



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AND GOVERNANCE

E-ISSN: 2664-603X
P-ISSN: 2664-6021
Impact Factor (RJIF): 5.92
IJPSG 2026; 8(1): 168-173
www.journalofpoliticalscience.com
Received: 02-10-2025
Accepted: 05-11-2025

Dr. Jayant Chandel
Assistant Professor, Galgotias
University, Greater Noida,
Uttar Pradesh, India

Political Economy of Famines in the British Empire: An Analysis of the Great Famines in India from 1876-1879

Jayant Chandel

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26646021.2026.v8.i1c.846>

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to understand the political economy of famines in British India from 1876-1879. The paper is looking at the ideational factors behind these famines and the policy failures behind them. Among these, the ideas of classical economists like Adam Smith and Thomas Malthus were most influential. Methodologically, the paper treats the empire as a web or ‘bundle of relationships’ wherein ideas flow freely from one part of the empire to another with ease, especially among the elites and the policymakers. The structure of the empire facilitates this flow of ideas, even bad ones in this case and affects the lives of millions of people. I use Karl Polanyi’s understanding of impact of economy on native population to criticize and analyze these classical thinkers and their followers in British India.

Keywords: Political economy, empire, British, India, famine, classical economics, karl polyani

Introduction

Under British rule in India, India witnessed some of the most horrific famines which led to the death of millions of people. India was not the only part of the Empire to have witnessed this phenomenon. Various British colonies witnessed large-scale famines in the 19th century. The Nineteenth Century in Economic History is known as the period which witnessed prosperity and growth throughout Europe. But, in this period of prosperity and peace, the “great drought of 1876-79” hit many colonies of the British Empire (Davis, 2002: 6) [8]. According to Davis, the death of millions of people in countries like India and China during this period, “contradicts much of the conventional understanding of the economic history of the nineteenth century” (Davis, 2002: 8) [8]. These millions perished after their forcible incorporation into the capitalist world-system. This famine which haunted the subcontinent from 1876-1879, in British India, has been selected as a case which will be studied. The second half of the 19th century, after the revolt of 1857, saw transfer of power within British India. The company rule came to an end and India was fully incorporated within the British Empire. This paper is an attempt to understand the cause of these famines and why British India’s administrators failed to provide much relief as millions perished. What role, if any, did the ideas of classical political economy play in these famines? Why did one of the worst famines occur during British rule, especially when laissez faire doctrine was applied to British India? Did the incorporation of colonies into the capitalist world system by the process of colonialism made things like famines inevitable? This paper treats the British Empire as a whole as an interconnected web of colonies and the Metropole, which were connected to each other in “bundles of relationships” (Ballantyne, 2002: 1) [5]. This Idea of the British Empire as a “bundle of relationships” brings together the “disparate regions, communities and individuals into contact through systems of mobility and exchange” (Ballantyne, 2002: 1) [5]. This paper places the Indian economy and its administrators within this bundle of relationships which created a complex web of “imperial networks and pattern of cultural exchange” where ideas, people and material goods traveled constantly (Ballantyne, 2002: 3) [5]. This understanding of British Empire makes our analysis much fruitful as it explains how certain ideas on classical political economy were able to travel and become dominant throughout the Empire and were able to deliver same result (eg. great famines in Ireland). In the first section I will look at the situation of the global economy in the 1870s. This will bring the larger context into the picture and help us in placing the Great Indian Famines into the context of the global economy.

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Jayant Chandel
Assistant Professor, Galgotias
University, Greater Noida,
Uttar Pradesh, India

It will also look at the domestic context within which these famines took place. In the second section, I explore the ideas of classical political economists like Adam Smith and T Malthus, whose ideas were very influential in deciding the fate of millions of Indians who perished during these Great Famines. In the third section I provide a Polanyian critique of free market dogmatism and provide an explanation to its failure in providing relief to the millions of people who perished. Here, I also provide a critique of Polanyi's critique and explanations of the impact of laissez faire on the colonies in order to improve his hypothesis and not reject it entirely.

