

ANGLOBALISATION AND THE MAKING OF THE THIRD WORLD. THE BRITISH EMPIRE IN INDIA

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Abstract: *The world as we know it is, in a large measure, a product of what Neill Ferguson calls “anglobalization.” Even today it is difficult to assess the legacy of the British Empire. My article focuses on the great famines in British India. It attempts to look at assertions about the Empire’s good work in India through the prism of the research carried out by the leftwing historian Mike Davis, whose seminal 2001 study Late Victorian Holocausts. El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World launched a debate on the human costs of anglobalisation.*

Keywords: *British India, conflict, famines, imperialism.*

1. Introduction

The world, as we know it today, is in a large measure, a product of the British Empire. British imperialism contributed to mapping out of new countries, drawing new borders, creating arbitrary states and artificial nations. It forged long-lasting alliances and provoked bloody armed conflicts.¹ It is also responsible for the displacement of millions of people and for great migrations that have radically changed the ethnic make-up of many societies in the contemporary world. The remains of the British Empire can also be seen in the recognizably British political institutions and hybrid cultures that have survived the demise of the Empire. In the countries where the British ruled, they left not only infrastructure, such as railways, telegraph lines, canals, water supplies etc., but also they disseminated a distinctly British culture: the English language, Protestantism, English forms of land tenure, the banking system, the common law, representative assemblies and the ideology of liberty as the crown of life.

Even today all attempts to assess the history of the British Empire give rise to many heated debates and controversies, though it is clear that the ranks of the admirers of the British rule are gradually shrinking, at least in the academic circles. Paul Gilroy, an academic who can be considered a spokesperson for the Black British community, observes that on the whole British society reveres the legacy of British Empire. He accuses white Britons of “post-imperial melancholia,” and argues that the white British society “found [itself] oddly unable to mourn and work through [its] loss of the Empire” (434) or come to terms with “the shame that attended the exposure of Britain’s colonial crimes” (431). Tapan Raychaudhuri, an Indian historian who also noticed that “it is difficult for an average British person to take a negative view of the past” (1996:357), offers an interesting explanation of the British postcolonial malaise. He quotes a Japanese historian, who while commenting on the Japanese post-war reckoning of their history, “pointed out that nations do not assess their historical past

¹ The map of Africa and Middle East: Palestine, Nigeria, Iraq. Some ethnicities with different values, beliefs rituals were thrown together whereas others such as Kurds were separated and divided among different states, which are torn apart by conflicts among their ethnically diverse groups

radically, unless they have gone through the experience of social revolution or crushing defeat in a war” (1996:357). Since Britain was spared such experiences, it is quite natural for its public opinion to turn a blind eye to the Empire’s crimes and lend an ear to historians who glorify its achievements. Among them the most is prominent is Niall Ferguson, an English professor of financial history at Harvard University, an author of many controversial books, among others *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (2003), *The War of the World: Twentieth-Century Conflict and the Descent of the West* (2006). In these books Ferguson claims that the flow of British culture and institutions under the Empire not only paved the way to modernity in the colonized countries, but also provided a framework for present day globalization that should be more accurately be called “*Anglobalization*.” The British Empire acted as an agency for imposing what Ferguson terms “the imperialism of free trade” on roughly a quarter of the entire world. In his opinion, no other “organization” in the world has done more to promote western norms of law, order and governance, as well as the free movement of goods, capital and labor. In the late 19th and early 20th century the Empire, Ferguson gloats, integrated the poor parts of the world into the global economy making them richer in the process.

The aim of this essay is to consider Neill Ferguson’s assertions in the light of the recent research on the history of India at the end of the 19th century, especially the work of another historian, an American, Mike Davis whose seminal 2001 study *Late Victorian Holocausts. El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* launched a debate on the different facets of *Anglobalization*. Whereas Ferguson voices the opinion of the radical right, Davis’s book combines environmental history with Marxist political economy. While Ferguson consistently argues that the Empire enhanced global welfare and the benefits of the Empire outweighed its drawbacks; Davis, conversely, asserts that the Empire was instrumental in creating the Third World, which, in his opinion, came into being at the end of the 19th century when great non-European peasantries were integrated into the global economy. Davis focuses on the underside of globalization and the human cost of the British fanatic adherence to the dogma of unfettered free trade. He particularly concentrates on the infamous Indian famines that swept across India in three waves in the years 1876-79, 1889-91, 1896-1902; exactly at the time when Ferguson envisaged such countries as India being incorporated into the global world market. According to different estimates, 12.2 to 29.3 Indians died of hunger (M. Davis 1951:7) in the process of becoming a “part” of the new economic world order. They died in spite of millions of tones of surplus grain in commercial circulation and in spite of the railroads that could be used to ship food to famine-stricken areas. According to the British, those millions perished as a result of extreme weather conditions and chronic destitution. Semi-arid India heavily depends on monsoons—if the monsoons fail, the argument goes, there are droughts and crop failure. But Mike Davis persuasively contends that the famines were not so much natural disasters as political tragedies that could have been avoided. His study tries to determine “to what extent did the colonial system of production changed the way in which climate factors could exert their influence” (1951:19).

