

Skeletons at the Feast

I am firmly convinced that in India we are working up to a hideous economical catastrophe, beside which the great Irish Famine of 1847 will seem mere child's play.

—H. M. Hyndman, 1886

India's rulers, of course, had no premonition that Victoria's Diamond Jubilee (1897) would be celebrated in carnage: "the saddest year in its accumulation of calamities since the time that India passed from the hands of the East India Company to the Crown," as Romesh Dutt would later tell the Indian National Congress.¹ Instead, as the subcontinent anticipated the monsoon of 1896, there was smug confidence (the recent deaths in Orissa notwithstanding) that famine mortality on the scale of 1876 was no longer possible. Thanks to the 1880 report of Sir Richard Strachey's Commission, there were now regional famine codes that instructed the organization of local relief and provided new controls (registration within subdistrict "famine circles") over panic-driven population movements like those that had so alarmed the government twenty years earlier. Moreover, a Famine Relief and Insurance Fund had been established in 1878 to ensure that Calcutta could finance relief during major droughts and floods without fiscal risk to its other priorities, especially the permanent military campaign along its northwestern frontier.

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In addition, wrote a contemporary economist, "the historic conditions controlling production and distribution ... had been revolutionised."² The integration of Burma's huge rice surpluses into the imperial system, along with the 10,000 miles of new railroad track (much of it financed by the Famine Fund), were heralded as providing the rural population with a decisive margin of food security.³ "Famine in the original sense of the word, that is to say as a result of a lack of food, has become impossible. In case of shortfalls, Burma feeds the Punjab and the North Western Provinces or vice versa; Madras comes to the aid of Bombay or the other way around."⁴ As Lord Elgin reassured Queen Victoria:⁵ "The improvement of the means of communications particularly by railway makes it possible to cope with scarcity now in a way that was out of the power of the officers of former days."⁵

In the event, these improvements were all but meaningless. Even his worst enemies marveled at Lord Elgin's singlemindedness in following Lytton's path to exactly the same calamitous destination.⁶ A severely deficient monsoon prevented the sowing of the spring 1896 crop throughout the Punjab, North Western Provinces, Oudh, Bihar and the Madras Deccan. The failure of the rains was even more devastating in the Central Provinces and eastern Rajputana (Rajasthan), where three years of bad weather and poor harvests had already immiserated the peasantry. Throughout India grain prices rose, then skyrocketed after the autumn monsoon likewise failed. Grain reserves, especially in the wheat belt of northern India, had been depleted by massive exports to make up the previous year's terrible harvest in England.⁷ Meanwhile Elgin's "revolutionary" improvements in distribution simply ensured that prices were as high in districts unaffected by the drought (like the well-watered Godavari Delta in Madras) as in those where most of the crop had failed.⁸

The mere existence of railroads, moreover, could not bring grain into districts where mass purchasing power was insufficient. British officials, with their doctrinaire faith in market rationality, were startled to see the price of millet and other "poverty grains" surpass that of the milled wheat used in European bread.⁹ As for the vaunted Famine Fund, a substantial portion had been diverted against the protests of Indians to pay for yet another vicious Afghan war. (At the inaugural meeting in London of a

campaign for Indian famine relief in January 1897, the socialist leader Henry Hyndman was pulled off the dais by police when he proposed that "home charges for the current year should be suspended and the whole amount be devoted to expenditure on famine relief.")¹⁰

The government, moreover, had categorically discounted warnings from Indian nationalists as well as their own health officers about the ever-increasing population of poor people vulnerable to any sharp increase in food prices. Malnutrition, critics believed, had reached epic levels unprecedented in Indian history. The Dufferin Enquiry in 1887 had shown that "forty million of the poor go through life on insufficient food" and "half of our agricultural population never know from year's end to year's end what it is to have their hunger fully satisfied."¹¹ Five years later in his famous "bombshell" circular to the Indian National Congress, Allan Octavian Hume lamented that poverty was "swallowing up our lower classes like a rising swamp, it is deepening, widening, blackening ..."¹² William Wedderburn, John Bright's old friend and sometime leader of the Parliamentary Opposition on India, lobbied an apathetic House of Commons to undertake a major enquiry into Indian poverty before famine again decimated the subcontinent.¹³ But the India Office in 1896 was no more eager than in 1876 to face the "nightmare" of poor relief in India. The *Spectator*, denouncing Hume, Wedderburn and the "baboo," warned its readers that "if India were as with England and had the same Poor-law, there would be eighty millions of paupers in receipt of relief."¹⁴

