

PART III

Anticolonial Famine Relief:
Mobilising against Hunger
and Colonialism

Famine Amid Swadeshi and Swaraj, 1900s–1920s

Abstract

Documenting famines and organising relief for the afflicted population was part of Indian nationalist activity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when promoting a vision of a future India free from famine became part of Indian political mobilisation. Tracing Indian nationalist activity in India, Britain and North America in particular, the chapter demonstrates the significance of famines in the transnational history of Indian nationalism in the early twentieth century.

Keywords: Indian nationalism, diaspora nationalism, anticolonialism, anti-imperialism

5.1 The Indian Famine Union in London: Advocating Indian Political Demands in the Colonial Metropole at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

The Indian Famine Union's Constitutive Meeting

Criticism of the colonial management of famine in India predated the twentieth century, but it was in the aftermath of the devastating Indian famines of the 1890s that the demands for the effective prevention of famine mounted in India and in Britain. In June 1901, London's Westminster Palace Hotel hosted the first assembly of the Indian Famine Union which brought together retired British members of the Indian Civil Service (ICS), parliamentarians, philanthropists and journalists. The hotel was a popular venue for politicians, diplomats and lobbyists due to its proximity to parliament and its luxury amenities. The nature of the gathering and the choice of its location made it difficult for the *Times of India* to believe that the Indian Famine Union would help the cause of famine prevention. It suspected that this new organisation intended to deflect state responsibility, making famine control a matter of British philanthropy instead.¹ This accusation proved unfounded, for the Indian Famine Union had no intention of relieving the colonial state of its duty to prevent another famine from ravaging India and killing millions of the Empire's subjects as a result.

Membership of the Indian Famine Union overlapped with that of the British Committee of the Indian National Congress in London, which advocated Indian political demands in Britain since 1889.² The impressive line-up of the first meeting

of the Indian Famine Union included the journalists and authors Vaughan Nash (1861–1932) and William Digby (1849–1904), as well as well-known heavy weights of moderate Indian nationalism, most notably Dadabhai Naoroji (1825–1917) and Romesh Chandra Dutt (1848–1909).³ The Indian Famine Union not only carefully selected its members but also chose the timing of the inaugural session deliberately. Under the lead of Antony MacDonnell, the third Indian Famine Commission was currently finalising its much-anticipated evaluation. British liberal William Wedderburn (1838–1918), long-time chairman of the British Committee, considered this an opportune moment to increase public pressure on the India Office to recognise the importance of revising its anti-famine policies.⁴

Many of the attendees contributed to Indian economic nationalism by analysing and criticising the impoverishment of India under colonial rule. They identified poverty as a central cause of famine in India, which was a radical proposition at the time.⁵ Naoroji was a professor, journalist and social reformer by the time he began studying the impact of colonial rule on the Indian economy. Commencing his writing on the “drain of wealth” in the mid-1860s, Naoroji showed that the practice of financing exports and the colonial administration through money raised in India precipitated a flow of wealth out of India.⁶ By calculating India’s national and per capita income, he defined the Indian economy in national terms, and therefore facilitated the imagining of India as a spatially delimited community and entity.⁷

Some of the later members of the Union had already commented on the intermediate findings of the Indian Famine Commission in March 1901. William Digby, the author of *The Famine Campaign in Southern India* (1878) and *India for the Indians* (1885), demonstrated his disagreement with MacDonnell in an exchange of statements in the *Times of India*.⁸ Digby particularly questioned MacDonnell’s statements on the condition of the rural population and the extent of famine-mortality. “[The Indian peasant] is not the starving creature that some people seem to imagine,” argued the head of the Indian Famine Commission. Digby, in return, recommended him to consult his forthcoming book to correct his statements.⁹ His 700-page magnum opus *Prosperous India* (1901) used the government’s own statistics and Naoroji’s previous analysis to demonstrate how rural impoverishment bred famine in India.¹⁰ The book was part of a series of related publications all released in the same year. These included, Naoroji’s re-edited collection of earlier writings *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* and Romesh Chandra Dutt’s *Indian Famines: Their Causes and Prevention*.¹¹ Equally important were Dutt’s letters to the Viceroy of India, George Nathaniel Curzon, published as a book in Britain in 1900 and pointing out the siphoning off of land taxes during famines.¹² Finally, the instigator of the Indian Famine Union himself, Wedderburn, had added to the list of publications on Indian famines. As a member of the ICS from 1860 to 1887, he had witnessed first-hand the suffering inflicted by famines in India. This drove

him to study the conditions of the peasantry in India and to call for investment in rural development. Concurring with Indian writers who identified poverty as a central cause of the frequency and intensity of famines, he argued that the Indian peasantry ought to be in a position to save to compensate for seasonal shortages.¹³ His 1897 pamphlet *Skeleton at the (Jubilee) Feast* condemned the preparation of the pompous ceremony of Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in a year of famine.¹⁴ In the same publication, Wedderburn demanded an official enquiry into the economic condition of rural India—a demand that had grown out of the debates of the INC. It was this demand that the Indian Famine Union now tried to popularise among metropolitan audiences, arguing that such a study would help build a factual basis for the improvement of colonial famine prevention. Since the colonial state questioned the objectivity of previous studies of Indian and British authorship, the demand for an independent enquiry meant to force the colonial administration into a debate on the state and causes of poverty in India. As Digby described in 1901, a profound ideological disagreement had eclipsed any middle-ground between defendants and critics of colonial capitalism at that time.

Two schools exist. One always referring to the increasing prosperity of the country and the people, and claiming unstinted praise for England as the creator of this prosperity; the other is incessantly dilating upon the rapidly-growing and now alarming impoverishment of both country and people [...] One is right; the other is wrong.¹⁵

Unsurprisingly, therefore, official reactions to the Indian Famine Union were negative. The responses of the Secretary of State for India, George Francis Hamilton, and the Indian Viceroy Curzon vacillated between ignoring the Indian Famine Union and discrediting its demands.¹⁶

The Indian National Congress and the Indian Famine Union

The response of the INC to the Indian Famine Union was naturally more benign: the 1901 Congress gave its formal blessing to the organisation, accepting it as a champion of Indian demands in London.¹⁷ Despite these concerted efforts, the Indian Famine Union was unable to move the India Office into giving in to the request for an official investigation. When the INC met in Bombay in 1904, Hari Sitaram Dixit again brought up the Indian Famine Union to stress metropolitan support for an evaluation of rural poverty in India. Dixit called upon the colonial government to either accept the result of Indian studies or agree to an independent enquiry. Other speakers at the meeting found it difficult to accept that, given the frequency with which the colonial state convened commissions, it felt unable to create the one commission that Indians actually called for.¹⁸ A year later, in 1905, the Indian

Famine Union further strengthened its ties to the INC, when it invited the members of an INC delegation to a meeting in Liverpool. In the midst of the British election campaign, when the imminent landslide victory of the British liberals was already anticipated, an INC delegation, consisting of the newly elected INC president Gopal Krishna Gokhale (1866–1915) and the Punjabi Congress politician Lala Lajpat Rai (1865–1928), travelled to London. The British Committee hoped that the visit would invigorate it, since the electoral campaign and the sickness of some of its leading members had slowed down its activities. Hopes were high that a liberal victory would bring political reform in India.¹⁹

In the resolution passed during the Liverpool meeting of October 1905, the Indian Famine Union expressed “its cordial sympathy with the aspirations of the people of India” and recognised constitutional reform as “the only effective way” to counter poverty and famine.²⁰ Although it declared Indian self-rule to be central to the reduction of hunger, the Indian Famine Union remained strictly within the confines of moderate demands that spoke of a gradual and indefinite process of reform. In hindsight, the fact that Gokhale had addressed the Indian Famine Union alone while Rai remained absent could be interpreted as a sign of dissent. The Indian Famine Union was of no appeal to the generation of extremists who formed a political counterweight to the old guard of the Congress. Rai, though he tried to unite the INC, was counted among the extremist faction that criticised the Congress for its conciliatory stance towards the colonial state.²¹ Such criticism of Congress politics can be traced back to the 1890s, but more radical political forces in India gained ground in the wake of the decision of the colonial administration to partition the east Indian province Bengal along a Hindu-Muslim divide. The division of Bengal resulted in the first mass boycott of British goods, the *swadeshi* (of one’s own country) movement.²² Though the colonial state claimed that dividing Bengal constituted an administrative necessity, it was an attempt to secure the control of the province. Bengal was home to a growing group of critical Indian intellectuals and still the centre of the colonial administration. While moderates embraced *swadeshi* and welcomed the advocacy of self-help and sacrifice that would become central elements of Indian nationalism, they sought distance from the increasing militarisation of the movement. This split also reflected in a growing divide of the moderate and extremist faction of the INC.²³ The shift of Indian politics at this moment is often exemplified with Naoroji’s own transformation. The Grand Old Man of Indian nationalism had long been convinced that Indians could win their greatest battles in the British Parliament. Naoroji had joined the House of Commons as the first Indian MP in 1892 and maintained his seat of Central Finsbury until 1895. After the defeat, Naoroji increasingly “radicalised”—a political trajectory that culminated in his call for *swaraj* (self-rule) at the Calcutta-Congress in 1906.²⁴ Shortly before, Naoroji had returned to India and was now elected Congress president for the third

time in his life. During the Congress session, the INC declared its unanimous support of swadeshi.²⁵ Against the background of swadeshi, the idea that the political answer to famine lay primarily in demanding the colonial state to recognise the extent of poverty and bring about development lost ground. Swadeshi made the fight against poverty and famine the subject of Indian self-help.

5.2 “The duty which we owe to each other as members of a nation”: Famine Relief as Indian Nationalist Mobilisation, c. 1890–1908

Social Service and the Transformation of Indian Famine Relief

The provision of aid during famine had a long genealogy in South Asia where different communities practiced philanthropy and alms-giving.²⁶ Indian famine relief was not invented in the twentieth century, but its organising principles shifted visibly between the 1890s and World War I.²⁷ The social service movement started to show in South Asia from the 1880s onwards and novel techniques of fundraising, volunteering and relief administration altered how Indian elites responded to famines in the early twentieth century.²⁸ Indian philanthropy intertwined with British, European and American debates on charity, self-help and national efficiency, and its own ways of organising social service and welfare activities in India emerged. As Carey A. Watt aptly pointed out, Indian social service became an exercise in nation-building, aimed at crafting citizens and creating a sense of national belonging.²⁹

Though not limited to Hindu communities, Indian nationalist famine relief in the twentieth century was partly rooted in Hindu socio-religious reform that had gained pace in the previous century.³⁰ The Brahmo Samaj was one of India’s oldest Hindu reform movements and was founded by Rammohun Roy in Bengal in 1828. An offshoot of the Brahmo Samaj, the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, was established in 1878 due to a break of some of its progressive members with the Brahmo leader Keshab Chunder Sen. Social service became a pillar of the new group of Brahmos, who ventured out into the field of famine relief in the 1880s and 1890s.³¹ Considerably larger than the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj was the Arya Samaj who started to engage in famine relief in the 1890s. The Arya Samaj was founded in Bombay in 1875 and Lahore in 1877, and was particularly successful in North India. It pursued a religious reform agenda. Its members called for a revival of a pure form of Hinduism by evading a series of social customs and practices that it deemed as alien elements to Hindu culture. Religious reform aimed to countervail the perceived numeric decline of Hindus in India and to strengthen the Hindu community. The cultural nationalism of the Arya Samaj, that linked Hinduism and nationalism, is considered an important precursor of later Hindutva ideology of the political right.³²

Lajpat Rai joined the Arya Samaj in 1884 and quickly climbed its ranks. In 1897, alarmed by the doings of missionaries, he initiated the assistance of Hindu children during the famine. Rai interpreted the reception of Hindu children by the Christian missions as a failure of Hindus, because they had left the care of the children to “outsiders”. In this context, he envisioned the rescue of Hindu children from starvation a test of Hindu national capacity.³³ Under the lead of the Arya Samaj, students of the Dayanand Anglo Vedic College assembled Hindu children in the famine-affected provinces in North India and placed them in orphanages run by the Samaj in Ferozepur, Punjab.³⁴ Rai also pushed the adoption of legal mechanisms preventing Christian missionaries from sheltering Hindu children, which influenced the decision of the third Indian Famine Commission to ban the removal of children from districts affected by famine.³⁵

Lajpat Rai made famine relief a nationalist endeavour, but his statements and actions were ambiguous and even contradictory at times. On the one hand, he wished to promote a national philanthropic movement in which no Indian was left uncared for. While he travelled across India to solicit funds for the famine relief work of the Arya Samaj, he flagged the duty of Indians to assist their co-citizens and opined that India’s more privileged committed a sin if they ignored the hunger of their fellow citizens. On the other hand, the Arya Samaj provided aid to Hindus, and excluded Muslims and Christians. Rai argued that each religious community was obliged to help their members in need, while he also opined that—given that Hindus constituted the numeric majority—Hindus were destined to take the lead in this wider national movement.³⁶

Indian Famine Relief in the Aftermath of Swadeshi: Demonstrating Unity

When famine struck parts of the United Provinces in 1907, the response of the Brahmo and Arya Samaj was unprecedented in terms of the scope of their aid, the reach of their fundraising campaigns and the degree of professionalisation. This was partly the result of the colonial repression of swadeshi which helped the prominence of social service in India and strengthened its importance for nationalist mobilisation. After the ban of student participation in swadeshi activities in Bengal in 1907, Indian elites used social service to provide a new outlet for nationalist activity.³⁷ The Sadharan Brahmo Samaj initiated a central committee in Calcutta in 1907, which solicited funds from across India and oversaw the famine relief activities of Brahmos in the United Provinces. It appointed Abinash Chandra Mazumdar (1855–1925) from Lahore as the committee’s chairman and under his lead, Brahmos began to dole out aid in Allahabad in February 1908.³⁸ While Brahmos were often considered pro-British, swadeshi altered their stance. Criticism of the colonial state became more frequent.³⁹ During the famine the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj exhibited

an open critical attitude of governmental famine relief, which it deemed insufficient and of “humiliating character.”⁴⁰

A rechanneling of political activity into social service was visible in the work of the Arya Samaj in the aftermath of the colonial repression of rural protest in Punjab. In 1907, the colonial state considered the Arya Samaj a repository of radicalism. Rai, who was suspected of being behind the rural agitation, was deported to Burma.⁴¹ When he returned, he emphasised the non-political nature of the Arya Samaj on the one hand, and launched a nation-wide campaign to assist the famine-stricken population of the United Provinces on the other.⁴² Lajpat Rai established the Arya Samaj Famine Relief Fund, toured across North India to solicit support for the relief of the Arya Samaj and inspected the work carried out by the provincial government in the famine-affected areas. The rescue of orphans remained a central concern of the society during the famine, but it also expanded its aid to other affected parts of society.⁴³ In keeping with the use of social service as civic education, Rai emphasised that famine relief was an “object-lesson in self-help” and “most valuable training in public life.”⁴⁴ Although the timely provision of famine relief hinged on the ability to recruit large numbers of volunteers quickly, Lajpat Rai took considerable time for the recruitment of volunteers, arguing that men (and exclusively men) had to be selected with great care.⁴⁵ The Arya Samaj offered social service training to women, but reduced the scope of their activities to the home. Social service at this time, including the provision of hunger relief, was predominantly perceived and constructed as a male endeavour.⁴⁶