Davis’s point of view is based on Rolando Garcia’s assertion that “climatic forces are not facts in themselves; they assume importance only in relation to restructuring of environment within different systems of production” (Garcia 1990:19). Likewise, Davis maintains that each pre-capitalist society had inner mechanisms of dealing with food shortages, but in case of India, this complex natural economy was destroyed by misguided efforts on the part of the British administration to subject India to modernization. The famines in British India were not merely food shortages but complex economic crises—they were “entitlement” crises—“people starved to death only because their wages could not be exchanged for minimum amount of calories to subsist on” (Garcia 1990:20).

2. History

The 1st wave of famine hit the districts of the Madras Deccan whose inhabitants died of hunger in their thousands. Millions reached the state of acute malnutrition which modern health workers call “skeletonization.” But the Vice-Roy Lord Lytton, who earned the unsavoury title of India’s Nero, and was a lesser-fair fanatic firmly believing in Smithian doctrines, gave orders to “discourage relief works in any possible way” because “mere distress [was] not a sufficient reason for opening a relief work” (qtd. in Davis 1951:152). Consequently in 1877 the Anti-Charitable Contributions Act was passed. It “prohibited at the pain of imprisonment private relief donations that potentially interfered with the market fixing of grain prices” (qtd. in M. Davis 1951:37). For Lytton the famine was caused by overpopulation, which “[had] a tendency to increase more rapidly than the food it raises from the soil” (M. Davis 1951:32). He was supported by Lord Salisbury—the Secretary of State for India and the grey eminence behind the British policies in India. Salisbury did not see why England should “pay tribute to India for having conquered her,” or why “rich Britain” should “consent to penalize her trade for the sake of poor India” (M. Davis 1951:33). In Salisbury and Lytton’s opinion, helping the starving Indians would mean setting a dangerous precedent: “[t]he doctrine that in time of famine the poor are entitled to demand relief . . . would probably lead to the doctrine that they are entitled to such relief at all times, and thus a foundation would be laid for a system of general poor relief, which we cannot contemplate without serious apprehension” (M. Davis 1951:33). *The Economist* supported this “skinflint” reasoning, accusing Indians of indolence and asserting that “it is [not] the duty of the government to keep them alive” (qtd. in M. Davis 1951:37). It was commonplace to regard Indians as being responsible for their own privation.

The death toll of Indian famines would perhaps suffice to understand the scale of humanitarian crisis brought about by the cold-hearted treatment of Indians by the British administration. But in order to fully grasp the extent of human suffering one has to turn to reports of village officers or coverage by independent journalists travelling through India. Village officers from the stricken areas wrote in their correspondence that only the “pariah dogs” that fed on the corpses scattered across the Deccan were “fat as sheep”:

[After] a couple of minutes’ search I came upon two dogs worrying over a body of a girl about eight years old. They had newly attacked it, and had only torn one of the legs a little, but the corpse was so enormously bloated that that it was only from the total length of the figure one could tell it was a child’s. The sight and smell of the locality was so revolting, and the dogs so dangerous, that I did not stay to look for the second body; but I saw two skulls and a backbone that had been freshly picked. (qtd. in M. Davis 1951:35)