'Government Charnel Houses' (1896-97)

High prices, meanwhile, were rapidly turning drought into famine. Acute distress was already visible in the North Western and Central Provinces in August 1896; by October, the police were opening fire on grain looters in Bihar and the Bombay Deccan. The *New York Times* published a letter written in October from the American Board missionary R. Hume in Ahmednagar. Pointing out that the drought was much more widespread than in 1877, Hume despaired that "for two days my servants tried in vain to buy 50 cents' worth of grain for use." With "no more rain ... likely to fall for eight full months," the next possible harvest was nearly a year

away, and thus Hume was not surprised at the desperation of his normally "quiet, orderly" neighbors.

Already grain riots are common. Grain merchants will not sell grain, largely because they know the price will greatly increase, though even now prices are 300 per cent. above normal. So people break open grain shops and granaries, and threaten to kill the merchants if they interfere. They say: "We shall have soon to die without grain. If you interfere with our getting your grain, and we kill you in the struggle, it will be all the same." Similarly, these people say to the police and courts: "Arrest us for stealing and support us in jail. There we shall not die from starvation."¹⁵

At nearby Narsinghpur, the American missionary Margaret Denning described the heartrending ordeal of a Moslem smallholder who was forced to sell, first, his land, then his hut and finally his cooking utensils to provide food for his wife and two small children. Since "the government was doing nothing to relieve the poor," he gave his oldest child to the infidel missionaries in violation of his religion. "The man brought the boy to us, telling the child he could care for him no longer, although he had always hoped to send him to school, but that now he saw no way to save his life and educate him other than to give him away. The boy was not to think his father did not love him, and, if he lived and learned how to write, he was charged to write to his parents. The father bade him good-bye and, asking nothing for himself, went away." (Later the government begrudgingly opened a poorhouse in the vicinity, but the father, together with the child's mother and baby brother, perished under a squalid regime of poor sanitation, inadequate rations and hard labor.)¹⁶

Such stories were commonplace and they began to sow unease abroad. Sir Edwin Arnold was mobilized to reassure the Americans that "the British in India rule for the sake of the Indians first, and for revenue, reputation and power afterward."¹⁷ But with Spectator and other prominent editorial pulpits chiding him for excessive parsimony, the viceroy—otherwise preoccupied with destroying rebel villages along the Afghan border—reluctantly agreed to open limited relief work in the most stricken districts. He remained stubbornly opposed, however, to private charity, including international missionary appeals, and bitterly condemned the