Rai’s appeal to assist the famine-stricken population of the United Provinces also attracted a newcomer to the field of famine relief. The Servants of India Society (SIS) approached Rai and offered to contribute three of its members.⁴⁷ It was the first time SIS responded to famine and although both institutions were divided in their approach to social reform, the Servants believed that they had much to learn from the more experienced Samajis. The famines of the 1890s had instigated Gokhale’s plans of launching an Indian social service organisation, but it took him until 1905 to inaugurate the SIS in Poona (today’s Pune).⁴⁸ Although Hindu in character and outlook, the SIS understood itself as a non-communal organisation which set it apart from the Arya Samaj. Reflecting the moderate nationalism and liberalism that Gokhale professed, the SIS worked within the constitutional boundaries of the British Raj to make India and its citizens fit for self-rule.⁴⁹ Gokhale understood the organisation to constitute a training site, where future leading Indian citizens were to receive their education in service. This thinking also surfaced in the context of famine relief. As the SIS assisted the famine-stricken on various occasions during the first half of the twentieth century (a role that is discussed in chapter 1 of the book), its members often reflected on how the participation in relief work promoted civic virtues. Gopal Krishna Devadhar, a

founding member of the SIS and one of the organisation's later famine specialists, claimed that the famine provided volunteers with "a very good opportunity to learn the first elements of real love for the country."⁵⁰ Yet despite the emphasis on the benefit of social work, the perceived need for a careful selection of volunteers limited the participation of Indians. This had already surfaced in the Arya Samaj's mobilisation of relief workers, and showed again in the general admission policies of the SIS. Future members of the SIS went through a careful and lengthy selection and training process, at the end of which they had to commit to a frugal lifestyle that ensured their dedication to the SIS and the nation.⁵¹ The actual number of volunteers involved in relieving the distress of famine was thus small. In 1908, in addition to the forty volunteers of the Arya Samaj, three members of the SIS assisted the famine-stricken.⁵² Although women remained conspicuously absent from the early famine relief efforts of the SIS, the organisation would later strive to increase the participation of women in social service. This was helped with the formation of the Seva Sadan (The Mission to the Women of India) in Poona in 1909. Women trained at the Seva Sadan later served as nurses at religious festivals (*melas*), in dispensaries and hospitals.⁵³ They also provided medical assistance during famines in the 1910s and 1920s and participated in nutritional education that sought to address maternal and infant malnutrition.⁵⁴ In 1919, in response to famine conditions in the Bombay Presidency, the SIS, in cooperation with the Bhagini Samaj in Bombay and the Seva Sadan in Poona, mobilised female volunteers to join Indian famine relief work. Volunteers of the Bhagini Samaj went to Kathiawar to assist middle-class women observing purdah, helping according to own estimates, 23,000 women in total.⁵⁵

Although the overall contribution of Indian organisations to famine relief was admittedly small, Indian relief providers argued that it was important and meaningful: on the one hand, Indians provided aid to groups that received not enough or no attention in colonial institutions. On the other hand, famine relief was considered a duty and a right of Indians vis-à-vis their co-nationals. This was emphasised by Lajpat Rai who noted in 1908 that "nothing can relieve us altogether of the duty which we owe to each other as members of a nation and as fellow men."⁵⁶ Similarly, in a response to the alleged resistance of colonial district officials to Indian famine relief, Devadhar stated, "it is certainly the right of the people to help their own countrymen in times of calamity and this question must be fought out."⁵⁷ In the aftermath of the famine, Devadhar wished to attribute historical significance to the recent relief work of Indian elites. While he described the work of Indian organisations in great detail to the readers of the *Modern Review*, he argued that "it [had been] for the first time in the history of Indian Famines that a successful effort was made by the people at large to go to the rescue of their unfortunate brethren purely out of a patriotic spirit, in a rather systematic and steady way."⁵⁸ Despite

the differences and at times rivalry between members of the Arya Samaj, Brahmo Samaj and the SIS, famine relief in 1907–8 became a demonstration in unity.

5.3 Echoes of Famine and Swadeshi in North America

“Gifts of Famine”: Indian Famine and Anti-Asian Xenophobia in the United States and Canada

While Indian organisations were working to mitigate famine in the United Provinces in 1907/8, anti-Asian activists in the United States used word of another famine in India to legitimise xenophobia. Although South Asian labour migration to North America was limited, it was met with racist outbursts. In the western US-Canadian borderland violence erupted in 1907 when an angry white mob attacked a group of workers asleep in their barracks in Bellingham. In fear of further violence, Indians on the US West Coast moved towards Canada, hoping that their status as subjects of the British Empire would offer them protection. But their arrival in Vancouver was again met with violence.⁵⁹ In October 1907, the *International Wood-Worker*, the mouthpiece of the Amalgamated Woodworkers’ International Union of America, strove to explain the recent violence against Indians. In *Gifts of Famine: Invasion of Sikhs from the Punjab*, the union claimed that Indian immigrants stole jobs and caused a drop in salaries, leaving the white working class in need for defence. It stoked fears, thereby risking further violence, by referring to the alleged unusual body height of Sikh men and their diseased bodies. The *International Wood-Worker* also reminded its readers how famines had devastated large parts of British India in the 1890s and predicted an “Asian invasion” would follow in the wake of renewed famines.⁶⁰ More specifically, the author referred to the arrival of Jat Sikhs from Punjab, a class and caste of former landowners, who had been dispossessed as a result of the restructuring of the land tax system in India under colonial rule and were consequently driven into wage labour and military service. The famines of the late 1890s had contributed to the impoverishment of agriculturalists in Punjab and fostered their migration.⁶¹ The majority of those fleeing poverty and famine however did not travel to Canada and North America but to East and Southeast Asia. The poorest sections of society were forced into the indentured labour system that after the abolition of slavery supplied cheap labour to the British Empire.⁶²

South Asian migration to Canada on the other hand had surged in the wake of imperial celebrations of the Diamond Jubilee of Victoria in 1897 and the coronation of Edward VII. in 1902, when Sikh battalions of the British-Indian Army who had taken part in the celebrations had crossed Canada on their way home. Some of them returned home with the wish to migrate. These South Asian immigrants

began to earn their livelihood as labourers on farms, construction sites and within the timber industry on the US West Coast and in British Columbia. Following common patterns of overseas migration, the establishment of communal and family networks resulted in a second phase of migration. The number of South Asians in British Columbia and the United States rose in 1905 and now also included more Indians of rural background. Yet, if South Asians indeed planned to invade North America, as the *International Wood-Worker* claimed, they did so rather slowly. Between 1904 and 1908, merely 5000 Indians made their way into Canada, and 6,800 arrived in California between 1899 and 1914.⁶³

Although the open display of racism was not unusual for the time, it is striking that US labour also directed its wrath against the British Empire. It claimed that colonial governance failed to remedy famines in India and charged the British with causing South Asian migration. To substantiate its claim, the *International Wood-Worker* used a historical analogy that equated the arrival of South Asians in the United States in the early twentieth century with the influx of Irish famine survivors of the *Gorta Mór*. This constituted a peculiar criticism of British imperialism that read the British failure of preventing famines as a threat to the wellbeing of the white working class in North America.⁶⁴

The increase of tensions and outright violence in conjunction with the lobbying of white anti-immigration leagues led the Canadian and US governments to restrict the immigration of Indians (and other Asians).⁶⁵ Denying Indians entry into Canada was a slippery slope as Indians were British subjects and, as such, were entitled to travel across the British Empire. To halt Indian immigration nevertheless, Canada adopted the Continuous Journey Regulation in 1908. Immigrants now needed to arrive on a direct route from their homeland to Canada, but since there was no direct steamship connection between British India and Canada the provision effectively prohibited South Asian immigration. The new orders also made it mandatory that Indians owned at least 200 US dollars when they entered Canada—a sum that remained out of reach for Indian wage labourers.⁶⁶ Similarly, the US Immigration Service started to systematically deny Indians entry after 1909, claiming that they were likely to become a public charge. Restrictions to Indian immigration and the experience of everyday racism in North America made imperial citizenship a central issue of Indian nationalists who began to settle and travel in North America in the first decades of the twentieth century.⁶⁷

“Victims of British Rule”: Famine as a Driver of Political Radicalisation

In May 1908, the activities of Indian radicals on the US East Coast became the focus of *New York Times* investigative journalism. The author of *Aroused India Faces Mutiny and Invasion* reported the frequent visits of obscure-looking Indians at a

lawyer's office in New York.⁶⁸ The article was a response to the advent of terrorism in Bengal. A month earlier, aiming to retaliate for the whipping of Indian students who had participated in swadeshi activities, two Indian men threw a bomb in a carriage. The bomb was supposed to kill the colonial official, Douglas Kingsford, who had ordered the whipping, but instead caused the death of two uninvolved women. The murder drew attention to Bengali revolutionary activities, marking the beginning of conflict between Indian revolutionaries and the colonial state that would intensify during World War I.⁶⁹ With Indian opposition against the British turning violent, the dubious Indian gentlemen who seemed to have appeared rather suddenly in the city of New York were seen as an indication that the United States was about to be involuntarily dragged into the conflict.⁷⁰

Colonial repression of the swadeshi movement had further driven the migration of Indian activists, who espoused more radical political demands and methods. The year 1905 saw the settling of Indian radicals in London, where Shyamji Krishnavarma opened the India House that became a locus of radical anticolonial cooperation.⁷¹ Following in the footsteps of Krishnavarma, Myron Phelps, an American lawyer of Irish origin, established an India House in New York in 1906/7. It was Phelps to whom the *New York Times* referred to in May 1908. The author cited letters Indians addressed to Phelps to illustrate the deep-seated Indian resentment against British rule. Famine, the *New York Times* argued, nourished anticolonialism, fuelling the political destabilisation of British India. Britain's alleged inability to contain famines in India furthermore threatened the American people, because they triggered nationalist uprising and migration to the United States. Referring explicitly to the *Free Hindusthan*, a publication edited by Taraknath Das (1884–1958), and its inflammatory writings, the *New York Times* claimed that Indians will bring terrorism to the United States.⁷²

Taraknath Das had fled India to escape imprisonment for his involvement in political radicalism in 1905. After seeking refuge in Japan, he had continued to the US in 1906, where he claimed political asylum. In 1907, Das worked temporarily as an interpreter for the US immigration service in Vancouver and helped Indian migrant workers in asserting their right to remain in the United States. He then enrolled at Norwich University in Vermont, where he was soon expelled for his political activism. He found shelter in New York, and in late 1908 began printing *Free Hindusthan* in the office of the *Gaelic American*, the outlet of the Irish republican *Clan na Gael*. The influence of his journalistic venture showed in the copies of *Free Hindusthan* that were confiscated in Calcutta.⁷³ Das, as well as other Indians abroad, used their distance from the colonial authorities to circumvent censorship and publish more freely about colonial rule.⁷⁴ In the first edition of *Free Hindusthan* in April 1908, Das reported famine conditions in north-east India.⁷⁵ The edition carried a two-page report about the famine in which Das demanded self-rule, claiming that

the end of colonialism was a necessary precondition for the prevention of future famine deaths.⁷⁶ Das cited the Irish-American economist Robert Ellis Thompson (1844–1924) to support the claim that only self-rule could durably free the country from hunger. Thompson had recently argued that political independence was a necessary requirement for the economic stability and prosperity of both Ireland and India.⁷⁷ On the cover of the November-edition of *Free Hindusthan* (figure 3) of the same year, two famine photographs alongside the heading “Victims of British Rule” were shown together with a notice that informed the readers about the paper’s mission: “The Free Hindusthan advocates liberation of Hindustan that Millions may be saved from the starvation caused by legalised pillage of India by the British government.”⁷⁸ The photographs showed two famished children; their bodies disfigured by hunger. Das neither mentioned the source of the photographs nor the year in which they were taken. They must have been familiar to readers, as the images, taken by American missionaries during the famine of 1899–1900, had circulated widely. They were reproduced several times in different contexts, amongst others in a booklet titled *Some Fruits of the Great India Famine*, which praised the success of converting a group of famine sufferers to Christianity. These earlier publications informed readers about the tragic death of the girls who both died shortly after the images were taken.⁷⁹ By using the images of the past famine without identifying them as such, Das intentionally blurred lines between the past and the present famine. In the accompanying text, Das remembered the previous role of Americans in mitigating famine in India, and explained that sending relief was not an adequate response. “We tell them again that no famine relief fund will ever be sufficient to stop the calamity until the people of Hindusthan get self-government.”⁸⁰ The rejection of (foreign) charity was by now a common element of Indian nationalist writing in North America. Indian activists saw humanitarianism as a makeshift that did not address the real cause of hunger, colonial rule.⁸¹ The Anglo-Indian William Charles Hopkinson, former police officer in India now acting as an inspector of Canadian Immigration, tasked to thwart Indian radicalism in Canada, suspected Das of exploiting famine to raise money to sustain revolutionary networks and placed him under permanent observation.⁸²

Das’ use of photography and his direct appeal to American audiences (in addition to Indian readers) distinguishes his writings on famine in 1908 from those of earlier Indian nationalists. But in terms of content and tone, it was also in continuity with publications of Marathi radicals, published over a decade earlier in India. Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856–1920) was charged with sedition for his poem in 1896 that glorified the seventeenth-century ruler Shivaji and deplored the prevalence of hunger.⁸³ At the time he published the poem, Tilak had succeeded Mahadev Govind Ranade (1842–1901) as the leader of the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha (PSS). The PSS was a voluntary political organisation with significant influence in the Bombay Deccan

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ROYAL FREEDOM OF ANY OTHER MAN." - Herbert Spencer, "Principles of Ethics" Section 279.
"RESISTANCE TO AGGRESSION IS NOT SIMPLY JUSTIFIABLE BUT IMPERATIVE, NON-RESIS-
TANCE HURTS BOTH ALTRUISM AND EGOISM." - The study of Sociology, Chap. 8.

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Caused by Legalised Pillage of India by
The British Government.

FUNERAL OF THE MARTYR KANAI LAL DUTT.

Kanai Lal Dutt, one of the executioners of the in-
former Gossain, was hanged on November 10 at Ali-
pore. There was a remarkable demonstration at the cre-
mation of his remains at Kalighat.

The body was carried through the streets with the
face uncovered, contrary to Hindu custom, so as to
enable the thousands who pressed around the cortage to
gaze upon the features of the "murdered Kanai,"
while purdah women followed in closed carriages. Hun-
dreds of rupees were collected round the burning ghat
in order to enrich the burning pyre, and there was a
general rush to gather portions of the ashes, which
were carried away in vases of silver and gold. Frag-
ments and bones were preserved for despatch as relics
to other towns. The uncle of the murderer delivered a
funeral oration which was greeted with cries of
"Victory to Kanai."

JOHANNESBURG, Sept. 17.—Mr. Harilal Gandhi,
son of the leader of the Indian community, who was
sentenced to a month's hard labor on the 18th of
August, for refusing to obey the Magistrate's order
and leave the Colony, was released to-day and quietly
deported by the authorities to Natal.