This paper argues that free market dogmatism, especially in the context of colonies like India proved a disaster because during the colonial rule the rural poor were subjected to the whims of the global market. It did not matter whether the 'free' market made food available or not. The widespread poverty meant that the rural poor were in no position to purchase food. In other words, 'availability' of food was a secondary issue. The situation was made more complex by the dogmatism which prevailed amongst the English administrators during this period. This dogmatism was directly the result of a blind belief in the Smithian ideas on free-trade and the Malthusian theory of population growth. The famines and the suffering were viewed through this lens which was provided by these theories of political economy. Furthermore, following Polanyi I argue that the situation of native society in mid-19th century India was made dire because of the destruction of social institutions and land relations in rural India. But, this paper departs here from Polanyian analysis and argues that the impact of forced creation of markets in colonies is much severe. Hence, contrary to Polanyi I argue that the asymmetrical relation between the metropole and the colony creates a situation in which peasants in India and Ireland were more vulnerable to things like famines. That is why these colonies saw millions of deaths unlike rural Europe.

World Economy in Second Half of 19th Century and India: Transformation of Rural Society and Economy

This paper is an attempt to understand the great Indian famine which occurred under the rule of Viceroy of India Lytton. Before proceeding further, I will look at the larger context within which the famine took place. By the 1870s, the price of agricultural products within the global economy saw a rise in price which led to an increase in the demand for Indian crops (Charlesworth, 1982: 49) ^[7]. This boom was also largely a result of the American Civil war which led to an increase in the price of agricultural products like cotton in the world economy. But, the Great Depression of 1873 led to a sudden slump in the price of agricultural products (Charlesworth, 1982: 49) ^[7]. Thus, it made cultivators in the subcontinent more vulnerable to any impending food crisis (Davis, 2002: 12) ^[8]. And, the great drought of 1876 made their situation more severe and marked the beginning of huge famines in the subcontinent. After the depression of 1873, "the rate of capital formation and growth of productivity" within Britain saw a sudden slowdown (Davis, 2002: 296) ^[8]. The period also saw a sudden rise and growing industrialization of Germany and USA behind their protective tariffs (Davis, 2002: 297) ^[8]. According to Davis in this context, for Britain, the millions of peasants who toiled and starved helped the British economy as it allowed them to maintain "the financial

supremacy" of Britain. In the words of Giovanni Arrighi (1994: 263) ^[3] this "large surplus in the Indian balance of payments became the pivot of the enlarged reproduction of Britain's world-scale processes of capital accumulation and of the City's mastery of world finance". India emerged as the biggest market for British exports "in the quarter century after 1870" (Davis, 2002: 298) ^[8]. In short, the mighty British Empire which became of the greatest economic power in the history of humanity became such power by exploiting the millions of peasants. Here, the toiling millions were a boon for the British economy.

If the subcontinent, after the great uprising in Northern and Eastern parts of India in 1857, the Company Raj was terminated. This revolt in many ways has been described as a "watershed moment" in the history of the subcontinent (Bandhopadhyay, 2004: 79) ^[6]. Firstly, it placed India under the direct control of the British crown. Secondly, under Victorian rule the idea of "racial segregation" and racial inferiority of Indians became more and more entrenched (Bandhopadhyay, 2004: 80) ^[6]. Thirdly, after 1850, when India became formally a part of the British Empire, the rural economy gradually became more and more commercialized (Charlesworth, 1982: 28) ^[7]. This had a long-term effect on the rural society in India. Vast numbers of Indian Peasants, since the commercialization of agriculture "were constantly in debt" (Charlesworth, 1982: 28) ^[7]. This led to an intensification of poverty among the rural population in India. Hence, rural society witnessed many upheavals like Deccan riots during this period (Charlesworth, 1982: 29) ^[7]. This large-scale destruction of rural society led to "pauperization of poorer peasants" in India (Ibid). The famines and the failure of state and the society to deal with it are connected to this phenomenon. These famines which occurred in the second half of the 19th century took place during a period which is considered by many as the "most favorable period for agriculture" (Charlesworth, 1982: 30) ^[7].

This context (global and domestic) is significant to understand the great famines and why the state failed to provide much relief as millions perished. For this purpose, it's important to understand the debates within England where the critique by classical political economists of state's welfare measures (e.g. Poor laws) was fundamental in deciding the fate of millions who perished in the Indian subcontinent.