For the survivors Sir Richard Temple, the enforcer of Lytton policies and “the personification of free market economics as a mask for colonial genocide” (M. Davis 1951:37), set up work camps, which, as Davis writes, looked very much like 20th century concentration camps. They were organized in accordance with the Benthamite principle that relief should be bitterly punitive to discourage dependence of the poor on the government. As Dr. Cornish, the British administration in India’s most severe critic, pointed out, the monthly mortality in these camps was equivalent to an annual death rate of 94%, which was the effect of strenuous work on railroad or canal building, unfit for people in dying condition. In the camps the inmates received the so called “Temple wage”—the minimum diet established by Temple. It “provided less sustenance for hard job than the diet of the infamous Buchenwald concentration camp and less than half of the modern caloric standard recommended for adult males by the Indian government” (M. Davis 38). To become a recipient of “the British bounty” the starving peasants had to survive “the distance tests.” that is they had to walk for

10 miles to work camps situated outside settlements. They had to prove that, in spite of their almost terminal state, they were capable of hard work. Those who were too weak to work were turned away without much ado. Others went away of their own volition. One of the local officers was unnerved by the “obstinacy with which persons almost in dying condition would go away anywhere rather than to a relief camp” (M. Davis 2002:43). Temple called it a “relief strike” and “passive resistance,” unconsciously adding to the colonial jargon an expression that was destined to become popular.

Not all peasants, however, were passive. There was a lot of inter-caste violence, as each caste tried to survive and the expense of the group below. Village mobs looted landlords and sometimes whole families were burned alive in their homes. Women and children caught stealing were “branded, tortured, had their noses cut off, ere sometimes killed” (M. Davis 2002:46). Women often offered their children for sale for a day’s substance (M. Davis:2002:45). Acts of cannibalism, very rare in India, were reported: “one madman dug up and devoured part of a cholera victim, while another killed his son and ate part of the body” (M. Davis 2002:47). In Madras city alone, 100,000 draught refugees dropped dead in front of the troops guarding pyramids of imported rice (M. Davis 2002:45). Robert Knight the publisher of *The Indian Economist and Statesman* for the first time in 1876 used the word “murder” to talk about the British famine policy (M. Davis 2002:53-4).

The 2nd wave (1896-97) of famine affected North Western provinces and the Punjab, and according to The Dufferin Enquiry (1887) the malnutrition reached levels unprecedented in Indian history, whereby “40 million people [went] through life on insufficient food” (qtd. in Davis 2002: 142). In words of William Digby, British journalist and humanitarian and one of the most staunch critics of British negligence, the second famine was the “price famine,” that is there was no real shortage of grain, but people died because they could not afford to buy it. The reason for that was that the drought in India coincided with the drought in the USA that had traditionally supplied Europe. Consequently all Indian crops were bought out to ship to Europe as a replacement for the American shipments:

The enormous European demand for wheat at a higher price induced the exporters not only to buy out all stocks but also to make “forward” purchases of wheat to be supplied from the new crop at similar prices. Thus an enormous amount of wheat was purchased at high price to be exported to Europe, resulting in general depletion of stocks within the province. One European company, namely Messrs. Ralley Brothers & Co. purchased even the standing crops for the purposes to export to Europe. The local trader or *bania* as usual raised the prices of grains, thereby causing distress in almost all the districts of the Punjab. (qtd. in M. Davis 2002:123)

Villagers who did not want to sell were coerced and beaten by the agents of Ralley Brothers. In response *zamindars* resorted to acts of violence against those creditors who pressed too much for payments, and murders were not infrequent.

Lord Elgin, the new Vice-Roy, like Lytton before him was averse to private charity. He was supported by popular opinion in Britain and some British newspapers, such as *The Spectator*, which warned its readers that if India had the same poor law as England “there would be 80 million paupers in receipt of relief” (qtd. in M. Davis 2002:143). Lord Elgin refused to control grain prices or to give green light to private initiatives to import grain from Burma and run “fair price shops” for the poor (M. Davis 2002:145-6). Instead the British organized relief works for those capable of work and opened poorhouses for those who were too weak. Since Lord Elgin’s administration was broke because of the war on the Afghan frontier, the contribution to the famine fund was reduced. In consequence the poor were kept on the allowance of 1 rupee per person per month, which according to current exchange rates, amounted to 34 cents (M. Davis 2002:147). What is more, the poor were regularly defrauded of their meager rations by the British officers in charge. An American relief worker was shocked to discover that “the grain was adulterated with earth” (M. Davis 2002:147). With the

return of rains in 1898, the poorhouses were shut down, and hundreds of the destitute and ravished people, without any means to benefit from the monsoons, were pushed out. In effect there were 6.5 millions deaths in 1898, making total death toll closer to 11 million. 12 to 16 million dead was the mortality rate commonly mentioned by the world press. The famine quickly acquired the title of “famine of the century” (M. Davis 2002:158), but as it turned out, the worst was yet to come.