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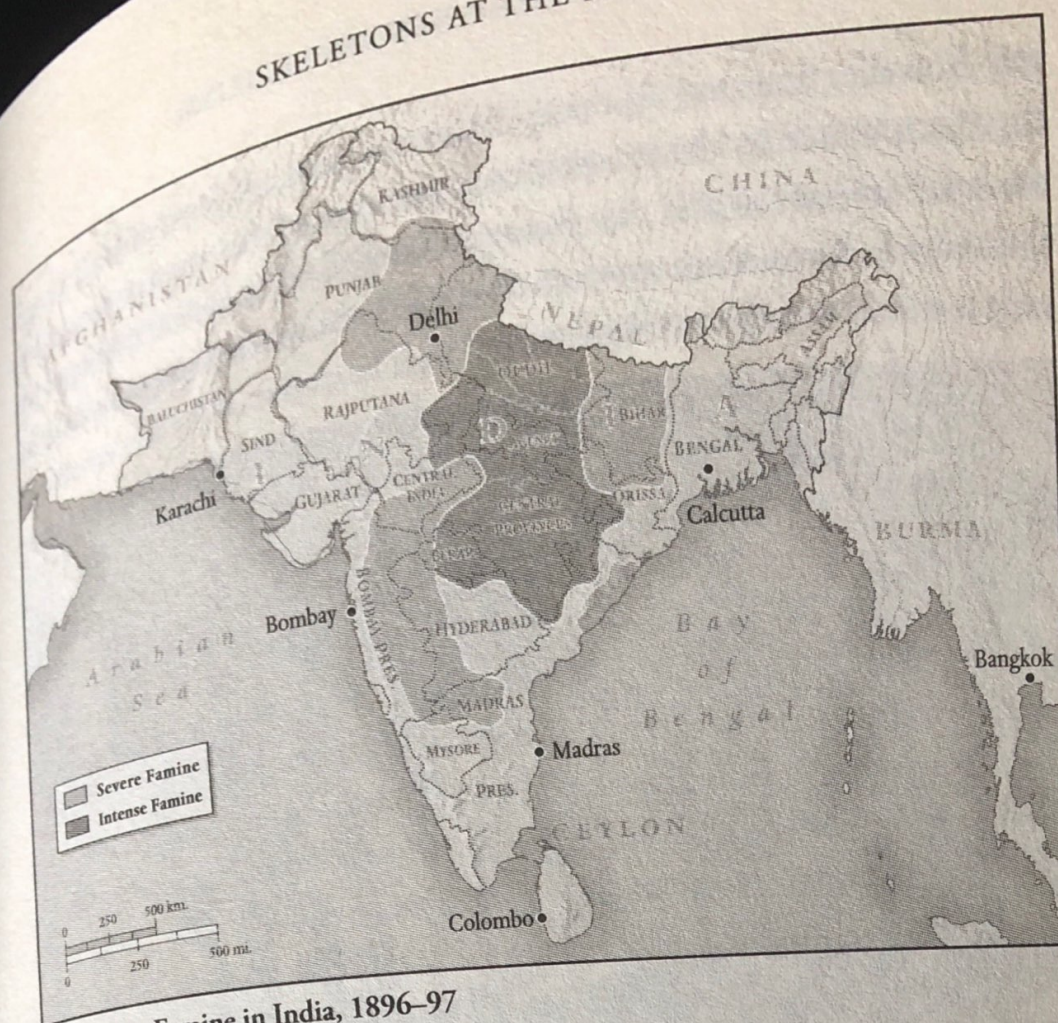


Figure 5.1 Famine in India, 1896-97

press for their "exaggerations."¹⁸ Like Lytton before him, Elgin foreclosed more liberal policies on a local or regional level. Thus the Bombay municipal committees were "banned to utilize their funds for running fair price shops," and the government of Bengal was forbidden to advance money to traders to import grain.¹⁹ (Burma, as a result, exported its large rice surplus to Europe.)²⁰ Finally, "as his coffers were drained by war on the North Western Frontier, his government ... reduced the contribution to the [Famine] Fund from Rs. 1.5 crores to Rs. 1 crore," in gross violation of previous official promises to Indians.²¹

In early December Elgin passed through Jubbulpur in the Central Provinces, a town that would figure centrally in international debates over British famine policy. The drought here had been unbroken since the fall of 1895 and the monthly death rate had been over 10 percent since September. The government had previously refused desperate local appeals to open relief work or control the price of grain. But Elgin, like Temple and Lytton in Madras a generation before, was stonily unmoved by anything he saw. "I can only say that travelling during the last few days in Indore

and Gwalior and now in these Provinces up to the gates of your city I have been struck by the prosperous appearance of the country even with the small amount of rain that has come lately." All India was outraged by this remark, based—one reporter claimed—on a quick glimpse from "the saloon window of the viceregal train."²²



Figure 5.2 "The prosperous appearance of the country ..."
Famine victims at Jubbulpur at the time of Lord Elgin's visit in 1897.