Definition of Famine and Empirical Background of Case

Before proceeding further, I will define the concept of famine. Despite its frequent use, famine is a much-contested concept (Rubin 2016: 8) ^[15]. The word is generally described as "as an extreme scarcity, a severe shortage or a collapse in the availability of food" (Rubin 2016: 9) ^[15]. But, such popular understanding of this term leaves out the affordability from their conception of famine. In the case of British India, one should keep in mind the fact that it was in the end extreme poverty and inequality in rural society which made it almost impossible for most of the rural poor to be able to afford food at all. Hence, famines can be defined as a situation where there is an extreme shortage of food supply due to either man-made or natural causes. Among man-made it is mostly related to the disruption of food supply chains (Eg. wars). Naturally it could be triggered by lack of rainfall, floods etc. It could also be a product of both the causes operating at same time. Often it

is difficult to make a distinction as sometimes the situation is made much direr due to inactivity on the part of the state. And, mostly, it is that section of the population which already finds it difficult to meet its needs is the one which faces the gravest threat in case of scarcity of food as they will be unable to afford the available food. In short, famine is a condition wherein there is severe shortage of food due to a combination of social, economic, natural and political factors.

This paper is an analysis of the so-called great Indian famine which mostly hit the Deccan and the western areas of British India. The maximum brunt was borne by following areas: the Bombay and Madras presidency, Punjab, modern day western UP, princely states of Mysore, Hyderabad and modern-day Rajasthan. During this period Lytton was the viceroy of British India.

Classical Political Economy and Famines in Colonies: Smithian 'Free' Market Dogmatism Meets Malthusian Pessimism

The ideational superstructure of the empire rested on the two pillars. First, rested on the ideas of Adam Smith and his work on economics. With British rule in India free-market dogmatism arrived with great fervor. Second foundational principle supporting this ideational superstructure of empire were Thomas Malthus and his pessimistic theory on population growth.

Smith and Arrival of Free Market Dogmatism

The failure of British administration on famine management is directly linked to the intellectual environment within which the colonial administrators imbibed economic ideals. The classical political economists like Adam Smith wrote extensively on the issue of famines. The ideas which dominated were largely the product of debates within the metropolitan England on the welfare system like the poor laws. In his classical work *The Wealth of Nations* while talking about the famines, Smith (1998: 690) ^[16] argues that the "history of dearths and famines" that have occurred in Europe in "preceding centuries" has arisen from any combination among the inland dealers in corn, nor from any other cause but a real scarcity, occasioned sometimes perhaps, and in some particular places, by the waste of war, but in by far the greatest number of cases by the fault of the seasons; and that a famine has never arisen from any other cause but the violence of government attempting, by improper means, to remedy the inconveniences of a dearth. (Smith, 1998: 690) ^[16]. For Smith ultimately it was not the wars or seasons which were the main reason behind famines. It was the intervention by the governments which made things worse for the people. For Smith, what turns that lack of food into famine type situation is not the lack of food per se but the intervention and regulations by governments. It makes situation worse and famine type conditions arise due to lack of food. According to Smith, "if the government would allow a free trade" then this dearth of crop will never become a universal problem (Ibid: 691). While talking about the famines which took place in India, Smith blamed the East India Company and its policy of interfering with the price and the market of rice "which contributed, perhaps, to turn that dearth into famine" (Smith, 1998: 691) ^[16]. Hence, the classical liberal economists blamed the interventions by the state for the lack of food in India under the company raj. But what explains the famines which occurred in the 1870s? Contrary to Smithian

assumptions and predictions these famines basically occurred when the Company rule was replaced by the direct rule under the British crown. This was an era when administrators believed religiously in the doctrines of free trade. What explains the Great Indian Famines during this period?

It was on these grounds, which were laid by Smith, that most of the classical economists objected to the idea of poor laws as "they tended to encourage paupers to depend upon state charity [and always led to the] taxing the 'haves', which added one more burden to the hard working and prudent sections of society" (Ambirajan, 1978: 59) ^[2]. Hence, it was argued that too much of state welfare will make the poor lazy and this burden should not be shifted on the shoulders of the middle classes. Classical economists like Adam Smith argued that even in the case of famines the state should refrain from intervening. It was supposed that the 'invisible hand' of the free market economy will take care of the lack of food.