The social unrest was higher than during the 1st famine, and an uprising was averted only by a Bubonic plague that came hard on the heels of the famine. It spread out, carried by the flees of black rats, from the slums of Bombay, where the British had blocked for decades increased taxation for water and drainage schemes. The plague, which could cause an international embargo on the shipments of grain from India, succeed in swaying the authorities into action, but the action was, as usual, inappropriate. The British organized a campaign to clear the slums whence the plague had emerged with the effect that the poor were deprived of any shelter while the contaminated rats got away unscathed. The most notorious campaigner in the war against slums was W.C. Rand: “Rand had summoned British troops to his aid and swept down on the slums like a proverbial wolf on the fold. Plucking out women, men and children from their homes, he burned their belongings and desecrated their shrines” (Goradia 123). At the same time “the government did nothing to control the explosion of the grain prices that was spreading the starvation faster than plague” (Davis 2002:149). It was clear that all actions were exclusively geared towards allaying the growing foreign fear of the plague. From the correspondence that went between the Secretary of State and Lord Elgin we can learn that “[the] Secretary of State was telling the Vice-Roy that he was most concerned about the plague than the famine because a market once lost, or even partially deserted, is not easily regained” (qtd. in M. Davis 2002:152). At that time the editor of the *Indian Spectator* counted that probably 18 million people, including the plague victims, might have already died (Davis 2002:152).

The British were condemned for their mismanagement, fraud, and corruption even by those commentators who in the past had usually praised philanthropy of the colonial government officials. F. Merewether—Reuter’s famine commissioner (and ardent imperialist) reported that:

[the] actual inhabitants of Bilaspur were dying of starvation, while under the supposed aegis of the government and within their very gates. . . I collected tangible proofs [of mismanagement] . . . which showed only too clearly that the officials and those responsible had not . . . fully recognized the gravity of the situation. With the reference to the poor-house, there can be no doubt that in addition to supineness and mismanagement, there was decided fraud going on, and poor hopeless and helpless inmates were being condemned by a paternal Government to a slow, horrible death by starvation. (qtd. in M. Davis 2002:154)

In another report F. Merewether writes about famine victims in terminal state who were suffering from what he calls “famine down”:

I here came across the first specimens of “Famine Down,” which is produced by long-continued starvation. At certain stages of want, a fine down of smooth hair appears all over the bodies of the afflicted . . . There were more than a score of souls who have reached this stage, and their bodies were covered from head to foot with the soft-looking black fur. (qtd. in M. Davis 2002: 154).

The American journalist Julian Hawthorne (son of the famous American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne), who went to India as a correspondent of *Cosmopolitan*, was horrified by the families of corpses sitting in the shade of occasional desert trees: “[t]here they squatted, all dead now, their flimsy garments fluttering around them, except when jackals pulled the

skeleton apart in the hopeless search for marrow” (155). After a visit to a poor house Hawthorne wrote about the inmates:

They showed us their bellies—a mere wrinkle of empty skin. Twenty percent of them were blind; their very eyeballs were gone. The joints of their knees stood out between the thighs and shinbones as in any other skeleton; so did their elbows; their fleshless jaws and skulls were supported on necks like those of plucked chickens. Their bodies—they had none; only the framework was left. (qtd. in M. Davis 2002: 155)

Even more shocking revelations were produced by a visit to an orphanage where Hawthorne found neglected children in the last stages of starvation and disease:

We went towards the sheds, where were those who were too enfeebled to stand or walk. A boy was squatting over an earthen saucer, into which he spate continually; he had the mouth disease; he could not articulate but an exhausted moan came from him over and anon. There was a great abscess on the back of his head. (qtd. in M. Davis 2002: 157)

Hawthorne did not mince his words about the corruption of the British relief workers, suggesting that many children might have been saved:

Another in the final state of dysentery, lay nearly dead in his own fifth; he breathed but had no strength to moan. There was one baby which seemed much better than the rest; it was tended by its own mother. . . . Now, this child was in no better condition than the rest of them when it came, but its mother’s care had revived it. That meant simply, that it has received simply its full allowance of the food which is supposed to be given to all alike. Why had the others—the full orphans—not received theirs? (qtd. in M. Davis 2002: 157)

The third famine of 1899-1902 was of an unprecedented scale—it affected 2/3 of the subcontinent: Gujart, Rajputana, Berar, central India. This time it was “water” famine—wells and rivers that had never failed in the living memory went dry. Some rivers, like Godavari, totally disappeared. India was prostrated after the previous famine and its economic aftermath. The surplus crop of 1898 was confiscated by money lenders and British tax collectors.