Fig. 3. Victims of British Rule. Cover page of *Free Hindusthan* I: 8 (Nov 1908). Reproduced courtesy of the South Asian American Digital Archive.

region and a training ground for later INC politicians.⁸⁴ Ranade, who provided much of the intellectual foundation on which Naoroji was to build his drain theory, founded the PSS in April 1870.⁸⁵ In 1872, the PSS began to study the condition of the peasantry in the famine-belt. Its English-language publication, the *Quarterly Journal of the Poona Sarvajanic Sabha*, made the condition of Bombay's rural population a prime topic. In 1875, when peasants opposed revenue collectors and money-lenders in what became known as the Deccan Riots, the PSS was accused of being behind the movement. In the succeeding years of famine in South India, the PSS provided an important counternarrative to the official reports by giving detailed accounts of starvation and relief efforts; a practice it continued during the famines of 1896–97 and 1899–1900, when Tilak was in charge.⁸⁶

5.4 Mobilising Against Famine and Colonialism in India, Canada and the United States, 1914–1920s

The Transnational Mobilisation of Indian Famine Relief

In 1914, the Congressman and member of the SIS, Hriday Nath Kunzru (1887–1987) was the secretary of the United Provinces Famine Relief Committee that under the presidency of the Vice Chancellor of the Allahabad University Sundar Lal (1857–1918) raised funds for non-governmental famine relief.⁸⁷ Several districts in the United Provinces went through another severe famine in 1914, the worst since 1907 as contemporaries claimed.⁸⁸ In addition to the SIS, the Arya Samaj and the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj were again leading Indian famine relief.⁸⁹ Intending to draw on famine for Indian nationalist mobilisation, Kunzru reiterated the importance of bringing Indians to aid their fellow citizens.⁹⁰ The fundraising of the SIS in 1914 also included South Asians in Canada and South Africa.⁹¹ To mobilise the South Asian diaspora in Canada, Kunzru wrote to the editor of the *Hindustanee*, a publication of the United India League, to ask for its assistance.⁹² “May I request you to draw the attention of our countrymen in Canada to the sufferings of the people of the United Provinces? I know they have grievances of their own, but I feel certain that they will nevertheless refuse help to their brethren.”⁹³

The United India League, as well as the Khalsa Diwan Society, were established in Vancouver and Seattle in 1907, committed to the welfare of Indian labourers in British Columbia and eager to challenge the anti-Asian immigration laws of Canada. In 1913, delegates of the organisations went to Britain and India to enlist support for the grievances of Indians in Canada. Although the delegation returned without concessions, it brought a group of Indians with them and, with the help of a lawyer, secured their right to enter Canada. Xenophobic fears rose in the aftermath

of the court ruling, leading to further restrictions of South Asian migration.⁹⁴ But the legal victory now raised hopes among Indians who had been stranded in port cities along the route from British India to Canada since the Continuous Journey Regulation had come into force. In an attempt to oppose Canadian immigration policies, Gurdit Singh left Hong Kong on a chartered Japanese steamer in April 1914. The Komagata Maru entered port cities along the route to Canada, allowing Indians stranded on their way to Canada to complete their journey. The ship arrived in Victoria harbour in April, carrying on board 376 Indians, mostly Punjabi Sikhs, who hoped to disembark in Vancouver. Upon the arrival of the Komagata Maru, South Asians, however, were denied access to Canada. After months of dispute over the fate of the passengers, the ship and its passengers were forced to leave for India in late July 1914.⁹⁵

The journey of the Komagata Maru was an important moment in the mobilisation of Indian transnational protest against imperialism. It followed in the wake of Gandhi's mobilisation of non-violent protest of Indian mine workers in South Africa against the state's repeated infringements on Indian citizen rights. Gandhi's experiment in *satyagraha*, or non-violent resistance, in South Africa was a stepping stone in his political career and received international attention.⁹⁶ The struggle of Indians in South Africa figured prominently in the publications of Indian organisations in Canada and the US which donated generously in support of the *satyagraha*. The experience of outright racism, manifesting in legal mechanisms to severely curtail the immigration of South Asians in white settler colonies, enabled Indians in British Columbia to relate to Indians in South Africa and to demonstrate larger structures of imperial discrimination.⁹⁷

The activities of the United India League and the Khalsa Diwan Society made Kunzru certain that his appeal would fall on open ears.⁹⁸ And indeed, his appeal was taken up during a meeting of the United India League and the Khalsa Diwan Society. Umrao Singh, student of electrical engineering at Washington University, had previously taken part in Indian relief efforts during the Kangra earthquake in 1905. He now took the lead in urging the Sikh community to mobilise funds. Another man present, Raja Singh, cited the history of famines in colonial India and referred to Dutt's writings to locate the cause of famine in colonialism. Those present had already decided to raise funds when Nabhi Ram Joshi rose to speak at length on the ills of colonial capitalism. In the following weeks, the U.P. Famine Relief Fund Committee in Vancouver collected money and the names of subscribers and the sums forwarded to Kunzru in India were shared with the readers of the *Hindustanee*.⁹⁹ As the United India League reported on the progress of colonial and Indian famine relief in the following editions of the *Hindustanee*, it railed against the low pay of workers in government-run famine works and saw a nationwide swadeshi campaign an appropriate response to such imperial labour exploitation.¹⁰⁰

Evidenced by its reference to Keir Hardie and Henry Mayers Hyndman, the United India League drew on socialist assessments of famine in India.¹⁰¹

At the time Sikh organisations in Canada were raising funds for famine relief, they had begun to pin their hopes on the Ghadar (Mutiny) movement. Aiming to take advantage of the mobilisation of Indian soldiers after the outbreak of World War I that left the colonial state vulnerable, the Ghadarites believed the time had come to drive the British out of India. In disagreement with the INC leadership who had commenced negotiations to advance the participation of Indians in key areas of state governance, the Ghadar movement strove for revolt. While North American anxiety had previously revolved around the arrival of South Asians, it was now their leaving that caused unease. Ghadar activists aimed to persuade Indian soldiers to turn against the colonisers and mobilised Indians across the globe, asking them to support the struggle against the colonial regime. Indians in North America began to board ships in 1914 to leave for India.¹⁰² It was against the backdrop of efforts of Ghadar to mobilise Indians into a movement that aimed to overthrow colonial rule that its leaders also spoke about famine. Reiterating Naoroji's drain theory and referring to Digby's writings, Ram Chandra, leader of the Ghadar Party and editor of the widely circulating *Hindustan Ghadar*, accused the colonial state of obscuring famine in India. "Today India is in the midst of perpetual and endless famine [...] and the officers of the government watch the terrific spectacle with the coolness of hardened villains."¹⁰³ Chandra lectured in California in July 1915 on the history of colonial India and circulated his analysis of famine also in a pamphlet.¹⁰⁴

Lala Lajpat Rai and Opposition to Missionary Humanitarianism

In the midst of the Ghadarite efforts to launch an uprising in India, Lala Lajpat Rai arrived in the United States. He had originally planned a six-month tour of Europe, but the declaration of World War I diverted him to America. He remained there, intermittently, for five years from November 1914 and used his stay to educate Americans about India's political demands and to deepen his contacts with like-minded activists. The Ghadar Party found little favour with the senior nationalist, who rejected the violence Ghadar propagated.¹⁰⁵ Rai instead connected with the India Home Rule Movement that Annie Besant (1847–1933) brought into existence in September 1915 before Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856–1920) took a hold of it.¹⁰⁶ Rai set up the Indian Home Rule League in New York in 1917 and started publishing *Young India*. Its editor was Jabez Thomas Sunderland (1842–1936), a Unitarian minister and long-time supporter of Indian nationalism. Sunderland had spent three months travelling in India from 1895 to 1896 to visit leaders of the Brahmo Samaj. In the aftermath of this journey, he became a vocal advocate of Indian nationalism and a critic of American imperialism. He became a member of the

Anti-Imperialist League and teamed up with Myron Phelps, who headed the Society for the Advancement of India in New York.¹⁰⁷ Sunderland also wrote on famine in India. In 1900, he presented a paper on *The Causes of Famine* that reiterated many of the claims Indian intellectuals advanced at the time. The paper was republished in 1904 as a stand-alone pamphlet and became well-cited by Indian nationalists in the US who used it as evidence of India's exploitation under colonial rule. Lajpat Rai for instance referred to it at length in his 1917 monograph *England's Debt to Britain*.¹⁰⁸

Rai, like many others, believed that India's contribution to the British war effort during World War I would be reciprocated with political concessions after the war. President Wilson's Fourteen Points speech in January 1918 fuelled this hope, as nationalist movements interpreted the president's call for self-determination to equally include colonised countries. Such expectations of Indian nationalists were still high during the Peace Conference, even if they were ultimately not fulfilled. Rai, who had written numerous pamphlets and books during his stay in the United States, once again increased the tempo of his publications in 1919 when he wanted to draw American attention to the Indian demands.¹⁰⁹ First disillusionment set in with the publication of the Montagu-Chelmsford Report in March 1919 that fell behind nationalist demands and continued to exclude Indians from the most important areas of state administration. To make matters worse, the colonial state enacted the Rowlatt Acts in March 1919, which maintained martial law in peacetime and served to crack down on the nationalist movement. In response to the escalation of colonial repression, Mohandas K. Gandhi launched a nation-wide civil disobedience campaign. The violent killing of peaceful protesters in Jallianwala Bagh in April 1919 by British troops who had opened fire on the order of Colonel Reginald Dyer resulted in Gandhi's decision to call off the movement.¹¹⁰ While the India Home Rule League provided a commentary to political events in India and the Peace Conference in Paris, it also published on starvation in India.¹¹¹ World War I caused economic dislocation in India, where prices of basic commodities skyrocketed.¹¹² Famine had to be declared in several districts across India, while scarcity was even more widespread. On top of famine, influenza spread in India, causing the death of an estimated 10 to 20 million people.¹¹³

The India Home Rule League was particularly vehement in its refusal of missionary fundraising efforts at the time. Contention arose after a Toronto-based fundraising committee consisting of Canadian and British philanthropists appealed to the public in the *Toronto Globe* in April 1919.¹¹⁴ By its own estimation, the committee was driven by the wish to improve the strained relations between Canada and India. To feed Canadian empathy for the Indian victims of the famine, the organisers foregrounded imperial connections and suggested that both India's and Canada's affiliation with the British Empire was a source of commonality. The assertion of a commonality based on empire, which contrasted with the history

of systematic discrimination against South Asians in Canada, infuriated the India Home Rule League. Putatively speaking on behalf of the people affected by the current famine, the League argued that Indians were willing to die in order to avail themselves of the help of the British-Canadian committee.

India does not want charity [...]. We are sick of appeals for charity. We believe that charity debases both the giver and the receiver. Our hearts bleed for the miseries of our country. Yet, we do not desire to save the lives of our people by foreign charity. We have been reduced to this condition by the imperialistic, capitalistic exploitation of modern civilization. By offering us charity the British people add insult to injury. We are proud people and we will rather die and let our people die than ask for charity. Let the millions of India perish by hunger.¹¹⁵

The statement of the India Home Rule League provides the opportunity to reinforce some points made earlier in the chapter as well as to identify new elements of nationalist responses to famine. The rejection of British-Canadian aid was connected to a broader critique of foreign humanitarianism, which *Young India* argued obscured and perpetuated the root cause of famines in India, that is colonial capitalist exploitation. This not unfounded criticism of humanitarianism (or charity in the parlance of the time) had been part of Indian writing on famines since the late nineteenth century. Also evident in the statement is an escalation of language, both in terms of the emotional response to famine and charity (“we are sick”; “we bleed”) and in terms of the suggested unity of Indians. Portraying the experience of famine as a collective experience helped to imagine the nation and its people as an entity, but negated that class, caste and gender (amongst other factors) were important determinants that split the Indian society into those who benefitted from colonialism and famine on the one hand, and those who were disproportionately affected by loss and death on the other. The collective experience of famine, expressed in the “we” here invoked, was a nationalist myth. Such assessments hark back to earlier Indian economic nationalist analysis of famine that, despite its strength of uniting critics of colonial capitalism, in so far as it reduced colonial exploitation to a stand-off between Britain and India, tended to obscure other power asymmetries.¹¹⁶

The India Home Rule League’s opposition to missionary fundraising continued in the following weeks and was fanned by the arrival of Robert A. Hume, missionary of the American Marathi Mission. Until his recent departure from India, Hume was the chairman of a relief committee in Bombay that collected and distributed money for famine relief on behalf of the National Christian Council of India. He now used his furlough to help the fundraising. *Young India* responded with scorn to the arrival of “one Dr. Hume” and reprinted excerpts from the missionary’s appeal for funds to demonstrate the extent of the suffering that colonialism was causing in India.¹¹⁷ Others joined in. According to the Bengali revolutionary M.N. Roy, the fact that even

missionaries, “the most sworn and vociferous defenders of British imperialism” called attention to India’s humanitarian needs, was evidence of the severity of the economic dislocation of the country.¹¹⁸ Roy had recently prevented his arrest by fleeing from the United States to Mexico. From his hideout, he wrote a serial article entitled *Hunger and Revolution in India* that drew a link between imperialism, capitalism and Indian poverty.¹¹⁹ He also noted that despite the many sacrifices India had made during the war, post-war rehabilitation concentrated on Europe and marginalised the plight of Indians. In this part of the analysis, the Indian radical found unexpected common ground with leading figures of the American missionary movement who currently flagged the needs of post-war India. Still, the purpose of Roy’s writing could not be more different. “It becomes self-evident,” Roy wrote in 1919 “that the liberation of India is more than a mere act of abstract justice, it signified a long step towards the redemption of the world from the jaws of the capitalist system.” Against the backdrop of the Bolshevik Revolution, the Roy strove to make India an arena of revolutionary politics, that would put an end to colonialism and with it, famine.

Against heightened anticolonial resistance across the British Empire, the colonial administration became increasingly wary of the way Indian nationalists in North America capitalised on famine to draw attention to the exploitative nature of colonial governance.¹²⁰ When in 1922 reports about an Indian famine-relief fundraising event in North America reached colonial officials in Whitehall, the latter responded nervously. In early September 1922, the *Boston American* informed its readers of a three-hour entertainment programme at the Old South Building that collected funds for famine-stricken India. Whitehall identified the Friends of Freedom for India (FFI) as organisers of the event and asked the US government to intervene.¹²¹ FFI was founded by Taraknath Das, Agnes Smedley, and Sailendranath Ghose in 1918. It assembled former Ghadarites and American sympathisers, among them the birth-control activist Margaret Sanger and the Chicago University professor Robert Morss Lovett. The size and membership of FFI pointed to a broadening alliance of American anti-imperialists and Indian anticolonialists that would considerably grow in the succeeding decades.¹²² Instructed by Whitehall, the British consul, who acted in cooperation with US officials, tried to stop the aid drive for India. FFI, however, was unwavering. In a statement published in the American press, it responded furiously to the attempt to interfere in its activities and promised to send the collected funds directly to the INC.¹²³

Gandhian Solutions to Famine

The outright refusal of missionary involvement and the emphasis of famine as a sign of imperial exploitation of India (although building on earlier Indian writings) arose within the context of the particular brand of Indian anticolonial nationalism

which flourished outside the subcontinent in the World War I era. Gandhi's experiments in famine relief that commenced in the 1920s are addressed in the following to complement the review of Indian nationalist famine relief and to return the gaze to India.

