and the consequent rises in food prices. The institutional factors were becoming disproportionately more important than the natural scarcity causing starvation. After the railroads expansion, speculative holding of stocks by traders emerged as the most contributory factor to subsequent famines.

However, the relief policy of Bengal Government temporarily changed when a food scarcity more pronounced than that in 1865-66 took place in 1873-74, with an estimated deficit of 3.75 million tons of rice. British India Association as well as the Bengal Government made presentations to the Viceroy India, urging an immediate import of rice from Burma and concomitant prohibition of export of food grains from Bengal and Bihar. Curiously, the import of rice was permitted, but the export was also continued on grounds of the non-intervention policy. Thus the vessels which brought Burma rice to Calcutta carried cargoes of Bengal rice to Burma. The timely import rescued the situation, and food prices as well as the loss of life was kept down.

Dependence on the monocrop of rice, particularly the winter rice, which depended on the monsoon,
19th Century famines in India [after B.M. Bhatia (1967)]
19th Century famines in India [after B.M. Bhatia (1967)]
The Famine Commission of 1880

— B.M. Bhatia

The policy of governmental inaction that dominated British imperial administration in the early and middle nineteenth century gradually gave way to selective intervention concentrating mainly on the regeneration of cash incomes.

Among the more important of these recommendations of the Famine Commission of 1880 were

1. the framing of region-specific ‘Famine Codes’ embodying ‘authoritative guidelines’ to the local administration on the measures needed to anticipate and deal with the threat of famine, and

2. a strategy of entitlement protection based on the combination of guaranteed employment at a subsistence wage and unconditional relief (so-called ‘gratuitous relief’) for the unemployable. The reasoning behind this strategy is explained with great clarity in the Famine Commission Report, which is worth quoting at some length:

...we have to consider the manner in which the proper recipients of the public charity can be most effectually ascertained. The problem to be solved is how to avoid the risk of indiscriminate and demoralising profusion on the one hand, and of insufficient and niggardly assistance on the other—how to relieve all who really need relief, and to waste as little public money as possible in the process... where limited numbers have to be dealt with, and there is a numerous and efficient staff of officials, it may be possible to ascertain by personal inquiry the circumstances of every applicant for relief sufficiently for the purpose of admitting or rejecting his claim. But in an Indian famine the Government has to deal not with limited numbers, but with millions of people, and the official machinery at its command, however strengthened for the occasion, will inevitably be inadequate to the task of accurately testing the individual necessities of so great a multitude. Nor again is it possible to entrust the administration of public charity to a subordinate agency without providing sufficient checks against dishonesty and neglect on the part of its members. Some safeguards then are essential in the interests of the destitute people no less than of the public treasury, and they are best found in laying down certain broad self-acting tests by which necessity may be proved, and which may, irrespective of any other rule of selection, entitle to relief the person who submits to them. . . The chief of these tests, and the only one which in our opinion it is ordinarily desirable to enforce, is the demand of labour commensurate in each case with the labourer’s powers, in return for a wage sufficient for the purposes of maintenance but not more. This system is applicable of course only to those from whom labour can reasonably be required... The great bulk of the applicants for relief being thus provided for, we believe that it will be possible for an efficient staff of officers to control with success the grant of relief, on the basis of personal inquiry and knowledge of the individual circumstances of each applicant, among the comparatively small numbers of destitute persons to whom the test of labour cannot be applied.

Employment in public works was typically remunerated with cash wages. The expectation was that the demands generated by these wage payments would be met by the operation of private trade.

These broad principles are still relevant to the conception of India’s entitlement protection system today. In particular the continued power of the strategy of employment generation supplemented by ‘gratuitous relief’ for the unemployable has been apparent in a number of experiences of successful famine prevention since independence. At the same time, it would be a mistake to regard this system as a mere legacy of the British Administration. In fact, important advances have been made in famine prevention strategies since independence, even if we confine our attention to the administrative part of the story. One of the most important post-independence changes relates to the public distribution system.

The British Indian administration considered governmental involvement in food trade or distribution as sacrilegious. This position was grounded on a particular understanding of the teachings of classical economists (especially Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, and Thomas Malthus), which were sometimes referred to as the ‘Infallible Laws of the Great Masters of Economic Science’. Suspicion of government interference with private trade extended also to any kind of public participation in food distribution.
In 1865-66, the ‘landholders’ were said to have been enabled ‘to meet their requirements with ease’ owing to the high prices for all kinds of agricultural produce over the greater part of the provinces.

The following year, the same was said of the Rohilkhand landholders.

In 1878-79, an indifferent year, prices said to be ‘fortunatrly high’ everywhere ‘materially assisted the people to meet the rent and revenue demand’ in Allahabad Division, although the kharif had been only fair and the rabi considerably below average.

In the scarcity year 1883-84, nearly all the revenue was collected ‘without pressure or any approach to difficulty within the year’ - a year in which, over many hundreds of square miles, an estimated three-quarters of of the total food supply of the people was said to have been annihilated in a crop failure which extended over the greater part of the provinces.

The total demand in the affected districts (of North-West Province, 1880-81) was Rs. 15,614,604. Of this, only Rs. 736,519 (less than 5 percent) remained uncollected on account of scarcity at the close of the revenue year. Returns for the following year showed that a great proportion of those outstandings was ‘being rapidly got in’.

The situation was the same for Oudh. In 1864-65, the inadequacy of the monsoon caused an almost total failure of the (staple) rice crop everywhere. Its effects were felt particularly in Sultanpur and the trans-Gogra districts. The price of agricultural produce increased bringing ‘some distress amongst the poorer classes’ but enabling ‘the landlords... to pay up the revenue’:

‘It is a matter of much satisfaction that under these circumstances so clear a balance sheet should be shown. The rent-roll exhibits an increase of 1 lakh [Rs. 100,000] over that of 1862-63; out of Total Demand of Rs. 10,403,660 only Rs. 87,390 (not %) remained uncollected at the end of the year, and of this sum, only Rs. 1,309 were irrecoverable...’