Convinced that Indians were natural shirkers and beggars, Elgin imported that old disciplinary cornerstone of utilitarianism, the poorhouse, to the subcontinent.²³ Designated for those too weak for heavy labor, the poor houses were despised by the peasantry who feared that "they would be converted to Christianity, or deported to places beyond the sea."²⁴ Confinement was especially unbearable to the tribal peoples, like the Gonds and Baigas, whom one missionary claimed "would sooner die in their homes or in their native jungle, than submit to the restraint of a government Poor House."²⁵ This was echoed by an English authority on the famine: "The hatred of the poorhouse has in many instances proved more strong than the fear of death."²⁶

Although the British regarded this antipathy as irrational, a visiting American relief official was horrified by conditions inside the poorhouses,

especially the diet. "The food was nothing but dry flour and some salt. An accustomed eye could at once see that THE GRAIN WAS ADULTERED WITH EARTH before it was ground into flour ... Alas! alas! for the poor who are obliged to eat the food given to them at the Poor Houses." Mennonite missionaries estimated that "perhaps about eight or ten annas or, at the most, a rupee per month is allowed for each person" by the government. (At 1899 exchange rates this was the equivalent of only 34 cents per month.)²⁷ As a result, one Mennonite wrote to Louis Klopsch, publisher of the *Christian Herald* in New York, "The death rate in this district which normally was under 50 in the thousand was forced by starvation up to the appalling figure of 627 in the thousand."²⁸

The Americans accused the government of deliberately deceiving world opinion about conditions in the Indian countryside. "How many more might have been saved and be today happy and full of life and vigor if they could only have been reached in time will never be known. Perhaps the bleaching skulls on India's plains could give us some idea. But the long continued withholding of actual facts by the government and the consequent general ignorance of the true conditions of things must be looked upon as the cause of many thousands of deaths."²⁹ Such accusations were made all the more effective by the shocking photographs of famine conditions that were reprinted in newspapers around the world. (During the 1876-78 famine, dry plate photography had required professional skill with a cumbersome tripod-mounted field camera. The advent of the cheap, handheld Kodak Number One camera in 1888, however, turned virtually every missionary in India into a documentary photographer.)³⁰

Rather than slowly die in the government charnel houses, peasants throughout the Central Provinces assaulted grain depots. The worst disturbances ironically occurred in Nagpur District, where the harvest was adequate but soaring market prices had nonetheless imposed starvation on Koshti caste weavers, immiserated by their losing competition against factory-made textiles. The local commissioner, Sir Andrew Fraser, arrogantly dismissed pleas to open relief works, and merchants outraged the public by selling adulterated grain at fantastic prices. After a series of violent clashes, the Lancashire Regiment had to be sent in to reinforce native infantry.³¹ As James McLane points out, the rioting was incipient class war

that did not spare the local leadership of the Indian National Congress: "In the Nagpur grain riots, the house of a leading Congressman, Gangadhar Madho Chitnavis, was singled out by a mob for looting and was saved by the intervention of sepoys. The rioters chose Chitnavis's house apparently because they believed, as a wealthy money-lender and land-owner and president of the municipality, he could influence the price or supplies of grain."³²

Similar conditions in the Bombay Presidency allowed the "Extremist leader" Bal Gangadhar Tilak to consolidate his takeover of the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha. Tilak, who had long urged the Congress to adopt the more militant agitational methods of the Irish, now played Michael Davitt in the Deccan, calling for popular resistance against tax collections.³³ (Davitt himself was meanwhile speaking alongside Naoroji and Eleanor Marx at protests against Elgin organized by Hyndman's Social Democratic Federation in London.)³⁴ Tilak's stirring invocations of the heroic Maratha past roused a martial populism in hungry villagers as they united once again, as in 1877, to oppose the hated revenue man. The British were unnerved. "The assistant collector of Poona district reported that 'not a pie of the revenue instalment' due on 10 December 1896 had been paid to the government." In the Kolaba district the collector was besieged by more than 4,000 ryots demanding remission of their taxes, and the *Times of India* trembled at the massive response of villagers to Tilak's organizers.³⁵ The tense political situation in western India was further inflamed by the draconian British response to the arrival of the Black Death from China.