After Gandhi's return to India in 1915, he ascended to become the leader of the Indian nationalist movement in the interwar period. Gandhi pushed for the reorganisation of the INC and expanded its support among the masses. His rise to prominence was helped by the erosion of the stalemate between the extremist and moderate faction in the aftermath of the death of two of its prominent representatives, Tilak in 1920 and Gokhale in 1915. In August 1920, Gandhi convinced the Congress to give up its conciliatory politics and to launch a national swadeshi programme that, in addition to the boycott of British goods, aimed at a complete renunciation of the British system of rule. In 1920, Gandhi confidently announced that swaraj could be achieved within a year.¹²⁴

The swadeshi movement of 1920–22 overlapped with the mobilisation of famine relief for the people of the district of Puri in Orissa. In May 1920, Gandhi deputed Amritlal Thakkar of the SIS to Orissa to report about famine conditions and to oversee relief efforts. In July, he pressured him to remain in Orissa as long as famine prevailed.¹²⁵ Gandhi reprinted Thakkar's reports in *Navajivan* and *Young India* together with his commentary.¹²⁶ The relief work of the SIS was also covered by the India Home Rule League in New York, where Thakkar's reports were cited to accuse colonial officials of obscuring famine deaths.¹²⁷

Lauding the donations from different strata of Indian society in 1920 as “a happy sign of increasing national consciousness and charity of heart,” Gandhi strove to use the famine to stir nationalist feelings.¹²⁸ Gandhi's writings of famine were nested in swadeshi with an emphasis on self-restraint. He demanded Indians to forsake lavish meals until Orissa was fully relieved. “We would not have a feast in a family if a member was about to die of starvation. If India is one family, we should have the same feeling as we would have in a private family.”¹²⁹ Gandhi's plan to arm India's peasants against famine became part of the promotion of *khadi* (hand-spun and hand-woven cloth) that aimed to reduce India's economic dependence on British goods and was a pillar of the attainment of full economic independence.¹³⁰ In 1920–22, Gandhi advertised the use of the *charka* (spinning wheel) to relieve and prevent famine. His followers implemented the first experiments with the introduction of spinning in villages affected by famine. Gandhi evaluated the experiment as “abundant proof of the spinning wheel being the greatest insurance against famine, and being also the best measure of relief.”¹³¹ Arguing that an increase of the agriculturalist's purchasing power was necessary to increase access to food, Gandhi recommended the introduction of *khadi* industries in villages affected by

food scarcities. The idea that spinning represented a way to reduce famine stemmed from Gandhi's efforts of reviving village industries. It was also an expression of his renouncement of modern technology and emerged in opposition to the otherwise strong emphasis on the improvement of irrigation and transportation networks to prevent famines. Gandhi disagreed with contemporaries in- and outside the colonial administration who argued that the expansion of railway networks in India assisted in balancing out local scarcities. He outlined how the railway had led to the integration of remote Indian villages into the imperial market. Spinning and weaving, on the contrary, intended to free peasants from the enforced production of cash crops, and allowed them to exert full control over their labour. Gandhi was critical of employing the famine-affected in infrastructural work, believing that such forms of labour had no lasting impact on the peasant's resilience to famine.¹³² The production of *khadi*, to the contrary, was a process that could address the problem of famine lastingly through multiple angles: the various stages of production, from the preparation of the raw cotton, and the spinning of the yarn, to the weaving of cloth, could create an income for a larger group of people. While *khadi* production was meant to achieve independence from foreign cotton trade, it also was intended to have a positive effect on the peasants' morale and restore their dignity.

Gandhi alternately used the term "famine relief" or "famine insurance" when he spoke about the use of the *charka*, despite the fact that the introduction of spinning provided no immediate help.¹³³ Through the creation of an alternative source of income, the introduction of spinning and weaving rather constituted a means to rehabilitate famine-affected localities and to strengthen the resilience of agricultural labourers against the rise of food prices. Gandhi noted in 1921, "I know, this is but the commencement [sic] of the transformation. But when it is complete, not a man nor woman having sound hands need beg or starve."¹³⁴

In October 1921, after Gandhi's followers attacked a police station in Chauri Chaura, killing all of its occupants and police men, Gandhi called off the movement in February 1922 and in March was sentenced to imprisonment of six years.¹³⁵ The All-India Spinners' Association (AISA), tasked with the nation-wide promotion of spinning, continued earlier experiments in applying the *charka* in the aftermath of famines as well as other disasters in the 1920s. In 1925, AISA toured India with a lantern slide show that depicted the use of the *charka* in the flood-affected areas of North Bengal, where spinning was introduced to compensate for the loss of crops.¹³⁶ Apart from AISA, however, Indian social service organisations only sporadically took to spinning in their famine relief work. The SIS, although it did not use it in the aftermath of famine, nevertheless agreed that the promotion of spinning and weaving was a meaningful contribution of rural reconstruction—a field of engagement that would decisively grow in the 1920s and 1930s.¹³⁷

5.5 Conclusion

In the 1901 session of the Indian National Congress Jagadindra Nath Roy (1868–1925) pointedly observed, “plague, we have been told, is a problem of Bacteriology, and famine of Meteorology, (Laughter), and as both these sciences happen unfortunately to be in their infancy, we shall have to wait long before any solution can be found.”¹³⁸ Dissatisfied with the colonial administrators’ explanations for the frequency of famines in India and the proposed remedies, Indian politicians and social reformers intensified their efforts to expose the poverty of India’s rural population and called for the effective prevention of famines. Therefore, if the Bengal famine of 1942–44 “put the final nail in the coffin of colonial rule” as James Vernon has argued, Dadabhai Naoroji, Romesh Chandra Dutt and Mahadev Govind Ranade provided the casket and the death of millions of British subjects during famines in India in the late nineteenth century sunk the first nails into the wood.¹³⁹ Indian economic nationalism of the nineteenth century formed the bedrock of nationalist critique of the colonial handling of famine. Indian economists and politicians were among the first to demand that the colonial state addressed the root causes of famine, with poverty at its centre, rather than mitigating famine when it struck. While Indian assessments of the causes of famine in the nineteenth century have been well explored by earlier historians, this chapter offers a new perspective by demonstrating the importance of famine for Indian nationalist mobilisation in the first two decades of the twentieth century. It does so by examining publications of Indians in the United States and Canada and the mobilisation and provision of famine relief by Indian organisations. The historical context of such activities was the increasing transnational dynamic of Indian anticolonialism and the growth of the social service movement—both contributing to the diversity of Indian political activity in the early twentieth century.

The activities of the Indian Famine Union in London from 1901 to 1905 illustrates the widening of the support of Indian demands of poverty reduction and famine prevention in the colonial metropolis at the turn of the twentieth century. The partition of Bengal that set off the first mass boycott of British goods in Bengal and the boost of (South)Asian confidence after Japanese victory over Russia, fanned the outpouring of Indian radicals after 1905.¹⁴⁰ It was in the decade before World War I when Indian activists, many of whom were displaced in the wake of swadeshi, created organisations in North America (and elsewhere), to work for the rights of South Asian migrants and to agitate against colonial rule. Against the background of South Asian migration to the United States and Canada and the formation of Indian organisations in the early twentieth century, the demand to eradicate famine (and colonialism) in India was carried beyond the British Empire. The writings on famine of nationalists overseas tended to be more radical in their political

analysis, indicating the widening of Indian political demands in the early twentieth century. Whereas early moderate demands aimed to alter the colonial governance of famine, after 1905, a growing group of Indian anticolonial activists made clear that colonialism had to end in order to permanently eradicate starvation on the subcontinent. Besides claiming that Indians collectively suffered from colonialism, nationalist estimations on famine tended to side-line issues of class, caste and gender which were (are) important determinants in deciding who was affected by loss, displacement and death during famines. Far from being the leveller that nationalists occasionally made them out to be, famines affected sections of Indian society with varying degrees of intensity.¹⁴¹ With the diversification of Indian social and political movements in the interwar period, the political analysis of famine became more nuanced. This tentatively showed in the writings on famine published by those branded radicals and revolutionaries in the interwar period, which were infused with socialist criticism of global labour exploitation. It also showed in relief practice that from the interwar period onwards sought to respond more adequately to the needs of women through the inclusion of female aid workers.

The material aid provided by Indian relief organisations during famines and food scarcities, as a second form of nationalist mobilisation examined in the chapter, served to demonstrate political authority, claim legitimacy and craft citizens. It gained pace in the aftermath of the colonial efforts to suppress swadeshi activism, when Indian organisations rechannelled political activism into social service. Though marginal compared to the resources that underpinned colonial famine relief, the appeals for assistance and aid across provincial, regional and “national” borders were intended to fuel the identification of Indians as co-nationals. Against the backdrop of the formation of the Indian diaspora and the global travel of Indian activists, Indians in the United States and Canada (among other places) began to participate in fundraising activities. The colonial state watched the growing entanglement of humanitarian and political agendas with nervousness. The fundraising efforts of organisations in North America that opposed British colonialism frequently provoked attempts of supporters of British colonialism to discredit such campaigns and refute the claims made. However, their ability to stop such initiatives outside of India remained limited.

Famine Relief and Nationalist Politics on the Eve of Independence: The Bengal Famine of 1942–44

Abstract

The chapter reviews the history of the famine in Bengal and shows how political movements and organisations inside and outside Bengal worked together to provide aid. Their aid was underpinned by visions of India's post-independence political future, which were reflected in the mobilisation of the relief. The chapter examines the involvement of Hindu nationalists, Indian communists and Indian women's organisations, all of which drew on transregional and transnational networks to support their relief efforts.

Keywords: Bengal famine, Communism, Feminism, Hindu Mahasabha, AIWC

6.1 World War II and the Prevalence of Hunger in India

Although the Bengal Famine of 1942–44 remained unmatched in its scale and tragedy, it was part of a broader spectrum of hunger and poverty affecting India in the 1940s.¹ At the outbreak of World War II, parts of Punjab were already in the midst of a food crisis. Even though official relief was mobilised in December 1938, famine conditions were visible well into the year 1941 and produced alarming accounts of scurvy and rickets.² The people in Travancore and Cochin in southwest India were plagued by famine from 1941 to mid-1944. Food shortages left the poorer classes starving and malnourished.³ The hunger drove about 15,000 Travancoreans up north to British Malabar, where they squatted in camps that remained largely unaided.⁴ In the meantime, in Bijapur, a district situated in the interior of the Bombay province, the failure of seasonal rains in September and October 1942 had precipitated a food crisis.⁵ Famine was officially declared in December of the same year, but the provincial government was consumed by the task of food rationing in the city of Bombay. In a country where the economy was geared to meet the needs of a nation at war, the provision of relief for rural populations, who had no direct relevance for the smooth functioning of the war machinery, turned into a secondary concern at best.⁶ Famines continued to represent only the tip of the iceberg. In early October 1942, Sonia Tomara, who had come to the South-East Asian war theatre as the first female journalist to cover World

War II, offered the readers of the *New York Herald Tribune* a rare glimpse at the state of rural India. In her account of an unnamed village ten miles away from Delhi she wrote “I had indeed seen extremely poor villages in Russia, Poland, the Balkans, Italy and Spain, but hardly anything that could touch the distress here.”⁷ When British administrators in Whitehall read Tomara’s account they were alarmed. In a continuation of well-rehearsed colonial responses to the American news coverage of hunger in India, officials undertook efforts to repudiate her report.⁸ The poignancy of the article lay in its timing. When the colonial government declared war on the Axis Powers on behalf of India without previously consulting with Indian political leaders, the All India Congress Committee protested. Congress politicians withdrew from provincial governments and made the achievement of substantial political concessions a condition of its cooperation. The negotiations between the Congress and the British colonial state reached an impasse in 1942. In March, Sir Stafford Cripps arrived in India to renew efforts for a settlement, but failed to reach an agreement. In August, the Congress demanded the British to quit India and appealed for nationwide non-cooperation to enforce its claim. The colonial state responded promptly. In the following days and weeks, it banned the Congress and imprisoned over 60,000 Congress representatives. The suppression of the Quit India movement prompted widespread mass protests in return, which in light of a lack of leadership that could have moderated the masses turned increasingly violent.⁹ Weakened by the war, the British colonial state, which was under attack from the world’s liberals for its harsh reprisal of the Indian nationalist movement, wanted to prevent Tomara from inciting further agitation. Two months after her report from India, Tomara was writing again and once more, criticised the government for starving its colonial subjects.¹⁰ She was now in the east of India, where she witnessed some of the events that marked the beginning of the Bengal Famine.

The Making of the Bengal Famine

Amidst the series of famines that affected Indian society during the war, the hunger in Bengal was by far the severest. The famine and the diseases following in its wake would take the lives of an estimated three to five million people. Historians have pinpointed the government’s scorched earth campaign as one of the causes of famine conditions in Bengal. The fall of Burma in the spring of 1942 had turned Bengal’s eastern districts and its coastal line into frontlines of World War II and had caused fear of a Japanese invasion.¹¹ In mid-1942, colonial authorities ordered the confiscation of boats and rice surpluses, which not only deterred Japanese invaders, but also removed the sources of income of Bengal’s agriculturalists and fishermen. The first outcomes of this policy became visible in June 1942, when Indian Army recruiters noticed a sudden increase in the number of young men

from the east of Bengal and commented on their miserable physical condition. Officers in charge had to create rest camps where the mal- and undernourished recruits were restored to health prior to their admission.¹² Meanwhile, with the cessation of rice imports from Burma in the spring of 1942, and later, the disruption of trade and communications networks, the balancing of local scarcities had become much more difficult.¹³ The influx of large numbers of British and American soldiers into Bengal, who were to fight in the South East Asian war theatre, exerted further pressure on Bengal's food economy. To accommodate troops, agricultural land was cleared and trains that had previously transported rice across district and provincial borders now moved soldiers instead.¹⁴ Adding a further layer of complexity to the unfolding of the famine, a cyclone ravaged the coastal districts of Bengal and Orissa in mid-October 1942. In Midnapore and 24-Parganas, the storm affected a population that was already strained by the government's scorched earth campaign. The relief response was severely impeded by the colonial efforts to quell political opposition.¹⁵ Clashes between the provincial government and the Congress movement had become more frequent and increasingly violent in Midnapore since September. The District Magistrate, N.M. Khan, and the police officer in charge for breaking the Congress movement, aimed to exploit the crisis to gain back control over the district. They withheld information about the cyclone until early November 1942, and pursued and imprisoned volunteers of political parties, who had set out to attend to the calamity.¹⁶ In December, Nripen Sen, an Indian relief worker who had been delegated by the Communist Party of India to visit the district, reported about how he was arrested upon his arrival and found himself in the company of other relief workers, whose aid efforts had been halted through the colonial intervention.¹⁷ Measures taken to stop political parties from exploiting the crisis also impeded the work of volunteers of non-political relief providers. The Ramakrishna Mission reported how the ban of news prohibited the Mission from appealing for funds. Moreover, the implemented rationing schemes that had rendered petrol scarce and that had posed restrictions on the use of the railway for trade and travel obstructed the transportation of relief supplies into Midnapore. Volunteers of the Ramakrishna Mission had to rely on bullock carts to move food and medicine into the province.¹⁸ In addition, the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, who had set out from Calcutta, had been denied access to Midnapore. After lengthy negotiations, the Sadharan was eventually allowed to open its temporary headquarters on Ghoramara Island, situated in the subdivision in the Bay of Bengal in the 24-Parganas and not in Midnapore.¹⁹

Although in early November 1942, the ban of information eventually was removed and the official disaster response got on its way, the assistance remained inadequate.²⁰ In February 1943, a relief worker of the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj reported from Diamond Harbour about the still grim condition of the people

affected by the cyclone. The deterioration of conditions in Midnapore did not escape Tomara, who criticised the government for responding insufficiently.²¹ In response to mounting public criticism, the Secretary of State for India in Britain, L.S. Amery began to inquire with the Viceroy about the existence of a fundraising appeal of the Government of India in Delhi. When he was informed that no such appeal was made, he decided the time had come to demonstrate colonial benevolence. The result showed in January 1943 when Amery, in cooperation with the High Commissioner of India in Britain and the Mayor of London, began to raise funds in the metropole for the victims of the cyclone.²² The appeal was published in the *Times* with letters of support of London's business class and was followed by a five-minute broadcast through the BBC. Mansion House also suggested using a film, but was unable to receive recordings from India. Given the lack of visual material, the organisers of the fund decided to stick to "colourful details" to solicit donations.²³