Due to the unexpectedly difficult struggle to subdues the Boers (Dutch farmers in South Africa), the famine was ignored by the press and the famine relief was severely restricted by financial stringencies. The help came not from London but from Kansas farmers, Native American tribes and Black American churches, which send grain that was promptly taxed by British officials, to the utter horror and outrage of the American benefactors. According to the India Office, 1.25 million people died, but according to independent commentators 10 million people was a more likely death toll. William Digby commenting on the estimates of the mortality made by the leading British medical journal *The Lancet*, wryly observed that it meant disappearance of “one half of the population as large as that of the United Kingdom” (qtd. in M. Davis 2002: 74). By 1914 the number of victims further grew by 8 million of those who perished due to the Black Death. In Gujartat by 1900, there were so many cholera victims that local water supplies were poisoned by the putrefying corpses (M. Davis 2002: 170). Dr Louis Klopsch of *The Christian Herald* reported:

The heat was intense; the thermometer indicated 108 degrees. A hot, blinding sandstorm filled our eyes and nostrils with microbe-laden dust, and the all-pervading stench of putrefying bodies, impregnated clothes, hair and skin. Cholera had broken out a short time before and 2,400 famine sufferers had died within a few days and had been buried in shallow ground. Decomposition speedily set in and impregnated the ground with death dealing malodor. There were no disinfectants, hence the awful, sickening, disease-spreading, suffocating stench . . . Millions of flies were permitted undisturbed to pester the unhappy victims. (qtd. in Pepper 1910:170)

Some villagers, knowing the Christian missionaries' "hunger" for new converts, resorted to selling their young children for a few days' supply of food. Dr Louis Klopsch wrote "repeatedly parents had offered me children for sale at a rupee each, or about thirty cents. And they love them as we love our children. Children are now being offered for sale as low as four cents each, for a measure of grain" (qtd. in Pepper 1910:171). The British response was as usual. The Vice-Roy Curzon cut the rations to less than the infamous Temple wage, restricted the relief eligibility by introducing the equally infamous Temple test, deported the refugees into the British India back to neighboring states, where puppet governments, totally dependent on the British, could not cope with the humanitarian disaster.

The total death toll of all three waves of famine and famine-related diseases, according to Mike Davis, "could not have been less than 30 million people. Fifty million dead might not be unrealistic" (2002:7). The survivors of the famines were struck by locust, malaria, bubonic plagues, dysentery, smallpox and cholera. Sometimes it was virtually impossible to distinguish famine victims from epidemics victims. The reason for that was that malnutrition and unsanitary conditions of work camps combined to increase the mortality. Often deaths were misinterpreted to disguise the true magnitude of famine. The epidemics and famines formed a vicious circle—even when rains came back, there was often an outbreak of malaria and the villagers were dying in their thousands, which further delayed the resumption of agricultural practices. Owing to the lack of plough animals, eaten during the famine, the cultivation of land was not very productive, and often the first good crops were ruined by locust, which also had a tendency to appear with terrible vengeance after each wave of famine.

Those millions of people died, as Mike Davis contends, "not outside the 'modern world system' but in the very process of being forcibly incorporated into its economic and political structures. They died in the golden age of Liberal Capitalism" (2002:9). They died at the end of the 19th century when, as Niall Ferguson rightly claims, the global order, based the free trade and free market, was beginning to emerge. For India modernization meant a transition to commodity economy. Earlier, Indian peasants grew sustenance crops: coarse rice, barley and millet, but with the onset of commodity economy, they were encouraged to grow profit crops for export—cotton and wheat, which reduced food security. In fact the regions which adhered to commodity economy were the epicenters of mass mortality during the famines.