The bubonic plague came to Bombay in summer 1896 probably as a stowaway on a ship from Hong Kong. At the time, some scientists theorized that drought, as previously in southern China, was a critical factor in driving plague-carrying rats into more intimate commensality with human victims.³⁶ Bombay, in any event, offered an ideal ecology for a pandemic: fetid, overcrowded slums (perhaps the densest in Asia) infested with a huge population of black rats. For years health officers had warned British administrators that their refusal to expend anything on slum sanitation was preparing the way for an "epidemic apocalypse."³⁷ Florence Nightingale, in addition, had repeatedly crusaded against the city's "phantasmagoria" of disease conditions, but the "European townspeople were

united in blocking increased taxation to pay for new water and drainage schemes."³⁸

The city's fabulous boom in the 1880s and 1890s moreover had been subsidized by the falling living and health standards of its vast majority: "The wages of unskilled laborers increased only five percent in 35 years while grain costs rose 50 percent and land values and rents tripled." The progressive immiseration of its working classes, Ira Klein argues, was the single most important factor in Bombay's "extraordinary, disproportionate blossoming of death near the turn of the century."³⁹ Despite several pandemic-stricken exoduses, the famine in Bombay's hinterlands left little option for the urban poor but to remain in their pestilential slums. Indeed, the drought inundated the city's environs with famished refugees from the Deccan: 300,000 of them in April, May and June of 1897 alone.⁴⁰ Starvation and cholera were promptly added to plague: eventually killing a fifth of the city's low-caste laborers.⁴¹ Even more alarming to commercial elites, some foreign ports began to quarantine shipments of wheat from Bombay. There were fears that a general embargo might destroy western India's foreign commerce.

As the city's morale plummeted, the governor's Plague Committee, still ignorant of the plague's true vectors, launched an unprecedented war against the tenement neighborhoods that sheltered the pandemic. The resulting onslaught of fire, lime and carbolic acid utterly failed to stop the plague's advance (it simply drove rats into neighboring homes), but it did unhouse thousands. (In England, some of the press proposed the "radical purification" of burning the entire native city to the ground.)⁴² While destroying peoples' homes and shops, however, the government did nothing to control the explosion in grain prices that was spreading starvation faster than plague. "Unrest in Bombay against continuing exports of foodgrains from the Presidency in the face of the serious famine" was thus combined with riots against the housing demolitions and the "kidnapping" of family members to the hated plague hospitals.⁴³

Meanwhile railroad shipments of contaminated relief grain spread the plague with great efficiency across the Ghats into the arid and hungry Deccan. Modernization and immiseration were again a deadly combination:

Even more important than travellers in bringing infectious rodent fleas to new locales was India's vast commerce, developed through the encouragement of free trade policies ... The transport of rice, bajri, wheat and other grains across the famine-stricken country in the late 1890s, a traffic meant to be life-giving, particularly helped disseminate plague amongst India's malnourished population. Grain was the favorite food of the black rat, while the great plague vector [the flea], "bred best in the debris of cereal grains." ... When these fleas arrived at new towns or villages they often carried plague bacilli with them, fastened on local black rats as new hosts, began epizootics and then transferred plague to humans as alternate hosts.⁴⁴

Oblivious to native dignity, the subsequent eradication campaign in the Deccan was militarized under a special executive headed by a haughty racist, W. C. Rand. The new Epidemic Disease Act gave him powers to "detain and segregate plague suspects, to destroy property, inspect, disinfect, evacuate and even demolish dwellings suspected of harbouring the plague, to prohibit fairs and pilgrimages ..."⁴⁵ Rand boasted that his measures "were perhaps the most drastic that had ever been taken to stamp out an epidemic."⁴⁶ As one Indian historian has written: "Rand had summoned British troops to his aid and had swept down on the slums like a proverbial wolf on the fold. Plucking out men, women and children from their homes, he burnt their belongings and desecrated their shrines. Suspected victims were forcibly evacuated, their families coming to hear of them only after they were dead."⁴⁷

