

Genocide of Millions of Indians During the British-Raj. 31 Famines under British Colonial Rule

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“I hate Indians. They are beastly people with a beastly religion. The famine was their own fault for breeding like rabbits.”—Winston Churchill

Under the British-Raj, India suffered countless famines. From 1760 till 1943, India suffered from terrible famines on a regular basis. Contrast that with the fact that there have been no famines anywhere in India since independence. Previously, when famine hit the country, indigenous ruler kings were quick to respond with useful measures to avert these famines. After the advent of the British rule, the story was different. First of these famines took place in 1770 till 1773. It killed 10 million people. It was followed by severe ones in 1783.

Bengal was the first to experience the devastating effects of the British rule after East India Company became virtual rulers of the province post Battle of Plassey in 1757 CE. That famine of 1768 CE killed nearly 10 million people in Bengal and Bihar.

Under Churchill’s warped policies, despite having a substantial harvest in 1942, massive areas of Indo-Gangetic plain were hit with famine the next year, Bengal being the worst.

Though the numbers vary, according to the Woodhead Commission, while famine and subsequent epidemics killed over 15 million Indians in these parts of the country, Churchill’s government diverted food grains supply to Greece and Yugoslavia from India.

Some of India’s grain was also exported to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) even though the island wasn’t suffering the same hardship; Australian wheat sailed past Indian cities (where the bodies of those died of starvation littered the streets) to ports in Balkans and Mediterranean while offers of American and Canadian food aid were turned down. India was not allowed to use its own sterling reserves, or its own ships to import food.

India had enough food supply to feed the starving, but the British chose to export millions of pounds of grain abroad. Great Indian nationalist, shri Dadabhai Naoroji noted that while

Orissans perished in droves in 1866, India had actually exported over 200 million pounds of rice to Britain.

Leopold Amery, the Secretary of State for India and Field Marshal Archibald Wavell, soon to be appointed the new viceroy of India, were deliberating how to ship more food to the colony. But the irascible Prime Minister Winston Churchill was coming in their way. Despite their efforts to convince Churchill, Bengal's famine could not be prevented.

Formerly, the Indian rulers, upon the possibility of an approaching famine, would waive their taxes and adapt compensatory measures such as irrigation, tax-waivers etc. to provide as much relief as possible to the farmers. The colonial rulers continued to ignore any warnings although starvation had set in from early 1770. Then the deaths started from 1771. But the Company raised the land tax to 60% in order to compensate themselves for the lost revenue.

Following is the timeline of major famines in India during the British-Raj:

- Doji Bara Famine or Scull Famine of 1791-92: Occurred in Madras Presidency as well as Indian Princely states of Hyderabad, Southern Maratha country, Deccan, Gujarat and Marwar. People died in huge numbers; could not be cremated or buried. 11 million perished during the years 1788-94.
- Agra Famine of 1837-38: It occurred in Central Doab and trans-Jumna districts of North- Western provinces (later Agra-province), including Delhi and Hissar. At least 800,000 people died.
- Upper Doab Famine of 1866: Happened in Upper Doab of Agra, Delhi and Hissar Divisions of Punjab under the British territory, also in the Eastern Rajputana under Indian kingdoms/Princely states. 2 million Indians perished.
- Orissa Famine of 1866-67: Occurred in British Territory of Bihar, Bellary and Ganjam districts of Madras. 1 million people (814,469 in Orissa, 135,676 in Bihar and 10,898 in Ganjam district) perished.

- Rajputana Famine of 1869: Happened in Ajmer, Western Agra, and Eastern Punjab under the British and Rajputana under the Indian Kingdoms and Princely states. 1.5 million people succumbed to hunger.
- Great Famine of 1876-78 and Southern India Famine of 1876-78: Happened in British territory of Madras and Bombay and Indian kingdoms/Princely states of Mysore and Hyderabad. 5.5 million people starved to death in British territory. Mortality is unknown for princely states. Total famine mortality estimates vary from 6.1 to 10.3 million.
- Indian Famine of 1896-97: Occurred in British territory of Deccan, Bombay, Madras, Bengal, United Provinces, Central Provinces as well as in parts of Punjab, Specially Bagar tract; also in Indian Kingdoms and Princely states of northern and eastern Rajputana, Hyderabad and parts of Central India. 5 million people perished in British territory.
- Indian Famine of 1899-1900: Occurred in Bombay Central Provinces, Berar, Ajmer as well as parts of Punjab, especially Bagar tract; also Rajputana, Hyderabad, Central India, Baroda, Kathiawar and Kutch. 1 million people died in British territories. Mortality is unknown for princely states.
- Bengal Famine of 1943-44: Occurred in Bengal. 1.5 million people starved to death while 1 million dies from epidemics.

Famines were used as strategic weapons by the British-Raj. Starving millions could not offer

stiff resistance to the alien power.

Every famine disaster in India was a godsend gift to missionaries as they were able to convert lakhs of desperate people by promising lifesaving grain. Major conversions of Hindus to Christianity around each famine and epidemic during the British Raj debunks the claims by missionaries that Hindus are converting to Christianity to “escape” the caste system.

Lord “Butcher” Lytton had issued specific orders that news of the famine be suppressed for the arrival of Queen Victoria in whose honor Grand Durbar was organized in Calcutta while horrific famine was going on killing nearly 100,000 Indians in Madras Presidency.

Adding it all up, from around 35 million Indians have perished due to famines under the British- Raj because of their criminal and intentional neglect to take remedial measures.

Amazingly, we have never been taught in high school or college history classes about these genocides under the British-Raj. It should be taught at high school level all over India.

While millions of Indians were dying from starvation, Londoners were dancing in their ornate dancing halls sipping scotch whiskey and enjoying the massive loot of their crown colony by the Empire.

This is the legacy of the British-Raj.

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Featured image: Hindus and Muslims, with flags of Indian National Congress and the Muslim League, collecting clothes to be burnt as a part of the non-cooperation movement

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