The famine unfolded in Bengal in the following months against the backdrop of skyrocketing prices for basic commodities and hesitant and misguided market regulation that encouraged hoarding and led to a flourishing black market.²⁴ At the same time, the ability of journalists and private institutions to pressure the government into action became more difficult. Partly as a result, it would take until the end of the year to again shift the response of the colonial government from denial to benevolence. As conditions worsened in Bengal's rural areas in the first half of 1943, the presence of Subhas Chandra Bose in Japan, and later in Burma, made fears of a Japanese invasion more palpable. Bose had been at the forefront of a group of Indian nationalists, who had entered into an alliance with Germany and Japan to end British colonial rule in India. Before he had arrived in Japan, Bose had spent time in Germany, where in 1941 the *Sonderreferat Indien* had harnessed his presence to step up anti-British propaganda. Bose's appeals to Bengal's inhabitants to side with Germany and Japan were broadcasted into Bengal and pro-axis propaganda distributed through Bose's political party, the Forward Bloc. After his arrival in Japan in February 1943, Bose mobilised captured Indian soldiers into the Indian National Army. Convinced that Japan would use the evolving famine to launch its strike, the colonial government drew from the Defence of India Act to obscure the true extent of the famine in Bengal. Thus, in contrast to Bombay and other parts of India, famine was not officially declared in the east of India. Censorship, implemented by the Chief Press Adviser to the Government of India in collaboration with the Provincial and District Press Advisers, suppressed publications that might be of use to the enemy, thereby also significantly delaying the international media coverage of the famine in Bengal.²⁵ His task was facilitated by the war, which diminished the interest of the international press for events in India. In July 1943, the news blackout stopped to fulfil its main purpose. At this time, the *Sonderreferat Indien* in Germany, however, had already collected enough evidence to conclude

that Bengal suffered from a famine. A month later, it recommended the intensification of propaganda linking the famine in Bengal to British imperialism.²⁶ In August, Bose broadcasted his offer to release Burmese rice for Bengal to ease the food situation in the province—an offer which the government found unacceptable and, hence, refused.²⁷ The colonial government instead continued their course of denial. It came under increased pressure after the English-language newspaper the *Statesman*, previously known to be loyal to the government, managed to run drastic images of the famine past the Press Adviser in late August. The rules applied to censor the press had been silent about images—a gap which the *Statesman* exploited.²⁸ While historians have concentrated on the role of the *Statesman* and its editor, Ian Stephens, in bringing the famine to international attention, they have overlooked how the publication unfolded a dynamic in Bengal itself.²⁹ Although the political landscape of Bengal was conflict-ridden, politicians united and used the publication of images of famine in the *Statesman* as ammunition against the press censor. In late August 1943, days after the images had appeared in the *Statesman*, the Press Adviser faced unprecedented opposition. He had just given the order to ban parts of a statement about the famine made by the Hindu Mahasabha leader Syamaprasad Mukherjee. H.N. Kunzru, now the president of SIS, immediately brought a motion before the Bengal Legislative Assembly that lamented the “lack of uniformity of censorship” and declared the censoring of Mukherjee’s statement an injustice. Mukherjee, the current president of the All India Hindu Mahasabha was involved in the mobilisation of famine relief on multiple fronts. He was vociferous in his critique of the Bengal government, and as such, of the Muslim League ministry. Although they had been the main target of Mukherjee’s criticism, not even representatives of the Muslim League welcomed the ban on Mukherjee’s statement.³⁰ The parties agreed that the press censor was unjust. Only a few days after the famous publication of the *Statesman*, the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* ran a first series of images of the famine and contributed to rendering the crisis visible to a wider Indian audience.³¹

The drastic accounts of the famine provided in the national and international press in the last months of 1943 allowed humanitarians worldwide to put pressure on the colonial government. In October, the newly appointed Viceroy Archibald Wavell eventually called for the army to drive food into Calcutta and rural Bengal. Army convoys arrived in November and provided much needed food and medical relief. The aid drive however ended prematurely. At the end of 1943, the Viceroy and the Bengal government were too quick to announce the end of famine. The media response that unfolded in the last months of 1943 had facilitated the work of non-state relief providers in Bengal who now found greater receptiveness of their appeals for assistance and were receiving help from outside the province. The chronology of events seemingly provides historical evidence for the role of a free

press in pressuring political elites to assist the starving.³² However, at the time the news broke, efforts to mobilise relief from outside Bengal and outside India already had been permeating the colonial curtain of denial and censorship.

6.2 For Akhand Hindustan and Greater India: Famine Relief and the Political Aspirations of the Hindu Mahasabha

The Hindu right-wing party, the Hindu Mahasabha, was one of the largest non-state contributors of famine relief in Bengal in 1943.³³ Throughout the famine, Syamaprasad Mukherjee (1901–1953), the Mahasabha politician and later founder of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (the predecessor of the BJP), was active in four famine relief committees. Mukherjee's prominent involvement in the relief activities reflected the political ambitions of the Hindu Mahasabha in general and Mukherjee in particular. Mukherjee and the Hindu Mahasabha played a key role in inciting communal conflict in Bengal and wider India, which would heighten in 1946, when in the aftermath of the failure of the British Cabinet Mission, Hindus and Muslims would kill each other in their thousands in Calcutta.³⁴ In 1943 famine relief became a field of public engagement that allowed the Hindu Mahasabha to advance Hindu communalism; in that regard, the Bengal famine of 1943 has been identified as an important prelude to the history of communal violence that followed.³⁵ At the same time, the politics that undergirded Mukherjee's relief work during the famine were more complex. Mukherjee employed different, and at times, countervailing secular and communal registers to also carve out a space for the Hindu Mahasabha on a national and international level. As the head of the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha Relief Committee, Mukherjee advanced the vision of a united Hindu India. Through his parallel leadership in the Relief Coordination Committee, he worked to broaden alliances with the Congress and non-communal institutions, with the aim of promoting the Hindu Mahasabha on an all-Indian political landscape; as the president of the Maha Bodhi Relief Committee he likewise demonstrated his efforts of cultivating pan-Asian solidarities between India, Ceylon and China.

The Political Context

The Hindu Mahasabha was formed in 1915 as the first of a series of Hindu nationalist organisations devoted to “defending” India against non-Hindu and particularly Muslim “intruders.” Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883–1966) created a powerful ideological basis for the Hindu right-wing movement with the publication of his infamous *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* (1923).³⁶ In the 1930s, the Hindu Mahasabha accelerated its efforts to build a united India (*Akhand Hindustan*, later *Akhand*

Bharat) by inducing aboriginals and untouchables in Bengal to register as members of Hindu castes and by offering non-Hindus the chance to “convert” through ritualistic purification (known as *shuddhi*).³⁷ While the Hindu Mahasabha clung to restrictive caste hierarchies on the one hand, it allowed for a certain social mobility within the caste system to ensure that low-castes remained Hindu. The proselytising activities of Muslims and Christians sparked fears of a numeric decline of Hindus; such fears were often further stoked by British census activities. In preparation for the upcoming census of 1941, Mukherjee, the leader of the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha at the time, took active part in the caste consolidation and mobilisation practices.³⁸ In his role as party-leader, Mukherjee also strove to improve the relationship of the Mahasabha with the Congress movement in Bengal, which suffered from differences between the All India Hindu Mahasabha and the INC on a national level. Since the Government of India Act of 1935 enabled the election of Indian provincial governments, national and provincial politics frequently diverged and regional loyalties complicated national party politics.³⁹ This dynamic intensified during World War II when the Congress protested against the British declaration of war on behalf of India and the Hindu Mahasabha sided with the British. Savarkar, who was the Mahasabha’s president at the time, saw India’s participation in the war as a chance to oppose the Congress as well as an opportunity to militarise Hindus.⁴⁰ He ordered the formation of Hindu military associations and encouraged Hindus to join the British armed forces.⁴¹ Over the last few months of 1942, however, the anti-Congress stance of the All India Hindu Mahasabha threatened to diminish support for its provincial counterpart in Bengal. In light of the colonial violence against the Quit India movement in Midnapore and the widespread sympathy it generated, the Mahasabha found it increasingly difficult to oppose the Congress in Bengal. Mukherjee, who was now part of a Progressive Coalition Ministry under the lead of the Bengali Muslim Fazlul Huq, chose to establish closer relations with the Congress-led movement.⁴² In November 1942, after the government’s violent reprisal against the revolt in Midnapore, Mukherjee resigned from his post as Finance Minister in an apparent act of solidarity with the Congress.⁴³ This, however, did not hinder either Mukherjee’s or the party’s continuing efforts to carve out a separate space for the Mahasabha as the protector of Bengali Hindu middle-class interests. Proximity to the Congress and toning down of the party’s communal rhetoric were parts of the Mahasabha’s claim to a political place at the national level.⁴⁴

The Huq-Mukherjee ministry ruled Bengal from 1940 until first Mukherjee resigned in November 1942 and then Huq was forced to do the same in April 1943. The Huq-Mukherjee ministry had been unique in India for uniting the political representatives of communal parties and advocating inter-communal understanding without making a claim of secular politics. Thereby, it had been able to accommodate communitarian demands without exacerbating them and, for a

brief moment in time, showed a way out of the spiral of communal violence.⁴⁵ This changed abruptly when the Governor of Bengal, Jack Herbert, used the Defence of India Act to install a new ministry under the lead of the Muslim League in Bengal. The Mahasabha now benefitted from the unpopularity of the new ministry, and Mukherjee was able to rally greater support for the party.⁴⁶ The Mahasabha framed its disapproval of the new ministry as nationalist and anticolonial (rather than simply as anti-Muslim).⁴⁷ The relief efforts coordinated under the auspices of Mukherjee and the Mahasabha in 1943 are evidence of this complex political manoeuvring of the party between promoting the Hindu communalism, appeasing the Congress movement, and criticising the Muslim-led government of Bengal.

Relief and Communalism

In July 1943, Mukherjee and the Marwari merchant and chairman of the Imperial Bank of India, Badridas Goenka (1883–1973), formed the Bengal Relief Committee (BRC). According to the BRC, its mission was to bring relief to Muslims, Christians and Hindus alike.⁴⁸ But despite its efforts to show that it cared about the needs of all Bengal, suspicion about its intentions soon cast doubt on its willingness to support non-Hindus. The Hindu Mahasabha and the Marwari community had been in frequent conflict with Bengal's Muslim population and their unity during the famine now inspired no confidence among Muslims. The Marwari community in Bengal originally came from Rajasthan and had migrated to Bengal in the late nineteenth century, attracted by the opportunities of imperial trade. Marwaris soon dominated the province's grain trade and made fortunes in the jute and textile industries. During World War II Marwari merchants profited immensely from the heightened demand for cloth and other war materials.⁴⁹ While many Marwari merchants grew wealthier during the war, their hoarding of and speculation in rice led to soaring food prices that contributed to famine. Many peasants who had chosen to cultivate a single cash crop (jute) rather than rice were dependent on the market to buy food and thus severely hit by the rising food prices. The great majority of them were Muslim peasants in the eastern areas of Bengal.⁵⁰ Allegations that Marwaris intentionally starved Muslims were made again when a group of Marwari industrialists in Calcutta supplied regular Hindu dockworkers with food rations while excluding Muslim contract labourers from the rationing schemes.⁵¹ However, while some Marwaris aggravated the hardship of Bengal's population, and Muslims in particular, the Marwari community was also amongst the largest providers of famine relief. The Marwari Relief Society, created in 1916 in Calcutta to institutionalise Marwari flood and famine relief work, contributed generously to the BRC.⁵²

Given the history of tensions and open conflict between Bengal's Muslims on the one side and Marwaris and the Hindu Mahasabha on the other side, it is not

surprising that the Muslim League ministry soon accused the volunteers of the BRC of giving preferential treatment to Hindus. The Hindu Mahasabha in turn claimed that the Muslim League ministry deliberately discriminated against Hindus in official relief centres by providing cooked food that neglected the religious and caste prescriptions of Hindu relief seekers. Indian leaders outside Bengal fuelled the mutual suspicion. Savarkar spread rumours of enforced Islamic conversion of Hindus, and the Muslim League politician Mohammed Ali Jinnah sparked controversy by making a personal donation that was earmarked for the relief of Muslims to the Muslim Chamber of Commerce.⁵³ The All India Muslim League had refrained from opening its own relief centres to avoid communal tensions in Bengal, instead forwarding money to the Muslim Chamber of Commerce. The latter distributed its funds to Muslim organisations, which were instructed to give assistance without discrimination.⁵⁴ After Jinnah's donation was made public, the Muslim Chamber of Commerce argued that such demarcations did not matter because the number of Muslim relief seekers far outweighed the donations earmarked for their relief. By this time, the scandal had spread beyond Bengal and in response, Savarkar called upon Hindus to rescue their co-religionists.⁵⁵

Although Mukherjee continued to emphasise the ability of the BRC to go beyond communal distinctions, he gave in to the extremist fraction of the Mahasabha and set up another committee that allowed Hindu donors to rescue their co-religionists exclusively.⁵⁶ The list of beneficiaries of the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha Relief Committee that largely included middle-class and high-caste Hindus, was in keeping with the ideological premises of the party. The Sabha offered relief to members of high-caste who felt inhibited by their caste and class sensibility to queue for food rations; teachers (*pandits*) at Sanskrit schools (*tois*) received particular mention.⁵⁷ Along with the Arya Pradeshik Pratinidhi Sabha, which united Arya Samajis in Punjab, Mukherjee appealed to those Bengali middle-class families unable to provide for their offspring to turn them over to the Samaj, thereby ensuring their upbringing and education in Punjab.⁵⁸ Their efforts led to the formation of the Arya Samaj Relief Society in early September, and Mukherjee oversaw the departure of a first batch of children soon after. On the morning of their journey, the Samajis selected 70 “peasant boys” aged six to twelve years. They were medically examined, provided with new clothes, “sumptuously fed”, and thereafter entrusted to a Bengali *sannyasi* (Hindu religious ascetic) who was to oversee not only their journey but also their rearing in Punjab.⁵⁹ The rescue of children served to promote Hindutva and the transfer of them to Punjab showed the attempts of the Hindu Mahasabha to deepen interprovincial networks during the famine. Since the famine codes were not applied, organisations in Bengal appear to have used the lack of restrictions to remove children from the province, a course of action not limited to Hindu communal organisations. Even moderate institutions like the

AIWC appealed to families across India to adopt children from Bengal.⁶⁰ Not only children but others too were taken out of the province. The Hindu Mahasabha began to transfer widows to Punjab, and another organisation announced the large-scale rescue and transfer of Bengalis: the Khaksar Relief Organisation.