The first British colony which experienced a famine on a very large scale especially under the free market economics was Ireland. The great Irish famine occurred after decades of free market experiments which were undertaken in this colony. The principle of free market and idea of self-help was applied very judiciously in the case of Ireland. Just before the famines, the Irish economy witnessed a shift in the focus from manufacturing to agriculture (O Grada, 1989: 27-28) ^[13]. This was due to a shift in "comparative advantage" in favor of agricultural products whose price increased substantially in preceding decades in comparison to Irish industrial products (O Grada, 1989: 28) ^[13]. This meant an increasing vulnerability of the Irish population in case of any crop failure. The situation was made worse by the free-market principles which discouraged government intervention in the functioning of 'free markets'. For the classical economists the idea of "free markets" meant that in desperate situation like famines the government should "not interfere in the free market processes by price control, financial encouragement to import, or prohibition of the export, of foodstuffs; and the correct price level would always be reached through the forces of supply and demand" (Ambirajan, 1978: 60) ^[2]. Another follower of Adam Smith, Edmund Burke discouraged any attempt by the state to provide things like food to the people (Ambirajan, 1978: 61) ^[2].

Most of the classical economists accepted the Smithian doctrine which was well entrenched by the mid 19th century (Ambirajan, 1978: 61) ^[2]. In 1871, J S Mill in his book *Principles of Political Economy*, argued that in cases of emergency "all that governments can do" is to provide "counsels" (Mill 2004: 270). The government interventions "cannot do nearly as much as all merchants" (Ibid). Lord Lytton, the viceroy of India during the great Indian famine, rejected any proposal of intervention on the grounds of free trade. His predecessor Lord Northbrook did formulate interventionist policy in case of famines (Ambirajan, 1978: 93) ^[2]. From the beginning of his administration, he portrayed a strict belief in the doctrine of free trade and hence argued that "a famine policy should not interfere" with the functioning of markets (Ambirajan, 1978: 93) ^[2]. Lord Lytton, at the peak of the great famine, influenced by the "Smithian dogma and cold imperial self interest" allowed the export of food grains to England when millions were starving in India (Davis, 2002: 11) ^[8]. In fact, from 1875 to 1877, there was a threefold increase in the amount

of wheat which was exported from India to the UK (Davis, 2002: 27) ^[8]. Lytton and his predecessors were also informed by the Malthusian ideas along with the ideas on free-trade. This explains the lack of any empathy towards the dying millions as their death was seen as something which only proved the naturalness of these deaths according to Malthusian doctrine. This created a toxic mix of ideas which became dominant by the early 1870s. And, the administrators of British India were driven by the Malthusian doctrine which understood famine as a 'natural' check on population growth.

Malthus and India's Famine Policy

In his celebrated work entitled *First Essay on Population* (1798) Malthus while talking about population increase in China opines the following. If the accounts we have of it are to be trusted, the lower classes of people are in the habit of living almost upon the smallest possible quantity of food, and are glad to get any putrid offals that European labourers would rather starve than eat. The law in China which permits parents to expose their children, has tended principally thus to force the population. A nation in this state must necessarily be subject to famines (Malthus, 1966: 130) ^[12]. Thus, Malthus wished famines in situation where population increased was supposed to have overtaken the food production. Hence, in such case a nation faces famines. The great Indian famine occurred during the reign of Viceroy Lytton whose tenure saw one of "the most terrible famine which had yet occurred within the century" in British India (Dutt, 1904: 424) ^[9]. The Victorian era scholars and administrators were under a variety of intellectual influences and orientalist assumptions regarding the natives. One of the first such assumptions was the notion of "tropical backwardness" (Mukherjee, 2013: 36) ^[11]. According to Mukherjee, this assumption treated the recurrence of famines as something which is a product of "indigenous historical and the climactic systems of South Asia" (Mukherjee, 2013: 37) ^[11]. The Indian Famine Commission of 1880 declared that the famines could be "traced directly to the occurrence of seasons of unusual drought, the failure of the customary rain-fall leading to the failure of food crops on which the subsistence of the population depends" (Mukherjee, 2013: 38) ^[11]. Hence, it was declared a 'natural' calamity which was not a product of modernity. The modernity and the modern capitalist market economy had nothing to do with the occurrence of famines in south Asia. But this assumption was challenged by scholars even during that period. Indian economist R C Dutt (1904) ^[9] provided some sort of contemporary critique to such dominant assumptions on the famines. In his own words,