(A) narrative of relief operations during the scarcity of 1877-78 and 1879 clearly shows (the chief concern of the administration): ‘Not the least important question for decision at a time when the condition of all classes of the community was one of grave anxiety was: what course to follow regarding the realisation of land revenue? were there any remissions or suspension to be granted? If so, under what circumstances and to what extent?’ Such was the issue before the local Government. But external pressures had to be considered.‘

The Government of India thought it necessary under the circumstances (of scarcity due to extensive crop failure demanding heavy relief expenditure) to remind the local Governments that, with reference to the character of the settlement, proposals or promises for remission ought not to be encouraged, and, in view of the experience of past famines and droughts in these provinces, held that it would be a direct encouragement to thoughtless unthrift were the demand even to be suspended on any great scale.

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* For references, see original - ‘The revised revenue settlements’ in Agrarian Conditions in Northern India, Vol. 1, (1971) New Delhi, Thompson Press India Ltd.
News reporting deepening food crisis in Bengal
[Anandabazar Patrika, 6 September 1943].
had long been established in Bengal, so that the food production system became vulnerable to floundering under climatic vagaries. Long spells of droughts in the latter half of the 1890’s destroyed the rice crop in the southern, western and central districts of Bengal and eastern and southern districts of Bihar, causing serious food scarcity. The state policy of non-intervention in foodgrains trade exacerbated this scarcity into the famines of 1896-97 and 1899-1900, when high mortality occurred, especially in the districts of Bankura, Medinipur, Nadia, Hugli and 24 Parganas. Landless wage labourers, marginal farmers and tribals were the principal victims of death from starvation and famine-associated diseases like diarrhoea, cholera and dysentery, ‘directly caused by insufficient and unwholesome food or by reduced power of digestion and assimilation as the result of continued privation’. 20

**The Twentieth Century Famine**

An overall favourable weather throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century proved conducive to an increase in agricultural production in Bengal Province. A few small sporadic famines, however, occurred in the dry western districts, and were controlled by effective administrative measures. Hence they did not attract much public attention. However, crop failures in the years 1940-41, and 1942-43, were amplified by short-sighted wartime policies of the Government into a monstrous famine in 1943, whose victims died in thousands on the streets of Calcutta.

In Bengal and Orissa, the entire new alluvial zone was cultivated for rice, and the growing market demand (boosted by the war) for rice extended from multi-crop cultivation to mono-crop of rice. In particular, aman (winter) rice was, owing to the prevalent practice of extensive monoculture, the most crucial food crop. The loss of this crop could be partially compensated by the spring crop in Bihar, where mixed cropping was still practiced, and maize was cultivated in some parts; however, in Orissa and Bengal hardly any food crop was grown in the spring, so that these regions had to depend on the following year’s aus crop to be harvested.
রাজস্থানের বিভিন্ন স্থান হইতে অনাহারে মৃত্যুর সংবাদ

রুধবার কলিকাতায় অনশনে ৭৭ জনের মৃত্যু

২০০ জন হাম্পাতেলে প্রেরিত

হাম্পাতেল, ১৪ই সেপ্টেম্বর—নগাড়ো রোডের কালীগ্রামের সিপাহী এক দুইগুটি হাম্পাতেলে অনাহারে প্রাণাবর্জন করিয়াছে। অন্য প্রায় ৫৫ জনের ওপর বিদ্যমান মাত্র দুই প্রচেষ্টা করিয়াছে। এই দুই প্রচেষ্টায় হাম্পাতেলের অনেক কলা প্রাপ্ত হইয়াছে এবং কলা প্রাপ্ত হওয়ার পরে এই দুই প্রচেষ্টায় হাম্পাতেলের অনেক কলা প্রাপ্ত হওয়ার পরে এই দুই প্রচেষ্টায় হাম্পাতেলের অনেক কলা প্রাপ্ত হওয়ার পরে এই দুই প্রচেষ্টায় হাম্পাতেলের অনেক কলা প্রাপ্ত হওয়ার পরে এই দুই প্রচেষ্টায় হাম্পাতেলের অনেক কলা প্রাপ্ত হওয়ার পরে এই দুই প্রচেষ্টায় হাম্পাতেলের অনেক কলা প্রাপ্ত হওয়ার পরে এই দুই প্রচেষ্টায় হাম্পাতেলের অনেক কলা প্রাপ্ত হওয়ার পরে এই দুই প্রচেষ্টায় হাম্পাতেলের অনেক কলা প্রাপ্ত হওয়ার পরে এই দুই প্রচেষ্টায় হাম্পাতেলের অনেক কলা প্রাপ্ত হওয়ার পরে এই দুই প্রচেষ্টায় হাম্পাতেলের 

একটি গৃহায় তিন মৃত্যুদারী

নোদার (রাজস্থান) স্থানের অক্সিজেন প্রান্তে মানুষের মৃত্যুর হিসাবে নেকার পরীক্ষা, লিপ্যান্ড, রাসায়নিক, পারামায়োজন, ভার্সামুল, কেচেরা, পারসামাঞ্চলের প্রতি গ্রাম গৃহায় তিন মৃত্যুদারী।