The Muslim *Khaksar* (“dust-like”) movement, was founded by Inayatullah Khan (alias Allama Mashriqi) in Punjab in 1931.⁶¹ It was one of several Hindu and Muslim paramilitary groups formed in the interwar period, and promoted discipline and fitness among members along with, by implication, the ability of Hindus and Muslims to defend themselves against the perceived “other.” Although these groups identified themselves as social service organisations and occasionally assisted people affected by natural and man-made disasters, they spent the bulk of their time on training their members. Founding the Khaksar movement, Mashriqi demanded that Muslims militarise under his authoritarian leadership. Khaksars soon attracted attention as its members marched in khaki shorts through North India to display their strength in “mock wars.” However, the Khaksars remained politically isolated. Not only did Hindu-dominated parties like the Mahasabha or the Congress oppose the organisation, even the Muslim League had no sympathies with Mashriqi. Although the Muslim League initially sought to collaborate with the Khaksars, who were occasionally tasked to protect party assemblies, the relationship soon deteriorated. Jinnah demanded that Khaksars renounced their affiliation with the movement prior to joining the Muslim League, which Mashriqi strongly resented. In addition, the latter was opposed to the Two-Nation theory, which asserted that Hindus and Muslims were destined to form two separate political entities. The Khaksars instead aimed to strengthen Muslims within a united India. In 1940, the colonial administration declared the Khaksar movement illegal and arrested Mashriqi.⁶² However, Mashriqi and the Khaksars frequently dodged government restrictions. Tensions between the Muslim League and Khaksars escalated in 1943, when a Khaksar tried to assassinate Jinnah.⁶³

In 1943, the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* noted that a Khaksar “information office” had opened in Calcutta, coordinating the influx of volunteers from other provinces.⁶⁴ The volunteers took up work under the Khaksar Relief Organisation, which opened 20 relief camps across Bengal to shelter survivors of the famine and nurture them until they were fit enough to be taken out of Bengal. In September 1943, Mashriqi gave orders about how Khaksars were to respond to the famine in Bengal that were both militarily precise and bizarre. He asked 600,000 followers in India to come forward to form groups of four.⁶⁵ These “Khaksar families” were told to contact Muslim representatives in Bengal, who in turn were to send one famine survivor to each of the volunteer groups.⁶⁶ The success was limited. By December 1943, Khaksars sheltered only 900 of the intended six *lakh* (600,000) Bengalis in Punjab, Sind and the United Provinces.⁶⁷ Despite the lack of success, the Hindu Mahasabha was outraged. It suspected Khaksars of using the famine as an excuse to round up

and confine Hindus. While Khaksar representatives denied targeting Hindus deliberately, it did not repudiate the accusation of sending Hindus out of the province.⁶⁸

In this controversy, Mukherjee and Mashriqi tried to appease colonial authorities by emphasising the non-discriminatory nature of their relief work. Even though the Famine Code was not implemented, charitable institutions still needed governmental approval. Mashriqi therefore clarified that “no refugee should be molested, or any Khaksar should interfere with his religion” and demanded that “Hindu and Muslim Khaksars should take part in the movement irrespective of caste or creed.”⁶⁹ This emphasis on the non-communal character of the Khaksars’ famine relief work was also connected to the wider ideological basis of the movement. Despite Mashriqi’s efforts to militarise Muslims, the Khaksar movement remained open to non-Muslims in theory. Although this had not translated into an actual membership of Hindus in the movement, the Khaksars secured the support of a Hindu named Amar Nath Joshi in 1943.⁷⁰ Joshi’s participation in the relief work of Khaksars allowed them to substantiate the claim to being a movement of much wider appeal. Joshi was tasked with overseeing the care of Hindus in their shelters.⁷¹ Likewise adopting a conciliatory tone, Mukherjee declared that no Muslims were amongst the children sent to Punjab. He emphasised that the Hindu Mahasabha was “acting solely on humanitarian considerations without any distinction of caste, creed or colour” and offered to hand over ten Muslim children taken in by the Hindu Mahasabha out of necessity to Muslim organisations.⁷² Mukherjee also repeatedly called on the Bengal government to stop Khaksars from moving Bengalis out of the province. He was not alone in this demand. Jinnah eventually joined in, and at the end of December of 1943, the government ordered Khaksars to end their relief activities. Those sheltered by the Khaksar Relief Organisation in Bengal were transferred to governmental poorhouses.⁷³ An outraged Mashriqi responded by announcing that he would gift Jinnah the corpses of starved Bengalis on his approaching birthday.⁷⁴

Seeking Broader Alliances: The Hindu Mahasabha and the Relief Coordination Committee

Although the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha Relief Committee gave Mukherjee a platform from which he could please his right wing and Hindu middle-class voters, he also undertook efforts to project himself and the Sabha onto a larger political canvas. Aiming to benefit from the weakness of the Congress who given its persecution was largely absent from the relief efforts, Mukherjee demonstrated his leadership through the formation of an umbrella committee emphasising the Mahasabha’s alliances with Congress workers and pro-Congress institutions.⁷⁵

The Relief Coordination Committee led by Badridas Goenka was formed in September 1943. It united a broad range of relief bodies, and had the BRC (now

operating on an unrivalled budget of 1.6 million rupees) as its largest contributor.⁷⁶ In addition to the natural allies of the Mahasabha, the umbrella committee included the Ramakrishna Mission and the AIWC, which although markedly “Hindu” in membership were renowned for their efforts to organise relief across religious distinctions.⁷⁷ This already pointed to Mukherjee’s success in building broader political alliances, but his ability to work with the Congress showed further in the appointment of the committee’s second vice-president (Mukherjee himself was the first vice-president). The Congress politician Bidhan Chandra Roy, or Dr. Bidhan as he was emphatically called, was a Bengal-born physician and educationist. He was the Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University and the president of the Medical Council of India (1939–1945).⁷⁸ Roy was a close associate of Gandhi and was asked to attend to the Mahatma in February 1943. When Gandhi embarked on a 21-day fast during his imprisonment, Roy was called for medical assistance.⁷⁹ Roy was also a veteran Congress relief worker. He had led the INC’s relief mission for the victims of the earthquake in Bihar in 1934 and organised the Bengal Civil Protection Medical Committee. The latter set out in May 1942 to provide medical assistance to stranded Indian refugees from Burma in Assam and Manipur, and to Midnapore in October 1942, where it worked side by side with the FAU to provide aid to the cyclone-afflicted province.⁸⁰ Showing that collaboration between the Mahasabha and the Congress preceded the famine, Mukherjee had sent members of the Sabha to assist Congress workers in doling out aid in Midnapore in 1942.⁸¹

At the time that Mukherjee helped to set up the Bengal Relief Coordination Committee, he became involved with the work of yet another famine relief body. He was already the president of the Maha Bodhi Society of India (1942–1953), when in September 1943, Mukherjee assumed the presidency of the newly formed Maha Bodhi Famine Relief Committee. In the remaining months of 1943, the Maha Bodhi Society of India opened orphanages and schools, provided cooked meals at a free kitchen, gave medical aid at a dispensary, and supplied milk to children and invalids. It also attended to the needs of *Bhikkus* (Buddhist mendicants).⁸² The Maha Bodhi Society of India belonged to a transnational reformist Buddhist movement that had additional branches in South East Asia.⁸³ It was co-founded by the theosophist Henry Steel Olcott and the early Sri Lankan anticolonial nationalist Anagarika Dharmapala in 1891. Believing in a glorious Buddhist past in which Asia was united under the Buddha, the Society fostered pan-Asian ties. Philanthropic work supported its members in doing so. During the famine of 1896, the Maha Bodhi Society channelled funds from Japan, China, Siam and Burma to support its famine relief work in Bengal. In 1934 it assisted the victims of an earthquake in Bihar.⁸⁴ Its main work, however, was to promote the restoration of the sacred space of *Bodh Gaya* in North India, where the Buddha is believed to have attained enlightenment (the site was eventually restored in 1949).

Mukherjee's support for and work within the Society were connected with the Mahasabha's appropriation of the concept of Greater India that framed India as the nodal point of a united pan-Asian civilisation. While initially an academic and literary notion, the concept was transmuted into politics in the interwar period. In the 1930s, and especially under the lead of Savarkar, who assumed the leadership of the Hindu Mahasabha in 1937, the party appropriated the concept of Greater India, which now was deemed a non-Muslim entity. Arguing that Buddhism was essentially Hinduism, it advocated for the unity of these Asian religions and strengthened ties to Buddhist institutions across Asia.⁸⁵

The Hindu Mahasabha was not alone to invoke Buddhism and its links to Hinduism to strengthen pan-Asianism. In the first years after independence, the Indian government under Jawaharlal Nehru would deploy Buddhism as a foreign policy tool, leading to a series of relic tours across Asia to nurture diplomatic contacts. At the same time, Buddhism played a special role in India's domestic politics after independence. In the mid-1950s, the Indian politician, social reformer and co-author of the Indian constitution Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891–1956) promoted the mass conversion of dalits to Buddhism to protest against caste discrimination.⁸⁶ In addition, Nehru frequently used Buddhist religious symbols to advocate for a secular vision of the Indian nation, thereby turning Buddhism into a means of cutting across communal distinctions. Clearly, this was not how the Hindu Mahasabha envisioned a united Buddhist Asia. Yet Mukherjee's role in the Maha Bodhi Society would lead to a strategic alliance between Nehru, Mukherjee, and the Maha Bodhi Society after independence. Although tensions between Mukherjee and Nehru would escalate after the assassination of Gandhi by a Hindu nationalist fanatic in 1948, Mukherjee would become the representative of the Nehruvian government for travel across South East Asia, carrying Buddhist relics to further pan-Asian internationalism.⁸⁷

This role of Mukherjee as the unlikely pan-Asian liaison of the INC could already be glimpsed at in 1943 through the work of the Maha Bodhi Society Relief Committee. The latter mobilised funds through institutions in Ceylon and China. The largest contributor to the Maha Bodhi Relief Committee was the Chinese government that under Chiang Kai Shek forwarded its donations to the Maha Bodhi Society Relief Committee in Bengal through the Sino-Indian Cultural Association in Chungking.⁸⁸ The Sino-Indian Cultural Association (also Society) had been established in Nanjing in 1933, followed by an Indian branch in Santiniketan a year later. It was a part of the efforts made by the Guomindang and the INC to bring both political movements closer together.⁸⁹ In 1943, the Sino-Indian Cultural Association received money from a fund-raising committee in China, which worked under the auspices of Song Meiling, better known as Madame Chiang. The Committee assembled 40 delegates from the government, industrialists, and relief workers and appealed to the Chinese people to support the famine relief in Bengal as an expression of "growing Sino-Indian friendship."⁹⁰ At

the inaugural meeting of the committee in China, Meiling announced that the Joint Board of Chinese Government Banks would advance 1.2 million dollars to forward the Chinese donation immediately. The Consul-General for China in India, C.J. Pao, joined the Maha Bodhi Famine Relief Committee in India as its vice-president.⁹¹ That high-ranking Chinese politicians and diplomats contributed to famine relief in Bengal was symptomatic of the growing diplomatic and personal ties between the Chinese government and the Indian nationalist movement during World War II. The Chiang Kai Sheks visited India in March 1942, reciprocating Jawaharlal Nehru's 1939 visit to China.⁹² The fact that the Chiang Kai Sheks channelled contributions through the Maha Bodhi Society adds a further layer to the efforts by the Chinese political elite to foster ties to India. Later that year, the Chinese government expanded its partnerships and channelled money to a much wider range of relief bodies in the province.⁹³

6.3 Reconciling Nationalism and Communism: The Famine Relief of the Communist Party of India

In the aftermath of Germany's attack on Soviet Russia in 1941, the Communist Party of India (CPI) acceded to the international communist embrace of World War II as "the people's war." Communists worldwide were called upon to postpone the fight against imperialism until after the war. The policy complicated the CPI's political position as Indian communists now had to balance conflicting goals. On the one hand, the CPI wished to identify with a nationalist movement that aimed to shake off colonial rule. On the other hand, the party needed to demonstrate its solidarity with the Soviet Union, which demanded an endorsement of the allied war effort. The CPI was thus forced into the unfavourable position of opposing the Congress-led Quit India movement by having to swing into full war support. To convince Indian communists of the new party line, many of whom had doubts about supporting the British, the CPI stoked fears of an immediate Japanese fascist threat to the Indian nation. The emphasis on Japanese aggression enabled the CPI to argue that the sudden advocacy of war was in India's best interests, as the immediate threat on India's eastern front outweighed the need to confront the colonisers for the time being. The CPI's decision to support the British in the war led to the lifting of the ban on the party and its publications. The removal of the ban gave the CPI considerable liberty to describe the famine in Bengal. The new freedom, however, was limited as colonial authorities remained sceptical of the party and attempted to renew the censorship. The outcome of these multiple pressures showed in the party's rhetoric. The CPI instructed members to refrain from strikes and anticolonial protests and to support the war instead. It also called on peasants to step up India's agricultural production so as to sustain the urban labour force engaged in producing essential war materials. At the

same time, the CPI touted its role as the primary protector of peasant interests and framed its social and political demands as evidence of its patriotism and allegiance to the Indian nation. The party's involvement in famine relief enabled communists to regain sympathies that had been lost by its political manoeuvring.⁹⁴

Organising Famine Relief

In September 1943, the CPI and its General Secretary P.C. Joshi (1907–1980) formed the People's Relief Committee (PRC).⁹⁵ It was the second largest umbrella committee to coordinate the relief response of non-state providers of assistance in Bengal after the Relief Coordination Committee steered by Goenka, Mukherjee, and Roy. For Indian communists this was the first step towards subsuming all relief providers under a unified body that would provide relief in a truly “non-party, non-factional, non-communal manner.”⁹⁶ At the outset, the PRC enlisted the support of a diverse set of representatives. It included Syed Nausher Ali (1891–1972), member of the Krishak Praja Party and speaker at the Bengal Legislative Assembly, Chaudhuri Moazzam Hossein (1905–1967), a graduate of Aligarh University who had joined the Muslim League in 1943, and the Congress supporter and anthropologist K.P. Chattopadhyay (1897–1963).⁹⁷ The ability to work across political boundaries, however, also had limits: The Hindu Mahasabha was absent from the committee. In its role as the protector of Bengal's capitalist class, the Mahasabha was a natural enemy of the CPI. The committee instead included mainly leftist and communist organisations, such as Trade and Worker's Unions, the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), the Anti-Fascist Writers' and Artists' Association and the *Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti* (commonly translated as Women's Self-Defence League). Members of the CPI had already been working to mitigate the crisis prior to the formation of the Relief Coordination Committee through these independent, but communist-dominated, institutions.⁹⁸

In 1944 epidemics and nutritional diseases followed in the wake of starvation and the priorities of the CPI shifted from the provision of food to medical aid. It was now that communists secured the cooperation of a broader spectrum of Indian political parties by forming the Bengal Medical Coordination Committee (BMCC).⁹⁹ The BMCC built on personal and institutional networks that had been established in the context of Indian humanitarian activities during the interwar period.¹⁰⁰ It was initially assembled by communists in February 1944 and included among others the relief committees of both the Mahasabha and the Marwari community, bringing it much closer to the united relief committee the party had originally envisioned.¹⁰¹ The representation of this broader range of political movements owed much to the initiative and reputation of B.K. Basu, who had just returned to India from China and now supported the CPI's famine relief work in Bengal. Basu had been to China with the Congress Medical Mission.¹⁰²

The INC had sent a Medical Mission to China to demonstrate its solidarity with the Chinese people in the aftermath of the escalation of conflict between the Japanese Empire and China in 1937. The Mission that left India in May 1938 and reached China in early 1939 comprised of an ambulance and five doctors, including Basu. The Chinese political leaders from both the Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party, who had formed a United Front government in light of the Japanese aggression, welcomed the Congress Medical Mission. For the next year, the Mission worked under the guidance of the Chinese National Red Cross and assisted victims of the war in China.¹⁰³ Basu was the last member of the mission to return to India. He arrived in the middle of the Bengal famine, carrying with him letters from Mao Zedong and Zhu De that expressed their solidarity with communists in India.¹⁰⁴ Whereas the Congress, the Muslim League, and the Hindu Mahasabha fostered ties with Chiang Kai Shek, the CPI sided with Mao. Although Basu's party affiliation remains unclear, he seemed to have moved closer to the CPI after his return. He now promoted a second medical mission to China which would also include representatives of the CPI.¹⁰⁵ In support of the mission, P.C. Joshi sent a request for permission to the British government in India, arguing that such a mission would promote cordial relations between the Indian and Chinese peoples: without success.¹⁰⁶ The second Indian medical mission to China did not materialise. Basu instead stepped up the CPI's medical relief efforts in Bengal. He took the lead of the Medical Board of the PRC, which organised mobile units to bring relief into rural Bengal. Shortly after, he approached B.C. Roy, who was the vice-president of the Relief Coordination Committee and a leading member of the Bengal Civil Protection Committee, and had already been able to bring differing relief bodies closer together. Both men led the formation of the Bengal Medical Coordination Committee.