Huge shipments of grain were exported to Britain in the midst of the most horrendous starvation, for example in 1876 the record exports of 6.4 cwt. were shipped to Europe (M. Davis 2002:26). A journalist commented that "[it] seems an anomaly that with her famines on hand India is able to supply food for parts of the world" (qtd. in M. Davis 2002: 26). In 1876-77 poor harvests in England generated a demand that absorbed most of wheat surplus from the North Western provinces of India. The commercial exports were used to stabilize the prices of food in England and occasionally to speculate on the European market, but in India they drained the country of food. Profits from shipments went to British intermediaries and to rich *zamindars* not to tenants. Between 1875 and 1900, the years that included the worst famines, exports increased from 3 million to 10 million tons (a quantity that, as Digby calculated, was equivalent to annual nutrition of 25 million people).

The odds were always against the peasants. When the crops were bad the grain prices rocketed as a result of speculation, which was a natural reaction of the market to shortages. Price regulation could have reduced the frenzy of speculation, but it was an anathema to the British administration, whose officers were raised on the concepts of Smith, Mill and Bentham. Often producers had to go into debt to buy additional grain at extortionate prices to resume production next year. But when crops were good, the prices of grain were so low that the producers could not sell their crops with a profit or pay off their debts. The local

producers of wheat, cotton or opium (sold by British to China to make it docile) did not have any bargaining power. Crops were sold at fixed prices and producers had no chance to exploit auspicious price trends. The middlemen, conversely, made enormous profits, which they later could use for usury. Many lenders often bought crops at half price, but lent money at usurious 38% interest (M. Davis 2002:325).

Moreover the international grain markets were very volatile. Often the British buyers suddenly switched to more attractive markets (for example Argentina), where the grain was cheaper, with disastrous results for the Indian producers. For example, during the Civil war in the USA, the Indian producers were encouraged to convert vast acreages to cotton production, but when the US export of cotton resumed, the prices of cotton plummeted below the cost of production. Another recession that affected India was brought about by the fall of the Jay Cooke Company, which entailed a decline in demand for colonial products. It affected the market prices of cotton, rice, tobacco, and sugar. The New International Gold standard introduced in 1870s was the beginning of a new international monetary system. It caused devaluation of the silver rupee and cost India around 105 million pounds between 1874 and 1894 (M. Davis 2002:303).

Shipments were made even from the drought stricken districts to central depots for protection from rioters. Indian railroads, which the British advertised as their great gift to the country, integrated thousands of villages into the international trade. Paraded as “institutional safeguards against famine,” together with the free market policy, the railroads sped up the spread of famine (an occasionally also disease as for example in 1889-91 when the trains carried from Bombay grain contaminated with bubonic plague) (M. Davis 2002: 150). William Digby calculated that in the Bombay and Madras Deccan “the population decreased more rapidly [23%] where the districts were saved by railways than where there were no railways [21%], This is a protection against famine in the entirely wrong direction” concluded Digby (qtd. in M. Davis 2002:111). Railroads would not bring food into districts whose inhabitants did not have the sufficient purchasing power. Pierre Loti, a French novelist and naval officer, travelling on train through India during the second wave, wrote:

Even now there are four wagons of rice coupled to the train behind, the loads pass daily, but no one would give anything to the children, not even a handful, not even the few grains on which they might survive for a little more. These wagons were reserved for the inhabitants of those towns where people still have money and can pay (qtd. in M. Davis 2002: 169).

As Pierre Loti observed, for the English administration the free grain market was more important than the life of children crying of hunger.

Thus Gandhi was right when he claimed that railroads “depleted the countryside of its [food] stocks and killed the handicrafts” (“Discussion with Woodrow Wyatt” 404-5). India’s incorporation into the world economy ruined her industries because she was a “captive market,” where English goods (mostly cotton) were sold. According to Cain and Hopkins (296) and Marcello de Cecco (298), the Indian market helped to postpone the decline of British capitalism, which at the end of the 19th century could not compete on more demanding markets. In India to eliminate competition the British discouraged the rise of industries by keeping the tariffs on their own imported cotton goods low. Consequently British products were very cheap, which put out of business not only local Indian manufacturers but also local artisans for whom weaving had been an additional source of income, protecting them from sustenance instability. Punitive taxes were imposed on the local woven goods.