For the famines, though terrible in their death-roll, are only an indication of a greater evil—the permanent poverty of the Indian population in ordinary years. The food supply of India, as a whole, has never failed. Enough food was grown in India...But the people are so resourceless, so absolutely without any savings, that when crops fail within any one area, they are unable to buy food from neighbouring provinces rich in harvests. The failure of rains destroys crops in particular areas; it is the poverty of the people which brings on severe famines. (Dutt, 1904: vii) ^[9] Hence, it was not the lack of food per se but the widespread poverty and destitution which made the rural population vulnerable to these famines. Hence, the doctrine of laissez-faire which the

British administrators propagated had no answer for this destitution which made it impossible for rural poor to buy food in case of the failure of crop. Gradually this assumption of tropical backwardness was replaced by other intellectual influence- Malthusian Population Theory. This theory also pushed the idea that there was something 'natural' in the regular occurrence of famines in the subcontinent. The second major intellectual influence, the Malthus' Population Theory, was a well accepted theory amongst the British middle classes. These ideas were also "diffused among the administrators of Indian famine policy from time to time" (Ambirajan, 1976: 5) ^[11]. By the 1860s, British officials largely accepted that the Indian population had reached "the Malthusian limit" (Ambirajan, 1976: 6) ^[11]. Even the viceroy Lytton during this period accepted this theory. According to him, the Indian population "has a tendency to increase more rapidly than the food it raises from the soil" (Cited in Ambirajan, 1976: 6) ^[11]. And, Lytton was not the only British administrator and scholar who used to argue along these lines. In 1874, the Economist magazine, while talking about the Great Indian Famine argued that under the native rule the Indian population was always kept under check "by war and infanticide, by misery, death and pestilence" (Ambirajan, 1976: 7) ^[11]. Another British official H C Irwin, argued that India's population growth could only be checked by the 'want of food, war and disease' (Ambirajan, 1976: 8) ^[11]. The British rule removed the other two 'checks' which kept the population under control.

The British administrators of that period assumed that scarcity of food was a logical and natural phenomenon as the population growth was too high. The end of endless wars and life threatening diseases further triggered the growth of population. In words of a British scholar of that period, Sir Robert Giffen, "the Roman peace [which] we have established in India appears to be effective in removing many obstacles to the growth of population which formerly existed- what Malthus described as natural checks" (Ambirajan, 1976: 7) ^[11]. In short, most of the Indian officials believed in this Malthusian assumption and the removal of extra population was only a 'natural' process. The Great Indian famines were doing exactly this task.

In this environment, any sort of welfare or government help was deemed as an 'unnatural' intervention in the larger scheme of things. According to one official Sir George Couper, government subsidies always make things worse. Hence, any extension of government help to the famine prone areas of the population will drive the "self supporting people to the ranks of the penurious, dependent upon public charity" (Cited in Ambirajan, 1976: 8) ^[11]. Couper was highly influenced by liberal economist and writer of the 19th century Walter Bagehot. In his book *Physics and Politics* (1872), Bagehot while talking about philanthropy argues that Great good, no doubt, philanthropy does, but then it also does great evil. It augments so much vice, it multiplies so much suffering, it brings to life such great populations to suffer, to be vicious, that it is open to argument whether it be or be not an evil to the world (Bagehot, 1872: 106). In this intellectual environment, the widespread death and misery brought forth by the great famines was deemed a necessary evil for the larger good of the society as a whole. For Bagehot the famine-stricken

nations and classes had to suffer as they were not ‘fit’ for survival. For him “nature [was] like a schoolmaster” and just like a schoolmaster it rewards only the “high and most instructed classes” (Bagehot, 1872: 118). Hence, in other words the demise of lower and least ‘instructed’ classes is a natural phenomenon which can never be avoided.

Another influential member of the Lord Lytton’s government, Sir John Strachey even advised the then Lieutenant Governor, Lord Temple, not to help the famine-stricken population in his area (Ambirajan, 1976: 8) [1]. Lord Temple during an earlier famine in Bengal and Bihar (1873-1874) dared to help the suffering millions. He imported “half a million tons of rice” from Burma to provide relief in Bengal (Davis, 2002: 36) [8]. Temple came under fire for the “extravagant” spending and *The Economist* declared that his policies were encouraging the lazy Indians to believe that “it is the duty of the government to keep them alive” (Davis, 2002: 37) [8]. The criticism seemed to have worked as during his stint as Lieutenant Governor in 1877 he refused to intervene and followed the mainstream dogma.