রাজস্থানের মৃত্যুর সংবাদ

রাজস্থানের বিভিন্ন স্থান হইতে অনাহারে মৃত্যুর সংবাদ

News of famine deaths. [Anandabazar Patrika, 17 September 1943].
in September in case of aman failure. When the aman as well as boro crop failed in 1940, the grain stocks that had already been depleted were soon consumed. In 1941, the licensed area for cultivation of jute was substantially reduced with an aim to keep a desired price level for jute in the war market. This increased acreage for rice. The rice yield in 1941 improved, but was soon consumed and proved insufficient to balance the year’s deficit of food. With the fall of Rangoon in March 1942, rice imports from Burma was closed. At the same time, the acreage of jute was doubled by government liberalisation. As Modern Review (April 1942, pp. 312-314) had forecast,

*The inevitable result of this will be that the price of jute of the next crop will be abnormally low, while on account of less cultivation of rice and lack of its import from Burma due to the present war conditions a severe famine may break out in Bengal.*

Delayed monsoon destroyed the aman crop of the year. At this time, the Government appointed agents to buy all surplus rice for removal from the coastal districts of Midnapore, Bakharganj and Khulna in apprehension of Japanese invasion. A further factor contributing to exacerbating the food crisis was that all boats, with a carrying capacity of 10 or more passengers, were removed from the delta areas in Barisal, Khulna, Basirhat, 24 Parganas and Midnapore. This Boat Denial Policy of 1942 not only interfered in the riverine districts with the principal means of transport of foodgrains, but also disrupted agriculture in char lands where the use of boats was essential for cultivation.

Speculation in food articles went fervent, and food prices skyrocketed: while the wage index for the agricultural labourer improved by ca. 20%, the rice price index had increased by 120% at the end of 1942. However, the rise in prices in 1943 was, according to the Famine Commission’s Report, ‘so much more spectacular than that in 1942, that the unprecedented rise in the former year is apt to be overlooked’. The extent of price rise was unwarranted by the natural food shortage, but was engineered by speculation, hoarding and profiteering in food grains by traders. While government statistics show this artificial food crisis to have been caused by decline in food availability, a scrutiny of food production records reveals that the failure in market control and in the public distribution of food were the primary cause of the famine. As Amartya Sen noted in his famous study, while 1943 was not a very good year in terms of crop availability, it was bot by any means a disastrous year either. The current supply for 1943 was only 5 per cent lower than the average of the preceding five years. It was, in fact, 13 per cent higher than in 1941, and there was, of course, no famine in 1941.

The only administrative action to avert the famine was imposing in July a ceiling of rice price at Rs. 5 As. 12 per maund, an action which drove the stocks underground, and the market prices soared higher.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Rs.</th>
<th>As.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January 1942</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1942</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 Nov. 1942</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 1943</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 March 1943</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 March 1943</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Rs.</th>
<th>As.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22 March 1943</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 March 1943</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 May 1943</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 1943</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1943</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 1943</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Bhatia 1967; Uppal 1984

At a rough estimate, 20 million people were directly affected by this lack of access and entitlement to food. People from remote villages trekked into Calcutta, relying on its proverbial munificence. The streets of Calcutta and other mofussil towns were gradually crowded by starving villagers, begging for food. The crisis was not felt serious in June and the first part of July, but in August onwards, Calcutta noticed the severity of the famine, when the number of emaciated, starving people expanded, begging for a little phan (starchy water drained from boiled rice).

*Four or five persons daily waited at the doorside of each household for phan. Often they fought and scrambled for it.... They had consumed all possible kinds of roots, fruits and leaves, already, while at home [in the village]. In Calcutta they took to cast-off skins of vegetables, and to rotten*
The Bengal Famine through the Photographers’ Lens*

* From various newspapers of the time
In the middle of October, the number of hungry villagers in Calcutta reached nearly 100,000. Incidents of death from starvation escalated, and corpses rotting on streets of Calcutta became a common sight by August. A corpse disposal squad was opened in Calcutta by the Commissioner of Police which, along with Hindu Satkar Samity and Anjuman Mufid-ul-Islam kept the city streets clean of bodies. The Government refused to declare famine or to acknowledge the occurrence of deaths from starvation until mid-August, and the press was rigorously censored. Nevertheless, the Calcutta newspapers intensified their coverage of famine. However, these reports and photographs of famine deaths were described by Mr. Conran-Smith, a Central Government spokesman, as ‘over-dramatised’. On August 4, 1943, Bengal’s Civil Supplies Minister said in his speech,

The real fact is, because of the want of food, the poor and the hungry are too famished to stand the physical strain and the climate, and whenever they fell ill they died because of their undernourishment.

This neglect of the facts led to an increasing number of deaths.

Recorded deaths in the Empire’s “Second City” during the week ended September 25 were 1492, as compared with 1319 during the preceding week.

During the week ended October 2, the deaths were 1636.

The bureaucratic inaction was condemned by the London press. The Sunday Pictorial of London (29 September 1943) wrote:

They are not German slaves in Greece, but citizens of the British Empire, and there can be no excuse for this shameful neglect.

Relief kitchens were started in August 1943, but the number was grossly inadequate to feed the two crore people. The Famine Commission was critical of the delay and inadequacy of the relief measures:

While reports of distress in various districts were received from Commissioners and Collectors from the early months of 1943, the Provincial Government did not call for a report on the situation in the districts until June, and detailed instructions relating to relief were not issued till August. ... The delay in facing the problem and the non-declaration of the famine were bound up with the unfortunate propaganda policy of ‘no shortage’ which, followed during the months April to June with the support of India, was unjustified when the danger of famine was apparent. The measures initiated in August were inadequate and failed to prevent further distress, mainly because of the disastrous supply position which had been allowed to develop. A Famine Relief Commission was not appointed till late in September. ... Part of the mortality which occurred could have been prevented by more efficient medical and public health measures.