The British Empire was also responsible for the disruption of pre-capitalist social relations and the destruction of the “corporate life” in India (M. Davis 2002: 339). The British efforts to modernize India, by means of British laws of land tenure and methods of agricultural production, ripped the old social fabric of the country and turned its castes into

antagonistic groups, no longer mutually interdependent. The British put an end to the traditional system of household and village grain reserves, replacing it with cash nexus and merchant inventories. They also removed patrimonial obligations, whereby the dominating castes exercised managerial control over the complex network of social production and public works such as weaving or irrigation. The breakdown of this system made it possible for the richer castes to abandon investment in agriculture for the sake of usury, which was much safer and more profitable than agriculture. The richer, freed from their traditional obligations towards the poor, could exploit whatever limited resources they had for their own selfish advantage (M. Davis 2002:339). For instance, the change in the system affected the distribution and access to the most important common good—water. In pre-British India water had not been anybody's property, but under the British, water was the property of the person who owned the land, and it had to be purchased as any other commodity. The former rulers of India, Mughals, who were often criticized by the British, had used taxes to promote water conservation, and tax-concession was granted to those villagers who build wells and irrigation systems. But in British India, *ryots* who built wells were punitively taxed 12 rupees per year (M. Davis 2002:335).

“The British complained about the ‘inertia’ of India,” writes Davis, “but when it came to potentially life-saving local, public works, they themselves were the embodiment of decisive inaction” (2002:338). To make matters worse they could be very profligate with money even in the midst of the most horrendous humanitarian crises. In the middle of 1876 famine, for example, the Vice-Roy Lytton organized the Imperial Assemblage in Delhi to proclaim Queen Victoria as the Empress of India. The week-long feast for 68 thousand officials was “the most colossal and expensive meal in world history” (M. Davis 2002:28). During the second famine, the acute distress in the country did not prevent the British from organizing Jubilee Ceremonies to celebrate 60th anniversary of Queen Victoria's rule. Julian Hawthorne claimed that 1 000 000 000 \$ was spent on the preparations (M. Davis 2002:157-8). Finally during the third famine, the Vice-Roy Curzon was raising private money for the Victoria Memorial in Calcutta rather than for the starving victims.

The war with Russia in Afghanistan cost India more than soil conservation or irrigation works. British hypocrisy reached its apogee when “famine insurance” was introduced. In theory, its purpose was to raise money for irrigation works, while in fact, it was a cynical façade for raising money for the Afghan war (the evidence comes from Vice-Roy Lytton correspondence qtd. in M. Davies 57). Military expenditures amounted to 25% of India's annual budget (by comparison in Victorian England—3% of net national product was allocated to navy and army), less than 2% went to agriculture and education, while 4% went to public works. The Indian army took part in various imperialist military operations, such as the sacking of Beijing (1860); the invasion of Ethiopia (1868), the occupation of Egypt (1882), the conquest of the Soudan (1896-98). The railroad system, in contrast, consumed up until 1880 thirteen times as much money as investment in hydraulic works (M. Davis 2002: 325).

The agricultural expansion also flew in the face of common sense and went beyond limits of ecological sustainability. The British agricultural experts believed that “rain follows the plough,” and that the semi-arid lands can be turned into fields with profitable crops, which of course did not happen. On the whole the irrigation improvements lagged behind the agricultural expansion pushed by cotton and wheat demand into areas vulnerable to ENSO² cycles. As far back as 1785, Edmund Burke indicted the East India Company for its neglect of irrigation, whereas at the end of the 19th century C. J. O'Donnell, an experienced administrator, complained that despite the British desire to “[broaden] the basis of taxation”

any investment in irrigation is a “hateful” idea (qtd. in M. Davis 2002: 334). The few British efforts to improve irrigation were simply misguided. The much celebrated canals built in the Punjab, served first and foremost, like the railways, to rob the country of its produce. Moreover, this investment brought about unforeseen consequences: the area was blighted with salinity, the rising water tablets caused seepage from irrigated fields and dried the wells, while mosquito-born diseases like malaria decimated the local population.

The desire to increase the acreage for export crops was also the main reason of the enclosures of common pastures and forests. These enclosures contributed to the ecological disaster that was the root cause of the subsequent waves of famine. The enclosures of pastures brought about a decline in plough cattle and the cattle manure used for fertilization. That, in turn, caused the exhaustion of soil (sped up by the cotton production), and consequently a decrease in productivity. By the end of the colonial period, 38% of soil was highly eroded (M. Davis 2002:332). The enclosures had also serious social outcomes. Nomadic cattle breeders, described by the British as “criminal tribes,” were squeezed out of economy and doomed to die. The forests and common lands (“wastes” in the official British terminology), which in times of austerity in pre-British India used to provide for free 55% of the fodder requirement for the poor, were transformed into a taxable private property or state monopolies where the poor were denied access (M. Davis 2002:326). “Even dung was turned into a revenue for Queen Victoria,” caustically commented Davis (2002:326-7).