The Art of Communist Campaigning

The agonised cry of Hungry Bengal, heard all over the country, in many different tongues, was at last rousing the dormant conscience of the whole nation. Food, money, medicines, and above all, brotherly sympathies were beginning to flow in a stream to Bengal, bringing new hopes, new life to forsaken millions. Yet it was too little. And, for tens of thousands, who had already laid themselves on the city pavements and died a homeless death, it was too late.¹⁰⁷

—From the Script of *Dharti ke lal* (Children of the Earth).

From 1943 to 1945, communist efforts to mitigate the famine in Bengal were accompanied by a turn to culture and art to mobilise assistance. Communist artists like

Sunil Janah (1918–2012), Govind Vidyarthi (1912–2006), D.G. Tendulkar (1909–1972), Chittaprosad Bhattacharya (1915–1978) and Somnath Hore (1921–2006) became chroniclers of the social, economic, and political crisis and produced a broad variety of visual art such as photographs, plays, sketches, drawings, linocuts and sculptures.¹⁰⁸ Their work had parallels with that of Zainul Abedin (1914–1976)¹⁰⁹ and Sudhir Khastgir (1907–1974)—left-wing artists who, although not party members, were frequently featured in communist publications.¹¹⁰ These Bengali artists created powerful images of human suffering, which were reproduced in the party's mouthpieces and distributed in specially organised exhibitions, and circulated through pamphlets and posters across India and beyond. The party's close ties to the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) also led to the staging of plays on the misery of Bengal's peasantry.

Though the IPTA was founded in 1943, the cultural, theatrical and political movements that birthed the institution were older. The Indian nationalist theatre emerged in the mid-nineteenth century in the socio-political and cultural context of Bengal and soon gained pace elsewhere in India, in particular in Maharashtra. The formation of the Indian Progressive Writers' Association in 1935 preceded the formation of the IPTA by almost a decade. In 1943, the All-India Committee of the IPTA began to support the work of People's Theatre Committees who had already been active in different Indian provinces, especially in Bengal and Bombay.¹¹¹ The People's Theatre Movement consisted of a series of novelties that would have a lasting impact on India's theatrical landscape. It established a non-commercial theatre to perform plays on improvised stages, with actors and actresses clothed in modest costumes. The IPTA's slogan "People's Theatre Stars the People" expressed its effort to blur the boundaries between the consumer and the producer of art, and the organisation itself aimed to create equity between them by choosing amateurs for its main cast.¹¹² It drew inspiration from the use of performing arts in China and the Soviet Union, where culture and art were relied upon to politicise illiterate peasants and labourers in particular. The IPTA's artists, therefore, performed pieces forwarded to them from China and the Soviet Union including "Defend our Homes", "The Doomed Battalion", "The Russian Soul" and "Nervy Deutschland." The IPTA's own plays soon dealt with the economic disintegration of the country, the havoc of famine, and the threat of Japanese aggression.¹¹³ With the formation of IPTA's Central Squad in 1943, the IPTA quickly became involved with the communist efforts to alleviate starvation in Bengal. Its theatrical performances and singing squads successfully solicited funds for the party's famine relief movement.¹¹⁴ Its biggest success, the widely known play *Nabanna* (New Harvest), was performed by the IPTA for the first time in late October 1944. It was written by Bijon Bhattacharya and directed by Shombhu Mitra, and told the story of a poor peasant family driven by famine to the streets of Calcutta. The main actresses of *Nabanna* were Tripti Mitra and Sova Sen, who had witnessed the famine as it evolved and doled out

aid to the starving.¹¹⁵ Declaring that “the screen [was] the most potent and popular medium for the propagation of the ideals of the People’s Theatre,” the IPTA gave his film-debut. K.A. Abbas transmuted *Nabanna* into the movie *Dharti ke lal* (Children of the Earth), which premiered in India in 1946.¹¹⁶ *Dharti ke lal* successfully drew attention to the havoc and suffering created in Bengal and incited further political debate on the eve of India’s independence.¹¹⁷

Prior to performing *Nabanna* across the country, the IPTA’s singing squads moved across Bihar, Bombay, Gujarat, and Maharashtra to solicit donations for Bengal. The IPTA’s mobilisation of funds for and solidarity with Bengal often carried international communist symbols, demonstrated the political unity of Indian parties, and tried to incite anger against India’s capitalists. In Bombay the organisers of a student rally picked the anniversary of the October Revolution to prepare a van carrying the banner of the Muslim League and the Congress to demonstrate unity. As the van moved through Bombay, loudspeakers amplified the students’ slogan “*Bengal Bhooka Nahin Marega*” (Hungry Bengal will not die).¹¹⁸ Likewise in Bombay, the CPI arranged for a “Bengal Exhibition” that later travelled across the country. It featured sketches, caricatures and photographs to educate visitors about the famine. Visitors learned about the culprits and the making of the disaster in three sections. It began with Sunil Janah’s photographs of the hoarder, the victims of famine, and the “heroic efforts of patriotic organisations.”¹¹⁹ The second section contained Chittaprosad’s black and white sketches, close-up studies of people’s misery in Chittagong and Midnapore. The third and last section exhibited the work of caricaturists from the Bombay Friends of the Soviet Union, R.M. Jambhekar and M. Bharatan, who exposed the hoarder and the political disunity of India’s parties as the main drivers of the crisis. To avoid misinterpretation, volunteers guided visitors through the exhibition.¹²⁰

The efforts of communists to evoke solidarity with Bengal in other parts of India also worked the other way around as communists in Bengal pledged support for other Indian provinces. In Bombay, Kerala, and later in Orissa as well, the CPI announced the formation of self-help committees for agricultural and industrial labourers who struggled to access food.¹²¹ The simultaneity of famine conditions in different provinces across India allowed communists to frame their responses as a nation-wide movement. The sending of workers and donations from Bengal to famine-affected areas outside the province and vice-versa substantiated such communist rhetoric. The efforts of the party to summon a nation-wide movement also became visible when the CPI provided medical relief and proved eager to liaise with incoming medical students, whom it perceived as vehicles of inter-provincial and, ultimately, national unity.

There was the need for emphasising that Bengal’s calamity was not an isolated event, that the tragedy of Bengal should be the patriotic concern for Indians wherever they might be,

that inter-provincial cooperation should emerge out of the immense sufferings of Bengal's millions.¹²²

To further cement interprovincial unity, the medical volunteers of the PRC sent a medical mission to Patna to help in treating victims of epidemics.¹²³ The mission was one of many ways in which Indian communists tried to give credence to a political vision of a united India that aimed to be markedly different, and ultimately more inclusive, than the vision of "Akhand Hindustan."

Solidarity Across and Beyond the British Empire

The efforts of Indian communists to solicit support for Bengal acquired an imperial dimension too. Initially, the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) was reluctant to publicise the famine as it had just begun to enjoy a new popularity at home due to its embrace of the war and its subsequent legalisation. It took some time for the CPGB to find a way to talk about the economic conditions in Bengal without the risk of being seen as engaging in anticolonial, and thus anti-war, rhetoric. British communists' reports about the famine in Bengal concentrated on expressing the solidarity of British workers towards their Indian brethren, publicising the work being carried out by the CPI, and highlighting how the famine weakened India's resistance against Japan. The party later published appeals from P.C. Joshi that insisted that the British assist Bengal; the CPI in turn praised communists in Britain for making the crisis visible to the public.¹²⁴

A common narrative that emerged from these mutual efforts to express British-Indian solidarity was the depiction of alleged good deeds by British soldiers stationed in Bengal, who donated funds, offered their food rations to Bengali children, or empathised in some way with the struggle of Indians. The communist worker Krishna Binode Roy described the arrival of thousands of RAF men in Jessore in West Bengal for the readers of the *People's War*.¹²⁵ He described an empathetic encounter with the "RAF boys" that emphasised the soldiers' young age, working-class backgrounds, and longing for home.¹²⁶ A picture showing Sergeants Jack Cole, David Price, and Arthur Gilbert sharing their rations with women and children accompanied the article. Similar efforts followed in Britain. In 1944, the CPGB published the letters of Clive Branson, a communist, who had served with the RAF in Bengal during the famine and later died on the Arakan front.¹²⁷ British readers could read Branson's sympathy for Indians in his own words, making it possible to identify with the plight of a people that still seemed distant and unfamiliar.¹²⁸ The British communist politician Harry Pollitt contributed a foreword to the book, expressing his conviction that the letters, written by Branson to his wife, were meant for a much wider audience. In addition, Arthur Olorenshaw, a *Daily Worker* correspondent, detailed the experiences of British

soldiers in Bengal, who had been appalled by the famine conditions in the region and demanded that their countrymen aid the people.¹²⁹ With a rise in conscription, the RAF had grown more diverse. It is not unlikely that young British communists found themselves in Bengal in 1943, reading communist literature and siding with the colonised. The newly arrived British Tommies and American GIs had little in common with the *sahibs*, who they viewed as elitist. However, the new arrivals also knew little about Indian politics, were critical of the Congress opposition to the war and saw little sense in defending the Raj.¹³⁰ Communist publications deliberately exaggerated British sympathy for Indians. They glossed over the displacement and dispossession that took place as hundreds of thousands of RAF men were moved into India, where agricultural land was cleared, irrigation networks dried, and food requisitioned to accommodate them.¹³¹ They were also silent about the fact that with the arrival of soldiers, prostitution and sexual violence increased to a degree that British and Indian officials likewise voiced concern.¹³²

In the second half of 1943, the CPGB intensified its cooperation with the London-based India League. Under the lead of V.K. Krishna Menon the London-based India League strove to unite Indians and British against colonial rule. The influence of the CPGB on the India League had been growing since Stalin propagated the Popular Front Policy in 1934 and communists worldwide started to seek alliances with anti-imperialist forces.¹³³ British communists now assisted the India League in setting up the India Relief Committee that raised funds for relief work in Bengal.¹³⁴ The committee raised funds through the magazine of the India League *NewsIndia*, through pamphlets, meetings, and conferences and it created sub-committees in a plethora of British cities. Menon chaired the London-based committee, while the Welsh politician Clement Davies served as its president and the famous Mulk Raj Anand (1905–2004) was its secretary.¹³⁵ During a meeting of the India League in June 1943, the novelist, essayist, and literary critic Mulk Raj Anand announced his theatrical work on the famine conditions in Bengal.¹³⁶ Anand's "India Speaks" was performed in London's Unity Theatre and the proceeds collected for Indian famine relief. Apart from its regular show times at the Unity, the piece was also staged for an Indian working-class audience in the east of London. A speech by Menon and an appeal for funds to help famine-stricken Bengal followed these performances.¹³⁷ The money gathered by the India League through theatrical performances and other fundraising events was channelled to the founder of the Social Service League, trade union leader and president of the IPTA, N.M. Joshi, who then distributed the money to a selection of relief agencies in India. The Social Service League forwarded money to the FAU, the Ramakrishna Mission, SIS, and the AIWC in addition to the communist PRC.

As time progressed, the display of communist solidarity with comrades in India extended beyond the metropole and across the British Empire to Australia.¹³⁸ Like

its British counterpart, the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) began to enjoy greater popularity after it declared support for the war in 1941. Following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbour, Australians were increasingly disillusioned about the willingness and ability of Britain, and later the US, to protect its shores.¹³⁹ The communist embrace of the war boosted the appeal of the left movement in Australia, and was accompanied by a turn to the Indian Ocean region and the articulation of an alternative vision of Australia's international relations.¹⁴⁰ Efforts to foster international cooperation with India were made, as can be seen in a letter to the CPI from the General Secretary of the CPA, John Bramwell Miles (1888–1969), who expressed his party's commitment to India's quest for self-rule in September 1943:

We have noted with deep admiration your splendid fight for India's liberty and for the mobilisation of your great nation for the defeat of the fascist marauders. We welcome the opportunity for the development of a closer friendship between our two peoples. Be assured that we will do all in our power to second your efforts for the welfare of the Indian people, the defeat of the Axis and the construction of a world of free democratic nations in the post-war world.¹⁴¹

In addition to this display of solidarity, the CPA informed its readers about the efforts of Indian communists to ward off Japanese aggressors and to cater to the needs of the famine-afflicted in Bengal. The official outlet of the CPA, the *Tribune*, published Chittaprosad's and Zainul Abedin's drawings of famine in 1944 to 1946.¹⁴² In March 1944, the CPA invited a graduate named Vaidyanathan from Madras University to tour the northern coalfields of Australia. Speaking about India's war effort and the famine conditions in the country, he solicited money for famine relief in Bengal. The CPA also publicised the work of the Australia-India Association, which was formed by Clarrie Campbell in 1936. Campbell, who had close ties to the CPA but never became a member, was involved in building social-welfare institutions for Indian seamen in Australian port cities.¹⁴³ In 1944, the Australia-India Association further expanded and by March it published a monthly bulletin that informed its readers about Indian affairs. It also included reports of famine conditions in Bengal.¹⁴⁴ In June 1944, the bulletin announced the opening of a club for Indian seamen in Sydney along with a famine relief fund for India.¹⁴⁵ The fundraising of the Australia-India Association for Bengal received support from Australian politicians and diplomats.¹⁴⁶ The patron of the India Famine Relief Committee was Bertram Stevens, who had been in New Delhi until 1942 as the Australian representative to the Eastern Group Supply Council. After the war, he went on to become a founding member of the India League of Australia.¹⁴⁷ The Australian Minister of Foreign Affairs, H.V. Evatt, also embraced the work of the India Famine Relief Committee and approved of the "tangible expression to

those aims of fostering the closest friendly relations with India.”¹⁴⁸ However, the main load of the fundraising was borne by Indian seamen, who in June distributed 50,000 leaflets with pictures, stories and figures of the famine and solicited money from schools and trade unions.¹⁴⁹

The reporting of the famine conditions in Bengal in Australian leftist forums coincided with the acceleration of Indian seafarer unionism and its politicisation. It would reach its peak in 1945 with the formation of the Indian Seaman's Union in Australia and its subsequent strike in solidarity with the Indonesian independence movement.¹⁵⁰ The deplorable condition of Bengalis served as an emotional subject to politicise and organise Indian seafarers. A similar process was underway in Britain, where different Indian nationalist associations vied for the endorsement of Indian *lascars* (seafarers). With the support of an eminent figure of the working-class movement, Ayub Ali, and its newly formed Women's Section, the India League expanded and opened an office just above Ali's Shah Jolal Restaurant at 76 Commercial Street in June 1943. The restaurant was a meeting point for Indian seamen and workers in the eastern part of London.¹⁵¹ Over the following months, Indian workers joined public campaigns by the India League and other Indian nationalist associations in bringing demands for food relief to the streets of Britain.¹⁵² This showed, among others, in the activities of the Indian Workers' Association. In October 1943, the Indian Workers' Association organised a protest during the visit of politician and Secretary of State for India, L.S. Amery, to his constituency Sparkbrook in Birmingham. Waiting in front of the venue, the Indian Workers' Association held up banners reading “Churchill and Amery are killing men, women and children in India” and distributed leaflets that placed the Bengal famine within a historical timeline of famines in India, accusing the British of deliberately trying to starve revolutionaries.¹⁵³