Severe diarrhoea and cholera epidemics broke out in July 1943 and continued till the end of the year, raising the death toll throughout Bengal. The largest number cholera deaths was in Mymensingh, Bakharganj, Noakhali (in Bangladesh), Dinajpur and Tripura. A severe epidemic of small pox began in December 1943 and continued into June 1944. The estimate of deaths put by the Famine Commission was 1.5 millions, while a Calcutta University sample survey put the total number at 3.5 millions.
The famines of Orissa

The famines of 19th century Orissa were a direct result of the Permanent Settlement and the Zamindari system that was established. The Marathas who ruled here prior to British rule, collected on an average, Rs. 12,00,000 as revenue each year. Unlike the British in the early years of their rule, they granted remission of revenue for crop loss due to droughts, floods and famines. As H.K. Mahtab puts it,

*People could approach for redress of their grievances not to individuals, but an institution vaguely called as Company Bahadur under whom the officers were inexperienced and dishonest.*

Land revenue was treated as a tax, and there was no appeal against it, even in times of flood and drought.

In a period of 36 years (1830-1866) only about 45 lakhs or revenue of 3 years only was exempted. In Cuttack, out of 13 years – 8 years of floods and 5 years of drought – Rs. 22,33,782 were remitted. In Puri, out of 30 years – 24 years of flood and 6 years of drought – Rs. 10,75,355 were remitted. In Balasore, out of 23 years – 14 years of foods and 9 years of droughts – Rs. 12,44,504 were remitted.

### Rise in the price of rice from 1836-1860

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Rice in seers per rupee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1815</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1836</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1840</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1844</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1848</td>
<td>59</td>
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<tr>
<td>1852</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1856</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Wage rate both in cash and kind had fallen to a new low.

### Per capita income of labourers in India (in Rs.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Per capita income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1600</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1650</td>
<td>123.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1807</td>
<td>62.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850</td>
<td>29.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1870</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Agriculture became unremunerative for the peasant, whose expenditure costs mounted, while incomes from harvests fell.

### Income and Expenditure of an Average Peasant in Orissa

#### INCOME

- 6 mana of sarods yielding paddy (6 varans @ Rs. 10 (10x6)) Rs. 60.00
- 5 mana of Beali (4 varans @ Rs. 10 (10x4) Rs. 40.00
- Cost of Straw of sarod dhan Rs. 18.00
- ½ maund of Birhi Rs. 15.00
- ½ maund of mug Rs. 10.00
- Income from other sources Rs. 12.00
- Total Rs. 155.00

#### EXPENDITURE

- Clothing for 5 members Rs. 11-4-0
- Value of food for members Rs. 90-0-0
- Rent for 10 manas of land Rs. 20-0-0
- Cost of day labour Rs. 24-0-0
- Wage of washerman, barber, blacksmith Rs. 2-0-0
- Purchase of basket Rs. 0-12-0
- Fodder Rs. 12-0-0
- Hire bullock for agricultural operation Rs. 12-0-0
- For religious ceremonies, festivals and interest of mahajans Rs. 18-0-0
- Total Rs. 190-0-0

Expenditure - income (Rs. 190-Rs. 155)= Rs. 35 as deficit.

### Number of absentee landlords in Orissa

- Cuttack: 123
- Puri: 271
- Balasore: 20

Source: S. L. Maddox, Final Report on the Survey and Settlement of the Province of Orissa, 1900

iii. 4.1 mana was equivalent to an English acre.

Source: N.N. Banerjee, Report on the Agriculture of the District of Cuttack, 1898

96
An Eye Witness Account of the Orissa Famine

The late 19th century saw many devastating famines in Orissa. Fakir Mohan Senapati, writing in 1916, describes one of these famines in his autobiography.

It was in the 9th year “Na anka” of the ascendance of the new king (1866 AD) that this devastation took place. People have not forgotten that very devastating act of the nature. Thirty lakhs of people died in that very year. Six times that number human families were devastated. Many died and the remaining ones got displaced.

I was at that time 23 years old. I was working as the Head master of Balasore Mission School. 50 years have passed in the meantime; but I still remember the details of the heart breaking happenings of that time. In the month of Bhadrav (Aug.-Sept.), it rained very heavily for four days and then there was no rain. Bhadrav was followed by Aswinna (Sept. - Oct.), people looked at the sky for rain but it was not coming. Nobody spoke about anything other than water. People became disheartened from the beginning of Kartik (Oct. - Nov.). Even if it rained, there was no escape. Paddy plants were dying. Paddy was the only crop in the district of Balasore. The life of people depended solely on the harvest of that crop. Half a mile to the south of my house the township of Balasore ended. From there till the end of the horizon extended the paddy fields. Scattered within that vast stretch were a few small villages like the Islands in the sea. Everyday at that time I used to take bath at 9 AM, collect a blanket “asana”, place it within my armpit and used to proceed to the paddy fields where sitting on that asana I used to pray to the God Almighty to save the innocent people. Some of the paddy plants had partially flowered and some fully but they were very small and white and swung in the air. People had released their cattle-herds in to the paddy fields; but the cattle used to smell the paddy plants for once and then move on without causing any damage to them.

People of the labour class sold away the metallic utensils whatever they had in their house-holds for maintaining their daily lives. By the end of Kartik (Oct.Nov.) most people left their homes. Husband-wife, father-son nobody met anybody but everybody was begging from door to door but who had the rice to give to them as alms. Even those who were little better, first sold away their metallic utensils then their cattle herds and even gold and silver whatever they had in their households and thus maintained themselves till Magha (Jan. - Feb.) Falguna (Feb. - March). At that time the cost of a bullock was one paddy measure to 2

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paddy measures. The gold and silver were being sold without being weighed; people selling them asked for paddy and rice in exchange. Those who had money moved round the villages to purchase paddy and live. Paddy was already scarce, whatever people had in surplus it was hoarded.