Apart from Malthus, liberal scholars like J S Mill, also had huge influence on the officials of British India. Mill while arguing in favor of the repeal of Poor Law in England opined that everyone has a right to live. We will suppose this granted. But no one has a right to bring creatures into life, to be supported by other people. Whoever means to stand upon the first of these rights must renounce all pretensions to the last (J S Mill cited in Ambirajan, 1976: 9) [1]. According to J S Mill, the right to life is an inalienable right which can never be taken away. But, this does not mean that other people should be obliged to support this right. This was the dominant opinion of the English middle classes during this period. Public charity would only make more and more people dependent on the state. This does not mean there was no reaction against this dominant understanding of famine. James Cair, the only dissenting “member of the Indian Famine Commission”, gave a “critique of free trading and self-help dogmatism” which was clearly visible in “the Lytton-Temple Relief System of 1876-1879” (Gray, 2006: 207) [10]. But, as an earlier example of Temple portray, such opinions were a minority among the administrators and those who failed to follow the doctrine of free market and Malthusianism were forced to follow the dominant narrative.

Famines and Its Impact on Rural Society

The lack of grains and hunger had a huge impact on the social fabric of areas which were severely threatened by the famines. The Deccan region was one of such region. In Madras presidency, more than 1.5 million people perished (Davis, 2002: 45) [8]. In districts like Bellary more than 25 percent of the population died during this great famine. The area saw an increase in riots and hungry masses attacked granaries and moneylenders (Bandhopadhyay, 2004: 196) [6]. In cities, like Madras the “famished peasants dropped dead in front of the troops guarding pyramids of imported rice” (Davis, 2002: 45) [8]. Hence, the import and export of grains continued amidst the widespread death and destitution such was the working of free markets!

The villagers in Deccan saw an increased social conflict where each “caste attempted to save themselves at the expense of the groups below them” (Davis, 2002: 48) [8]. There was a substantial increase in inter-caste violence and villages turned into “a Hobbesian” world where *ryots* were

engaged in a war for survival against other *ryots* (Davis, 2002: 49) [8].

Polanyi’s Critique of Classical Economics and Economistic Dogmatism: Famines in India

According to Polanyi, one of the biggest tragedies of the expansion of the market economy is that the expansion of market economy upon the native population leads to the destruction and “violent disruption of the basic institutions of the victim” (Polanyi, 1944: 167) [14]. According to him, the social and “cultural catastrophe” of the native societies in the colonies is similar to the destruction of rural society within Europe “in the early days of Capitalism” (Polanyi, 1944: 166) [14]. That is why for Polanyi it is the destruction of native institutions which is more problematic. The creation of a labor and land market in the colonies destroys the pre-existing land relations. In his own words, Indian masses in the second half of the nineteenth century did not die of hunger because they were exploited by Lancashire; they perished in large numbers because the Indian village community had been demolished...The actual source of famines in the past fifty years was the free marketing of grain combined with local failure of incomes...The three or four large famines that decimated India under British rule since the Rebellion were thus neither a consequence of the elements, nor of exploitation, but simply of the new market organization of land and labor which broke up the old village without actually resolving its problems...Socially she (India) was disorganized and thus thrown a prey to misery and degradation (Polanyi, 1944: 167-168) [14]. The destruction of rural society and its institutions is indeed very significant as it led to poverty amongst the rural population and they were always vulnerable to any future catastrophe like famines. But, Polanyi downplays the role of economic exploitation in these famines. British India was in an unequal economic relationship with Britain. This unequal power relation meant any policy regarding the economy or the famines were undertaken by officials who were influenced by theories which originated in England. Hence, the role of this unequal power relation between the colony and the metropole should not be ignored. The ideas on free market were significant as Polanyi argues but so was the material reality of the asymmetric relation within the British Empire. The exploitative nature of this relationship made it impossible for the toiling masses to move out of poverty. This is what differentiates the situation of the native and the white lower classes in Europe, who suffered, according to Polanyi, during early phase of capitalism. Despite similar conditions why did the millions of English did not perish in famines? Among white Europeans it was the Irish who died in millions. It was this unequal relation between the colony and the British which made the situation of Ireland and India somewhat similar. The famines in both the countries followed a similar trajectory wherein the arrival of ‘free-market’ dogmatism led to the destruction of rural societies during famines (Gray, 2006) [10]. As Polanyi argued within England the doctrine of free trade and economic liberalism was simultaneously challenged by the doctrine of social protection (Polanyi, 1944: 138) [14]. Polanyi calls this sudden and spontaneous reaction within society to protect itself against the doctrine of economic liberalism as “double movement”. In England, the suffering lower classes could mobilize to protect their interests and the society from the doctrine of free market. But, Indian or Irish people in