The famines were “engines of historical transformation” (Arnold 15) in yet another sense—each global drought was the green light for the intensification of Christian proselytism and imperialist land rash. The famines were a chance to increase the number of converts and strike against the native landowners, whose lands were mercilessly confiscated for outstanding debts and taxes. In pre-British India Mughal officials reduced peasants’ obligations towards the state, if their own survival was at stake. But in British India, as Davies documents, taxes were fixed with scant regard for climate variations, and occasionally they were raised in the middle of the worst distress to facilitate the takeover of lands. Lt.-Col. Osborn, a British Army officer in India, who was continual at odds with Lytton’s policies, said that the British rule in India was “so hard and mechanical in character” that “to the great mass of people, the English official is simply an enigma . . . a piece of machinery possessing powers to kill and tax and imprison” (M. Davis 2002:325).

Was then the British rule in India “the most extraordinary act of charity in world history,” (Davis 2002:331) or are we to consider the British in the Raj as “the Nazis of their time,” as Nirad C. Chaudhuri asserts (357)? In words of Sir Richard and Sir General John Starchey “India has received to a degree unheard-of and unthought-of before protection for life and property,” and a generous investment in its infrastructure (“9000 miles of railway and 20 000 miles of telegraph”) (qtd. in M. Davis 2002:331). “The accomplishment of this work, and the expenditure of all this,” according to Sir Richard and Sir General John Starchey, “have increased to an extent absolutely incalculable the wealth and comfort of the people of India,” and all this with “[adding] nothing to the actual burden of taxation” (qtd. in M. Davis 2002:331). Mike Davis writes in response to this assertion: “if the history of British rule in India were to be condensed into a single fact it is this, there was no increase in India’s per capita income from 1757 to 1947. Indeed in the last half of the 19th century income probably declined by more than 50%” (311). The research undertaken by Indian historians also bears witness to the galloping pauperization of Indians at end of the 19th century. Prasannan Parthasarathi, for example, claims that Indian laborers in the 18th century had higher wages than their counterparts in Europe, but as Romesh Chunder Dutt points out, by 1900 the average British household’s income was 21 times higher than Indian (qtd. in Parthasarathi 1998:292).

Thus as Mike Davis 2002: argues, the British sowed the seeds of underdevelopment in India making it a part of the Third World. By 1947 India had not developed industry to compensate for the poverty of countryside. When the power was transferred from the British 53% of the rural population lived below the poverty line. (Raychaudhuri 1996:262-3). “Moreover , in the age of Kipling . . . the life expectancy of ordinary Indians fell by a staggering 20 precedent, a deterioration in human health probably without precedent in the subcontinent long history o war and invasion” (Davis 2002:312). When India gained independence, “the average life expectancy was 29 years,” and “nearly half population could not afford the minimum amount of food required to sustain the human body” (Raychaudhuri 1996:262-3).

3. Conclusion

The human loss caused by the great famines in India ought to be sufficient to annul any accolades for the Empire. But if they were enough it might be illuminating to look at other achievements of the Empire that Niall Ferguson points out. As for the British institutions implanted in India, they indeed survived—the administrative and judiciary system were extended and modified and the parliamentary rule was sustained. “But it is not . . . the end result of smooth or continuous developments sponsored by the Raj” (Raychaudhuri 264), as Niall Ferguson would like to think. The representatives institutions were introduced by the British to merely mitigate opposition, and in 1919 only 2% of the population had the right to vote, while in 1937, ten to 13 % of the population was enfranchised (K. Davis 2002: qtd. in Raychaudhuri 265). In the sphere of education after 180 years of exposure to the British civilization 88% of the population was illiterate, and schools and colleges were few and far between. Still the westernization of the elites of the Raj has widened the gap between these elites and the masses with the effect that even today “[the] elite’s way of thinking remains incomprehensible to the masses” (Raychaudhuri 1996:369). The partition of India, in which, according to different estimates, from several hundred thousand to a million people lost their lives, also was a direct effect of the British policy of “divide and rule” in India. Thus Indian nationalism and the Indo-phobia that in induces in Pakistan and Bangladesh must also be included amongst the negative inheritance of the colonial past.

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