By Falguna (Feb. - March), most cultivating people and a substantial number of artisans were displaced from their homes and were wandering all around in search of food. Anybody who got anything including the fresh leaves and the grasses chewed it. The soft and fresh tamarind leaves were coming up in the trees. Ten to twenty people were seen climbing on to a tree to browse on these soft leaves picking one by one like the monkeys. The body of the men and women, in general, were of bones and skins with the eyes sinking deep into the orbits. Such people were a common sight. The dresses covering the body of matured girls and the ladies of even well to do households were reduced to three-four hands in length and were torn here and there. Such ill-dressed women were roaming about freely on the village lanes without any trace of shame. Their breasts were reduced to folds of skin hanging from their chests as the insignia of their motherhood. Some had bony babies in their laps sucking these skin folds of the mother’s chest. It was difficult to distinguish whether the baby was dead or alive, but the mother was holding the child close to the breast. From Chaitra (March - April) onwards, gradually the number of the dead started increasing in number day by day.

On the village streets, on the embankments of the village water reservoirs and the village tanks, look anywhere, you would find only the dead.

At that time the most benevolent and the great friend of Utkal, Mr. Ravenshaw, joined as the new British Commissioner. In the month of Sept. or Oct. a letter came from the government to the commissioner indicating the possibility of a famine in Orissa owing to lack of rains. The letter also enquired in to the possibility of any governmental steps in the event of a famine for the protection of the people by and large. It asked the commissioner to suggest steps if necessary. In order to send a reply to the government, the commissioner convened a meeting of all court clerks. Two sirastadars opined, “Let there be a famine in Orissa, nothing to worry. The rural Zamindars and paddy merchants have sufficient paddy in their stores, which can manage the people for a whole one year”. When the sirastadars spoke this much, the pescars who use to serve under the sirastadars, in order to appease them, spoke in their favour. The commissioner’s pescar said, “there are fifty thousand chhelas (each chhela two quintals now) of paddy in the paddy storage of the zamindar of the Mouza Gopalpur. That apart thousand of chhelas of paddy are in the underground storage. From the house of Mr. Shyma Sahu of Bhimpur minimum of fifty thousand chhelas of paddy can be procured. That apart the grain stores of every merchant in all village are full of paddy. If they open their paddy stores that will be able to feed the people of Orissa for two months”. The political area pescar increased the number from fifty thousand to lakhs and lakhs of chhelas of paddy in the different paddy stores. The lower ranking clerks gave a yet brighter picture regarding the paddy stores in the rural areas and opined that whole of Orissa can be managed for one whole year.

The commissioner wrote to the government, “there may be a famine in Orissa; but there is plenty of paddy stored in households that can manage the state for the whole one year”. The commissioner thus made a big mistake. Whether actually that much of paddy was there in the stores or not, he did not enquire. That apart during the crisis whether the paddy owners would sell the paddy or not he did not enquire properly before replying to the government, which he should have done. But it was destined to see the loss of thirty lakhs of the great souls from Utkal and a very large number of people getting displaced. If this was fate, how would good sense prevail upon the commissioner?

On the streets on the way sides, on the pond banks, on the fields and in the forests one would find only the dead. Gradually the entire country side became covered with these dead human bodies.
From the beginning of the Farguna (Feb. - March) people started dying in large numbers. The number of the dead increased every day. On the streets on the way sides, on the pond banks, on the fields and in the forests one would find only the dead. Gradually the entire country side as if became with these dead human bodies. The rate of rice reached as high as ten seers a rupee (one seer = 616gm). For only three or four days, it became three sears a rupee, that too, it was hardly available in the towns. After three or four days as fresh rice arrived from Rangoon, the cost of rice settled at ten seers a rupee. The procured rice was mostly available in the towns and hardly available in the country sides. In the rural areas, those who had rice and paddy they hid them. Most households stored them in underground chambers. Those who had purchased cattle herds at throw away prices, lost them all in the same year along with most of their original ones. These are all the matters of fact, there is nothing to disbelieve. Those paddy merchants who had dumped cash and gold by selling paddy lost them all. In the year prior to the famine, paddy was sold in Baleswari measure approximately one hundred fifty seers a rupee and rice, one and a half Mahana (=sixty seers). That very rice during the year of famine was sold at the rate of ten seers a rupee which was the cause of such of misfortune. Not only that, for the last five to seven years preceding the famine that was the selling rate of rice at Balasore. Why didn’t the misfortune occur then? Now the rupee is more conveniently available. Everybody gets money and rice as desired, whenever one wants to buy rice in as much quantity as he wants in exchange rupee he can. But then both rice and rupee were scarcely available. It was not easy to procure rice from outside at short notice.

By March or April the commissioner of Orissa having obtained a correct picture of the state sent a prayer telegram to the government to send adequate quantities of paddy and rice. The government, in turn, having remembered the commissioner’s previous letter sent back a telegram, “you have sent a telegram for rice. But rice can not be sent by telegram”. However, the government sent rice from Rangoon & Bengal by hiring beautiful ships from Calcutta. On behalf of the government, charitable food centres were opened at places in the towns. Having heard about the opening of the charitable food centres in the towns people ran from the villages to the towns. They had not eaten any rice for the last fifteen to twenty days. They survived by eating fresh young leaves and unedible fruits. They started running towards the towns in search of rice, but how would they cover the distance? Large number of people died on the way, those who reached the charitable food centres ate rice once and died due to vomiting diarrhoea and dysentery as they had lost the ability to digest it. Most of these people died within two days. Doctors arrived to treat the empty bellied bony kangals (near beggars). The government procured bagful of Sagu grains from Calcutta and stored them in charitable food centres. The empty bellied kangals were provided with the sagu grains for a first few days; yet the situation did not improve, all of them died. All around the charitably food centres and at different places in the towns on the road sides there laid dead bodies of these kangals, which the scavengers lifted on to the carts next morning and threw in to the rivers. The author was witness to these sordid affairs for over a month or two. Every morning the scavengers took three to four cartfuls of dead bodies towards the rivers.