contrast were placed in a very different context. The unequal subordinated nature of Ireland and India made it much more difficult for the classes to defend themselves from the dogmatism of laissez-faire.

Conclusion

This paper was an attempt to understand the causes behind the famines and more importantly why the state refused to intervene during the great Indian famine. We followed the intellectual trajectory of the administrators of British India who were well equipped, theoretically, as far as the issue of famines was concerned. Here, ideas of scholars like Adam Smith, J S Mill, Thomas Malthus and Walter Bagehot were very influential. Their defense of free market without any state intervention, even in case of famines, was very powerful critique of state led mercantilist system. But these scholars failed to predict the ills of their own theory. The Malthusian theory, on other hand, created an environment where death of millions of poor was deemed as 'natural' and necessary for the control of the population. But just like in Ireland, in India also the invisible hand of free-market failed to prevent the famines as Smith predicted. The situation was made direr because of the widespread poverty amongst rural poor. Hence, availability of food during famine is less significant than the issue of affordability. Most of the rural poor were unable to afford the food even when it was available in the market. Here, the paper borrows from Polanyi's critique of market economy. Polanyi rightly draws parallel between developments of capitalism in Europe its impact on society in general and the impact of free market dogma on native population in colonies. There are indeed parallels between the two, but it is not the complete picture. The death of millions of peasants did not occur in England for that matter. So, this paper argues that after application of market economy and doctrines of free trade on colonies. There was, like in Europe, a destruction of social institutions of the native population which led to widespread destitution and misery. But, the impact in colonies was much more severe, it was due to the fact that they were in a subordinate position vis-à-vis England. England controlled the economic and famine policies in these regions. Unlike England, it was much more difficult to launch a movement to defend the society from the free market economy. Here, consequences and challenges were graver. Hence, the reaction of the rural masses was much localized and disorganized. The resistance often took the form of grain riots, attacks on local moneylenders and looting. Hence, Polanyi's critique of free market economy failed to see the much severe effect of market economy in case of powerless colonies.

References

1. Ambirajan S. Malthusian Population Theory and Indian Famine Policy in the Nineteenth Century. *Population Studies*. 1976;30(1):5-14.
2. Ambirajan S. Classical Political Economy and British Policy in India. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1978.
3. Arrighi G. Long Twentieth Century. New York: Verso; 1994.
4. Bagehot W. Physics and Politics. Ontario: Batoche Books; 2001.
5. Ballantyne T. *Orientalism and Race- Aryanism* in the British Empire. New York: Palgrave MacMillan; 2002.
6. Bandhopadhyay S. From Plassey To Partition: A History of Modern India. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan; 2004.
7. Charlesworth N. British Rule and the Indian Economy 1800-1914. London: MacMillan Education Ltd; 1982.
8. Davis M. Late Victorian Holocasts *El Niño* Famines and the Making of the Third World. London: Verso; 2002.
9. Dutt R. The Economic History of India In the Victorian Age. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Company; 1904.
10. Gray P. Famine and Land in Ireland and India, 1845-1880: James Caird and the Political Economy of Hunger. *The Historical Journal*. 2006;49(1):193-215.
11. Mukherjee U. Natural Disasters and the Victorian Empire. New York: Palgrave MacMillan; 2013.
12. Malthus T. First Essay On Population. London: Palgrave Macmillan; 1966.
13. O Grada C. The Great Irish Famine. London: MacMillan Education Ltd; 1989.
14. Polanyi K. The Great Transformation. Boston: Beacon Press; 1944.
15. Rubin O. Contemporary Famine Analysis. New York: Springer International; 2016.
16. Smith A. An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations. London: The Electric Book Company Ltd; 1998.