The shocking contrast between the huge number of people detained, many of them apparently healthy, and the relatively few ever released alive from the plague camps played on Indians' worst apprehensions about British rule.⁴⁸ Rumors spread across the country that Indian patients were being murdered to extract a vital oil to be employed as a magic ointment by Europeans.⁴⁹

Across India, meanwhile, there was growing outrage at the lavish preparations to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of Queen Victoria's rule. "In the Lahore Town Hall, a group of Indian schoolboys broke up a meeting of leading English and Indian citizens by insisting that money be raised for famine orphans rather than for a memorial to Queen Victoria." But

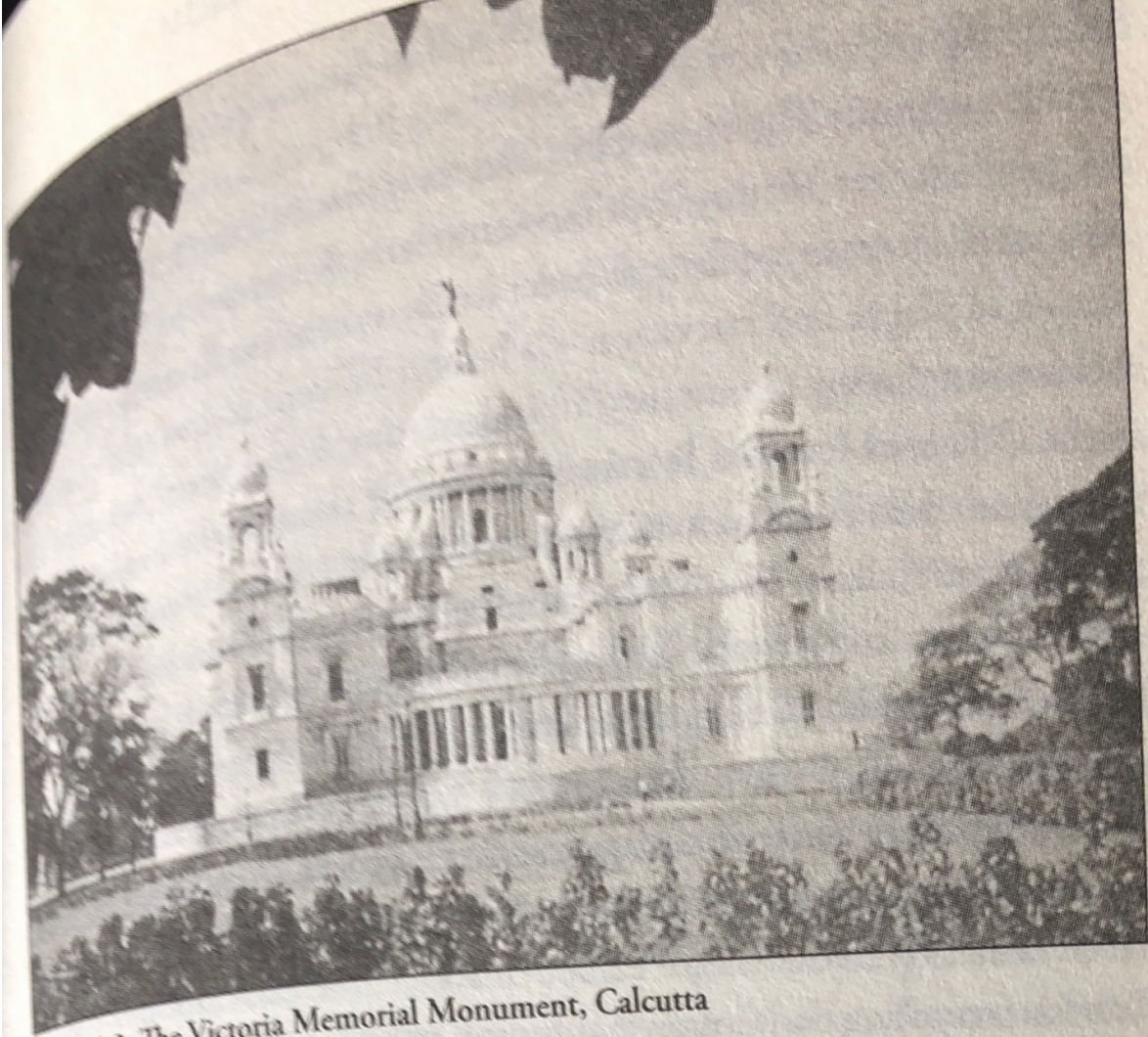


Figure 5.3 The Victoria Memorial Monument, Calcutta

was in famished and plague-infested Poona that imperial arrogance finally sparked what many feared to be the prelude to a second Mutiny. On 22 June two Indian patriots assassinated Rand and an underling as they were driving away from Diamond Jubilee fireworks at Government House. The murders were followed a month later by an unprecedented Muslim eruption in Calcutta after a court ordered the destruction of a neighborhood mosque. "For several days large groups ... roamed the streets, attacked isolated Europeans, and threatened to loot and burn factories. The disturbances were unusual in that the rioters singled out Europeans and ignored Hindus."⁵⁰

The Poona assassinations nonetheless gave Elgin a welcome pretext to strike back against the Maharashtrian tax resistance movement as well as his critics in the vernacular press. Tilak, accused of being the "spiritual godfather of the Rand murders," and four newspaper editors were promptly charged under a new sedition law. "Magistrates were empowered to bind down editors of newspapers for good behaviour, and to send them to prison in default of security, without trial for any specific offence." Any

figure as an order-of-magnitude approximation for the combined mortality of the 1896–1902 crisis.¹⁴¹