[Note - This disastrous famine of 1866 as occurred in the 9th year of ascendance of the new king, went down in the history of Orissa as the “Na anka durvikshya” and was remembered awfully for over several generations succeeding]
In 1897 a famine of serious dimensions affected Chota Nagpur in the province of Bihar. Food prices increased rapidly, and by August official famine reports noted that there had been a heavy increase in the death rate in all districts. The increased mortality was chiefly due to an epidemic of cholera, which was very severe in Hazaribagh and Lohar-daga. However, cholera was not the only killer. Andrew Forbes of the Famine Enquiry Commission noted that:

"Independently, however, of cholera there has been a marked increase, as in Manbhum, for instance, where although the deaths from cholera have notably fallen off since June, the death rate has still been increasing. This is no doubt due in great measure to the general lowering of the system among the labouring classes owing to the want of proper food and the consequent diminished power of resistance against attacks of fever and other ordinary diseases."

Unlike earlier periods of scarcity, this was clearly a ‘famine that killed’. What was remarkable about the nature and the scale of the 1897 event was the fact that it was the first major famine recorded throughout the region. Earlier crises of scarcity were limited geographically and were soon alleviated as the local people could depend on the abundant forest produce to avert any major crisis. For example, in 1874, distress in the pargana Tori and the ‘5 pargana’ in Palamau district, the highest price of common rice reached was 10 seers to a rupee, and even this lasted but a fortnight. A bumper harvest of mahua (Bassia latifolia) and an abundant supply of jungle produce ended the impending famine.

In 1896, however, the crisis did not have such a simple resolution. By November 1896, the price of foodgrain was on the increase in all the districts. The poorer classes felt this pinch, and one indication of this affliction was an increase in the number of beggars, especially in the small towns. The movement of people in search of work and the increase in the numbers of wanderers along country roads was another indicator of the extent of deprivation. This time there were fewer resources in the hands of the people to combat the scarcity. In the intervening twenty years since the preceding food crisis, the area under reserved and protected forests had increased, exploitation of forest areas by landed elites had intensified and the poor, especially in the rural areas, had less access to critically important forest products. They also faced much increased pressure on their lands from a variety of interest groups. Apart from population growth, which contributed to the pressure on the land, state and private capital interests in many areas effectively joined hands to extract vital natural resources from the rural districts, beginning with timber and game. The crisis sharpened with the passage of years and climaxed in the last decades of the nineteenth century in the 1897 famine.
Slacke, in his report on the settlement operations in Chota Nagpur estate in 1882, enumerated 21 species of seeds and fruits of 45 uncultivated trees which were used as food in addition to 34 trees the leaves of which were used as vegetables and 18 species of edible roots. He also gives the names of 97 forest products used as medicines, 28 used as oils and gums, 17 used as dyes and 33 creepers or barks of trees used as rope fibres.

Forests as the life-support of the people of Chota Nagpur

The original forests were spread over thousands of square miles, especially in the districts of Hazaribagh, Singhbhum, Palamau and Ranchi, all of which had large forest areas. Indigenous rulers had tended to preserve the forests. The best sal (Shorea robusta) trees were found in the valleys of the Ganges tract in Ranchi district, growing up to 120 ft. in height and with a girth of up to 15 feet. Asari (Terminalia tomentosa), gambhar, kend and simal were also found here. The mahua tree was common throughout Chota Nagpur. In the villages grew fruit-bearing trees like jamun, karanj, tatar, bael, jackfruit, pipal, and ber. There were many other forest shrubs and trees which yielded fruit and which afforded valuable food supplements in years of scarcity. Slacke, in his report on the settlement operations in Chota Nagpur estate in 1882, enumerated 21 species of seeds and fruits of 45 uncultivated trees which were used as food in addition to 34 trees the leaves of which were used as vegetables and 18 species of edible roots. He also gives the names of 97 forest products used as medicines, 28 used as oils and gums, 17 used as dyes and 33 creepers or barks of trees used as rope fibres.

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in great abundance. No only were the fruits made use of as articles of food, but the fleshy corolla constituted a staple article of diet for the poor for several months of the year. Other fruit sources included piar, mango, varieties of bier, ber and pipal, whose fruits were eaten in times of scarcity by the very poorest Santhals and Mundas, and jamun. Water chesnuts formed another important article of their diet.

Several grass species were harvested wild as were the roots of certain shrubs and trees, and some wild bulbs. The leaves of other plants furnished useful nutrients and were extensively used throughout Chota Nagpur. As a missionary in the Santhal Parganas noted, 'A Santhal will manage to live where even a rat would starve.' In Palamau most people obtained a good supply of flowers, fruits, barks, roots and tubers which formed important articles of food almost throughout the year and, as district officers noted, 'to that chiefly is due the immunity of the district from famine.'

The most important food resource of the tribal people was the mahua tree. Early British reports mention that the full-grown trees were everywhere
districts, including Ranchi and Singhbhum, where the rights of the Munda and Oraon peasants were gravely threatened by the new breed of landlords. In many villages the proud Munda was reduced to an agricultural labourer.

Other causes for dispossessing the people of their forests included the trade in timber and the construction of the railways. In fact only when the timber began to gain marketable value did landlords begin to assert their proprietary rights. While in some landlords allowed the tribal people to graze cattle and cut wood for domestic and agricultural uses, they were subject to both quantitative and qualitative limitations. They were not allowed to fell trees such as mahua, asan, paisal, tetul, jam, aam, kusum, palas or sal. The landlords cut these for the market, destroying the forest itself.

H.H. Haines, recording the forest flora of Chota Nagpur in 1910, noted that the larger plateaux of the region were under cultivation and in the dry season became a monotonous expanse of dried up fields with scarcely any vegetation, while the once jungle-covered scarp had been reduced to a state of scrub. In 1883, Hewitt, the Commissioner at Ranchi, called attention to the rapid destruction of private forests and to the incalculable misfortune that would result from their wholesale destruction not only to Chota Nagpur but to the Bengal districts lying below. By 1885, Dr. Schlich, the conservator of Forests in Haaribagh and Ranchi, had concluded that Ranchi district contained little forest. In the undulating plateau of Barwe, through which the Sankh river flowed, the country was devoid of jungle and most of the clearance seemed to have taken place in the last decades of the 19th century. In the 1882-84 survey of Chota Nagpur estate (a zamindari estate) it was found that in fourteen jungles surveyed the net decrease in the area of jungle was 11 per cent.

The major cause of the destruction in most district was the sale or lease of forest to contractors for supply of wood for railway sleepers. The forests of Singhbhum were subject to heavy fellings, and its was reported in 1898 that the 'selection fellings for the supply of broad gauge sleepers from trees over 6 1/2 feet girth amounted to over 20921 trees at an average of 10.4 sleepers per tree.'

The indigenous people of Chota Nagpur were thus stripped of almost all their forest and common rights by the activities of the state and the more rapacious landlords. Such changes had catastrophic effects on the physical and mental lives of the people.

**The famine of 1896-97**

By 1897 the belief that the region was immune from famine was finally dispelled. The famine developed in the context of a failure of the monsoon, a not uncommon event but one that had grave consequences in the context of the changes. The harvest in 1895 had been deficient, and in 1896 the monsoon was weak in August and September. The rainfall was badly distributed and affected the bhadoi crop. The whole district was affected and the rice crop was greatly reduced. The only relief measures undertaken in April, May and June consisted in the opening of a few relief kitchens at Ranchi and Lohardaga, and work on the Bundu-Silli road. The price of rice had, however, been steadily rising. In the second half of October 1896, it had risen from 11 seers to a rupee to 9 1/2 seers. From February 1897, it had risen further from 6 5/16 seers in June to 5 6/16 seers at the end of July, when in many markets only 4 seers could be obtained for the rupee. Immediate relief works had to be undertaken in an area of 700 square miles south-west of Ranchi. But the District Officers noted in perplexity that they failed to attract labour.
The Commission supported the bare subsistence principle by instituting large relief works, putting labour tasks and distance between the famine victim and a grain ration, restricting village relief to the helpless and avoiding policies that intervened in the social order.

as ‘the people preferred to support life on a meagre diet of jungle products, without working, to obtain a ration insufficient to compensate them for the expenditure of physical energy.’

In fact, it was quite clear that the local people were attempting to cope in the way they best knew how, by resorting to the products of the forest. By mid-August the sufferings of the people had increased. The jungle foods which they had always depended on had been severely depleted. The little that they could now procure was not enough to sustain them. Once, they could have lived comfortably on a diet of mahua flowers and roasted sal seeds supplemented with small fish and water chestnuts. Many of the mahua trees were now in private hands of the landlord or were in reserved forests. The central and northern plateau where once the best sal forests had been found were denuded and only small scrub jungle remained. Enfeebled by a low diet of limited jungle produce people fell prey to various diseases, but mainly to cholera. It proved to be a devastating killer. In August and September alone the mortality was 21.18 per thousand.

The onset of the famine in most districts was relatively slow. The growing distress was revealed by an increase in emigration to Assam and a rise in the number of beggars in Hazaribagh. The Civil Surgeon of the town reported that a number of the coolies he examined for emigration purposes were very emaciated and were on the edge of starvation. By the end of November the District Officer in Palamau was calling for the opening of the reserved forests in the district to help relieve the distress of the people by giving them access to mahua flowers. This early proposal was delayed by bureaucratic bunglings. At first, A.E. Wild, Conservator of Forests, objected to the proposal on the grounds that the collection of mahua flowers was liable to cause forest fires, it being the custom of the people to clear by fire a space under the tree upon which the flowers were dropped, to render collection easier. As the government debated the issue, forest offences mounted all over Chota Nagpur.

As the scarcity intensified the state reluctantly set in motion a system of famine relief. In the worst-affected tracts of Hazaribagh, it was reported that relief works would be started under Section 2 of the Famine Code and that the Deputy Commissioner would be strictly guided by the provisions of the Code in fixing and regulating the rate of wages and quantity of work.

Malthusian policy of the Famine Commission

The Famine Commission of 1880 has been credited with the framing of the ‘modern’ policy of famine relief administration. Actually the Commission supported the bare subsistence principal by instituting large relief works, putting labour tasks and distance between the famine victim and a grain ration, restricting village relief to the helpless and avoiding policies that intervened in the social order. The Commission strongly believed in free trade and Malthusian values. It had failed to intervene in the grain trade and stressed that demoralisation would result from the ‘excessive distribution of charitable relief.’ As Klein notes,

*It was found most wanting and least able to save lives where the code was applied in orthodox terms. People perished in the greatest numbers where local officials were most suspicious about distress and most restrictive in offering relief, or villagers were least able to take relief at large distant works.*

In some relief works the stupidity of the administrative officer prevented them from working efficiently. In Palamau in March 1897, a
On the FAD and Fallacy of
The ‘FAD’ Theory of Famines

— Excerpted from Amartya Sen’s Poverty and Famines
(Oxford University Press, Delhi), 1997, Chapter 2

The most common approach to famines is to propose explanations in terms of food availability decline (FAD). This FAD approach has been extensively used to analyse and explain the Bengal famine. The Famine Inquiry Commission’s view that the primary cause of the famine was ‘a serious shortage in the total supply of rice available for consumption in Bengal’ provides the standard explanation of the famine...