These great fin de siècle famines, followed by another El Niño-linked drought-famine in 1907–08 that Maharatna estimates took 2.1 to 3.2 million lives in the United Provinces, cast a long mortality shadow over the first decade of the twentieth century.¹⁴² Their immune responses weakened by the long ordeal of hunger, the rural poor in western and northern India were mowed down in the millions by epidemic waves of malaria, tuberculosis and plague. The Black Death, spread by drought-induced rat migrations, entrenched itself in the former famine districts of the U.P. and the Punjab, where it had claimed 8 million further victims by 1914.¹⁴³

The cumulative damage to the subcontinent's productive forces was colossal. "Almost all the progress made in agricultural development since 1880 was nullified during the famines."¹⁴⁴ Srivastava claims that 92 percent of plough cattle in the Punjab died in 1896–97; while in the Bombay Presidency (according to Tomlinson in the *New Cambridge History*) the herds did not regain their 1890s levels until the 1930s.¹⁴⁵ Partially as a result of this catastrophic shortfall of animal power, the net cropped area in both the Bombay Presidency and in the Central Provinces in 1900 had declined by 12 percent relative to 1890. In the most stricken districts the decrease in cultivation was 25 percent to 41 percent.¹⁴⁶

The country's demographic engine likewise ground to a near halt. In the thirty years from 1891 to 1921, India's population barely grew from 282 million to 306 million—hardly a Malthusian boom.¹⁴⁷ Indeed, in many parts of India there had been a fifty-year standstill in population growth. Thus in Agra, Rohilkhand and Allahabad, among other localities, the 1921 population was less than that of 1872, while in Lucknow, Jhansi, Gujarat, most of the (former) United Provinces and the Native States, merely the same.¹⁴⁸ For India as a whole, only the 1880s had seen a relatively healthy ratio between birth and death rates.

And what lesson did the British draw from these catastrophes? The most comprehensive official survey, the *Report on the Famine in Bombay Presidency, 1899–1902*, conceded that much of the excess mortality might have been avoided by "widespread gratuitous [home] relief from the beginning," but insisted that "the cost could have been such as no

country would bear or should be called upon to bear" (although both the Moguls and the Qing provided this form of relief during the eighteenth century). Likewise the principal finding of the Report of the 1901 [all-India] Famine Commission—despite the fact that barely a fifth of estimated famine victims received any British assistance whatsoever—was that "the relief distributed was excessive."¹⁴⁹