But is this explanation really supported by the facts - even by data to be found in the body of the Report of the Famine Inquiry Commission itself? ...While 1943 was not a very good year in terms of crop availability, it was not by any means a disastrous year either. The current supply for 1943 was only 5 per cent lower than the average of the preceding five years. It was, in fact, 13 per cent higher than in 1941, and there was, of course, no famine in 1941.

...As it happens, the two-year average ending in 1943 is the highest in the series for total foodgrains availability - hardly the build-up for a famine...For per capita figures, even with out deliberately raised population growth assumption, the three-year average ending in 1943 is only just a shade lower than that ending in 1941, and the two-year average ending in 1943 is, in fact, quite a bit higher than that for 1941. [Thus] seems safe to conclude that the disastrous Bengal famine was not the reflection of a remarkable over-all shortage of foodgrains in Bengal...

The picture that emerges from [the] data seems to be entirely in line with what one expect from the use of the entitlement approach. The high incidence among agricultural labourers vis-à-vis the low impact on peasants and share-croppers was to be expected. The food entitlements had, indeed, deteriorated sharply for the former, but not so much for the latter. The relatively large effects on fisherman, non-agricultural labour, craftsmen, etc., are also consistent with the observed pattern of shifts in entitlement relations.

...[A]n important aspect of the famine was its association with an uneven expansion in incomes and purchasing powers. Those involved in military and civil defence works, in the army, in industries and commerce stimulated by war activities, and almost the entire normal population of Calcutta covered by distribution arrangements at subsidized prices could exercise strong demand pressures on food, while others excluded from this expansion or protection simply had to take the consequences of the rise in food prices. Agricultural labourer did not in general share in the water based expansion...The abundance of labour in the agricultural sector...made the economic position of the labourers in the agricultural sector weak. The weakness of their position is also reflected in the fact that, while the famine killed millions, with agricultural labourers forming by far the largest group of those killed, Bengal was producing the largest rice crop in history in 1943.

The government’s thinking on the nature of the food problem seems to have been influenced by attempts to estimate the size of the ‘real shortage’ based on ‘requirements’ and ‘availability’. It was a search in a dark room for a black cat that wasn’t there. The approach provided no warning of the development of a gigantic famine arising from shifting exchange entitlements. The approach also contributed to some reluctance to accept the magnitude of the disaster and even after the famine had in fact appeared.... Finally, when the time came to report on the famine and assess what had happened, the Famine Inquiry Commission also adopted FAD as its main approach...The occurrence of the famine was squared with production and trade figures by assuming a sharp decline of that mysterious - and unobserved - ‘carry over from previous years’. Like the Phoenix, the FAD theory arose rejuvenated from the ashes, and it can be found today in the current literature on the food crisis of the world, even making occasional reference to the Bengal famine.
Circle Officer in charge of a project on which nearly 2000 workers were being employed closed the work for four days because money had run short. In this case it was not necessary for him to stop work as he still had sufficient rice with which to make payments. In April 1897 the task work rates in Palamau were reduced as the administration was worried about paying too much. Even the establishment of relief kitchens was regarded as rather wasteful as ‘the inevitable result of opening a kitchen in any place is to throw all the beggars of the locality on our hands. People who had previously supported these beggars consider their duty ends when the “sirkar” intervenes.’ As scarcity intensified some zamindars opened private relief works. However the efforts of private relief agencies and the state combined were still too limited to have much of an impact.

The parts of the population most severely affected by the scarcity were those with no holdings, who had been dispossessed over time. These included not only adivasi (tribal) labourers but also Hindu low caste agricultural workers. In most of the cases while the men migrated in search of work, women and children were left to forage for food.

Attempts by the government to import rice and distribute it were unsuccessful for logistic reasons. By January the retail price of common rice in Palamau had shot up by 40 per cent. Makai (Indian corn) had shot up from 30 seers a rupee to 10 seers, a rise of 67 per cent, while mahua had shot up from 60 seers a rupee to 20 seers, a rise of 63 per cent.

By March 1897, in Manbhum and Hazaribagh, cholera and smallpox deaths were reported for the first time. By May, a serious epidemic of cholera had broken out in and around Ranchi. In Hazaribagh, a cholera epidemic was declared by July 1897 and in one month alone there were 1500 reported deaths. Fever and dysentery also increase the death rate to a very considerable extent, clearly highlighting the levels of malnutrition among the population.

That the death rate continued to rise due to starvation was clearly established in Palamau, where peasants affected by famine were imprisoned in Daltonganj jail for committing petty offences. Many of them died in prison with famine-related diseases. A doctor examining the dead in the prison reported that they were generally very weak and suffering from low vitality due to starvation and that ‘they were mostly mere skeletons, simply skin and bones and they would have died much earlier outside the jail.’

The recovery from the famine was slow and painful. It was only by the end of the year that conditions improved and food stocks were replenished by mahua, early bhadoi rice and gondli. The death rate decreased more slowly as cholera passed away. No accurate mortality figures were recorded but there is no doubt that many had died.

From the early part of the British rule in the eighteenth century through the whole of nineteenth century, India suffered frequent famines resulting in death of millions and economic ruination of large number of farming households. The latest in the British regime was the Great Bengal Famine of 1943, when, according to conservative estimates, more than three million men, women and children died of starvation, mostly in the streets of Calcutta and a few other cities of Bengal. Prevention of famine and food security got ingrained in the psyche of our national leadership. Famine was associated with the insensitiveness and callousness of the imperial power and its mercantile associates. Independence meant to many freedom from hunger and abolition of famines.
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107


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