6.4 The Indian Women's Movement, Transnational Feminism and Famine Relief

MARS and the Broadening of the Indian Women's Movement in Bengal

The famine in Bengal was a catalyst of the Indian women's movement. As Annie Devenish amongst others has argued, women's various experiences of the economic and social upheaval in Bengal spurred their political mobilisation. Many women in the province organised themselves into new organisations that raised awareness of the special needs of women and articulated the right of women for protection and assistance. The mobilisation of Indian women during the famine was helping the subsequent participation of women in the Tebhaga movement in

1946 that mobilised against landowning elites and money lenders.¹⁵⁴ It was also a step towards the formation of the National Federation of Indian Women in Calcutta in 1954 and Indian women's participation in the globally operating Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF).¹⁵⁵

The political activities of women in Bengal in the 1940s led to a significant diversification of the women's movement which had long been dominated by middle- and upper-class women.¹⁵⁶ This diversification owed much to the Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti (MARS) and its ability to enlist the support of women from different social backgrounds.¹⁵⁷ Manikuntala Sen (1911–1987) and Renu Chakravartty (1917–1994), both members of the CPI, and Ela Sen Reid were among the founding members of MARS in 1942.¹⁵⁸ The formation of MARS and other communist women's organisations in India was the consequence of different impulses originating in and beyond South Asia. MARS operated independently of the CPI and yet was closely entangled with the party. The CPI promoted the formation of women's organisations in the 1940s although many male party members continued to oppose the official policy.¹⁵⁹ In her close reading of women's complex experiences of famine, Ania Loomba has shown how women actively carved out a place for themselves in the communist movement in the 1940s. Gargi Chakravartty, in her study of MARS, has also noted that Soviet women's organisations and their call to women worldwide to form anti-fascist institutions inspired the work of women in Bengal.¹⁶⁰ The CPI helped this process by reproducing hagiographic accounts of Soviet women martyrs, of whom the Soviet heroine Zoya Kosmodenskaya was the most prominent example.¹⁶¹

MARS attended to the special needs of women who apart from hunger often suffered from gender-based and sexual violence.¹⁶² Alongside conventional famine relief such as food and medical aid, MARS trained women in self-defence, raised awareness of violence committed against women, and prevented sex-work and the trafficking of women and children.¹⁶³ To this end, MARS placed volunteers in shops to "prevent the manhandling of the women in queues and to help them collect their legitimate quota" and rescued women and girls who had been sold into prostitution.¹⁶⁴ In July 1943, as migration from rural Bengal to Calcutta peaked, MARS opened canteens in the city to provide meals at subsidised prices or free, and ran milk centres that fed 12,000 women and children daily. In August 1943, MARS initiated the Bengal Women's Food Committee, which combined the efforts of 14 smaller women's organisations in the province.¹⁶⁵ Later, in April 1944, it shifted to the task of rebuilding women's livelihoods in rural Bengal. For this purpose, it assembled more than a dozen social service organisations in the *Nari Seva Sangh*, which operated shelters where women received vocational training.¹⁶⁶ The famine relief work of MARS had intensified its appeal to the women of Bengal and turned it into a mass movement. In early 1944 MARS claimed a membership of 40,000 women from different social strata, classes and castes.¹⁶⁷

Although MARS defined itself as a women's social service organisation, its proximity to communism embedded it firmly in the political aspirations of the CPI which affected the way its members advocated for women's rights and women's position in Indian society. Since the Soviet entry into the war against Germany, communist organisations mobilised women against the anticipated arrival of Japanese invaders by raising anxieties of sexual violence. MARS and the CPI tapped into well-established symbolism that equated the woman with the nation, and placed the protection of women's "honour" at the heart of India's national defence. Communist writing on women's endangered sexual purity and their need to arm themselves against Japanese invaders was not limited to Bengal, but likewise resonated in Punjab, Madras and Andhra Pradesh.¹⁶⁸ In Andhra Pradesh, where Japanese air raids on Vizagapatnam and Coconada in April 1942 made the diffuse threat of Japan's advance tangible, communists organised special training in schools for young women. Apart from lessons in self-defence, the training offered a set of skills for modern Indian women to master. Lessons included political education, training in public speaking, and—illustrating the role that culture and art had acquired in the communist movement—singing lessons. The training, however, also educated young women in "the principles of maternity, child welfare, personal hygiene and sanitation" to make them "better as mothers and housewives."¹⁶⁹ The emphasis on women's domestic duties alongside their engagement with public political forums occurred more than once. In early 1943, MARS organised women's hunger marches in Bengal. In the *People's War*, Renu Chakravarty depicted women's politicisation as conjuring with their maternal and conjugal obligations. The reason why women left their home was to claim food (for their families) which meant that they kept with their role as mothers and wives or as "pivots of the household."¹⁷⁰

MARS was clearly at the forefront of the women's involvement in famine relief work in Bengal, but it was not the only women's organisation participating in such work, nor were women visibly active only in Bengal. In 1940, when the CPI was still illegal, more and more communist women had joined the AIWC. MARS and the AIWC worked closely together for several years, although the political divide between the INC and the CPI seemed insurmountable. It was only in 1946 that the AIWC began to lament the growing influence of communist women, leading to rising tensions and the withdrawal of communists from the AIWC.¹⁷¹ During the famine in Bengal, the AIWC and MARS thus had a small but important overlap in their membership, enabling communist women to flag the needs of Bengal's women in the fora of the AIWC. In addition, the AIWC maintained a network of branches across India and women activists disseminated information about the famine in Bengal through their networks. Naturally, the AIWC branches in Bengal were the first to respond to the famine. The AIWC in Bankura and Calcutta took the lead in April 1943, opening clinics, milk kitchens, and relief centres. They also

appealed to families across India to adopt children rendered destitute by the famine, and set up a foster parents' scheme that allowed Indians to pay for the food, shelter and education of orphaned children without actually taking them into their homes. Reports about the famine in the province filtered through to the AIWC Central Assembly in Bombay in early 1943.¹⁷² The AIWC president, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit (1900–1990), visited Bengal in September 1943, which had a momentous effect on the mobilisation of relief for the region. The social activist, politician, and sister of Jawaharlal Nehru, was repeatedly imprisoned earlier that year because of her affiliation with the Congress and support of the Quit India movement.¹⁷³ These incarcerations delayed her personal involvement in the appeals for relief for Bengal. By late September and early October, however, her accounts of the plight of women and children were taken up by the national and international press, adding momentum to the mobilisation of funds already underway for Bengal.¹⁷⁴ In October 1943, the AIWC branch in Srinagar organised an aid drive that raised funds by means of house-to-house collections, charity concerts, and festivals, with the result that five hundred tons of grain were dispatched from Lahore to Calcutta.¹⁷⁵ By November, money was forthcoming from the India League's Famine Relief Committee in London.¹⁷⁶

In the aftermath of her visit to Bengal, Pandit set up the All-India Save the Children Committee in collaboration with B.C. Roy. The All-India Save the Children Committee continued to assist children after the famine, by aiding during the partition crisis. In 1952, it merged with the Indian Council for Child Welfare.¹⁷⁷ During the famine, the All-India Save the Children Committee opened shelters for children first in Bengal, and later in Malabar and Orissa as well. Pandit's correspondence of the time illustrates the role of famine relief in the political ambitions of the women's organisation. For Pandit, the opening of children's homes tied in with both the nationalist endeavour to produce "useful citizens" and the AIWC's objective of carving out a place for the women's movement in India's nation-building process.¹⁷⁸ This also included the building of permanent institutions that as Pandit noted would serve as a "memorial" of the AIWC's social service activities during the famine, reminding later generations of the importance of the women's organisation.¹⁷⁹

The Women's Committee of the India League in Britain

At the time women in Bengal and wider India were mobilising relief, Indian women in Britain also were advocating for those afflicted by famine. In June 1943, Asha Bhattacharya opened the inaugural meeting of the India League's East London branch office with a speech that blamed the "short-sighted policy of the British government" for the current famine conditions in India.¹⁸⁰ Bhattacharya's audience included a group of about 80 Indian factory workers and *lascars* who had come

to listen to the India League. Before the League's long-time president V.K. Krishna Menon and Mulk Raj Anand rose to speak, Jaikishori Handoo addressed the audience.¹⁸¹ Speaking in Urdu, she drew further attention to the famine conditions in Bengal. Against the background of the raging naval war between Germany and the allied powers, Handoo questioned the willingness of Indian seamen to risk their lives bringing food to Britain, while in the meantime their families in Bengal were starving. In her efforts to rally Indian seamen behind the India League that continued throughout the following months, Handoo referred frequently to the famine in Bengal. In October 1943, she shocked a group of Indian seafarers who had just returned from North America with reports of Indians starving to death on the streets of Calcutta and called the men to action.¹⁸² At this time, the famine in Bengal had made headlines in British newspapers and Handoo was now translating articles into Bengali and Urdu for Indian seamen in British port cities to read and listen to.¹⁸³ Women in Britain had long supported the India League, joined its meetings and took part in its activities. Their voices suddenly acquired greater visibility in March 1943, after Menon's attempts at winning the support of Indian dockworkers and seamen in the east of London resulted in the formation of the India League's Women's Committee. For the task of mobilising Indian labourers, Menon, who was perceived as elitist and lacked the language skills required to address his audience in a more personal tone, depended on women like Handoo and Bhattacharya. The women were fluent in Bengali and Urdu and seemingly found greater acceptance among Indian workers. The current famine conditions in Bengal (as well as in the south of India) gave these women a powerful topic that assisted them in gaining the attention of Indian workers.

Handoo, who was appointed president of the Women's Committee and Bhattacharya, the president of the India League's East End branch, now exchanged with the British liaison committee of the AIWC. The liaison committee of the AIWC in London was formed in 1934 when Grace Lankester and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur were appointed as the first liaison officers between the AIWC and British women's organisations. By 1943 the liaison committee had grown and gained additional prominent support with the joining of the pacifists Agatha Harrison and Vera Brittain.¹⁸⁴

Brittain's interest in India had been sparked as she listened to a speech by Gandhi in the early 1930s; later, she hosted Jawaharlal Nehru in London. She was invited to the AIWC twice, in 1940 and 1941, but was denied a visa on both occasions because of her anti-war stance.¹⁸⁵ Harrison's involvement with India started around the same time as Brittain's. She was drawn to Gandhi's pacifism upon visiting India as the assistant of a member of the Royal Commission on Labour in 1929–31. On returning to London, Harrison began working with other Quakers in the Indian Conciliation Group (later India Conciliation Group) in their efforts to facilitate India's self-rule by mediating between British and Indian representatives. Harrison attended the

meetings of the India League from 1933 onwards, signalling a convergence of white women's feminism and Indian nationalism in the metropole.¹⁸⁶ The importance of such ties showed in April 1943, when members of the Liaison Committee embraced India League's newly founded Women's Committee. Shortly after, its members also joined the India League's Famine Relief Committee, which began to channel a part of its funds to the AIWC.¹⁸⁷ The Bengal Famine thus coincided with the deepening alliance of metropolitan feminists and the AIWC on the one hand, and the greater involvement of British and Indian feminists in the India League and diasporic Indian nationalism on the other. In October 1945, Handoo represented the AIWC at the Board Meeting of the International Alliance of Women in Geneva.¹⁸⁸

Women's personal and institutional networks that carried information from Bengal to London were part of a larger web of entanglements that subverted the colonial censorship regime and allowed information about the famine to circulate. This ensured that details about the famine in India would, amongst others, filter through to Britain where Indian nationalists, British socialists, communists and pacifists aimed to raise awareness of the plight of people in the province and to mobilise funds and food despite, and against, the inertia of states and governments.

6.5 Conclusion

The breadth of political and social movements in Bengal that were involved in relief activities in the 1940s demonstrates the complexity of the humanitarian response to the famine and its relevance for political mobilisation and nation-building. Without claiming to be exhaustive, the chapter pointed out how relief in Bengal was mobilised through communist, feminist, Hindu nationalist, pan-Asian and anti-imperial networks of various scales—many of which had their origins in the interwar period.

The leader of the Hindu Mahasabha, Syamaprasad Mukherjee, placed himself at the head of four relief committees, using his involvement to strengthen the political influence of the party in the province. The elasticity of Mukherjee's politics allowed him and the Hindu Mahasabha to cultivate very different, and at times, even conflicting political contacts. Although he nourished communal identities through famine relief, the Hindu Mahasabha leader likewise demonstrated the capacity to move beyond communalism and, hence, collaborated with Congress politicians and institutions in another capacity. The famine relief work of the Maha Bodhi Society of India, another organisation Mukherjee was involved in, exemplifies the efforts of Indian, Chinese, Ceylonese and Burmese politicians at fostering pan-Asian solidarity, as well as the Mahasabha's efforts to implement its vision of Greater India. As historians Maria Framke and Esther Möller showed, the

Hindu Mahasabha continued to show a remarkable flexibility in terms of political alliance in the aftermath of the famine, when the relief it gave to Hindus during the partition crisis again catered to multiple audiences.¹⁸⁹ But the Hindu Mahasabha was not the only political force in Bengal to exploit the famine strategically. Indian communists used the famine to nurture and substantiate interprovincial and transnational solidarities. Famine relief enabled communists in India, Britain and Australia to demonstrate commonality with the Congress movement, that was otherwise impeded by the demand of the Comintern to pause anticolonial agitation until the war was won. Famine relief also enabled the CPI to gain back political ground by deflecting criticism that accompanied its opposition against the Quit India movement and to demonstrate its wish to protect Bengal against Japanese aggression.

The famine also galvanised women's political mobilisation in Bengal and, to a much lesser extent, in Britain, where Indian women rose to new prominence within the India League. A growing number of Indian women mitigated famine as members of social service institutions in the first decades of the twentieth century. Following the formation of women's organisations, most notably the AIWC, the participation of women in famine relief markedly grew in the interwar period. It reached an unprecedented scaled in 1943–44 when the AIWC and MARS successfully tapped into national and transnational feminist networks to mobilise aid. Famine relief, as part of the broader social service activities of Indian women's organisations, helped the women's movement to claim space in the political arena by highlighting the importance of women's participation in Indian nation-building and drawing attention to the special needs of women and children.¹⁹⁰

American Food Aid for Independent India

Abstract

The political alliances between American and Indian civil society actors had intensified in the interwar period but came to full fruition in the 1940s and 1950s. In response to famines in Bengal, Bihar and Madras, organisations formed in the US to push the American government to assist India. The chapter provides a new perspective on the history of US food aid for India by examining the involvement of non-state actors and the role of Indian activists who began to cater to Indian national development in the 1940s.

Keywords: Food aid, development, postcolonial India, South Asian Americans

7.1 American Anti-imperialism and the Bengal Famine, 1943–1945

I found myself eating a candy bar, disinterestedly watching a woman die. [...] There is something that happens to all who live through it that leaves a mark on the body and mind. Surely this is one of the dangers of imperialism, this subtle poison that eats away whatever it touches. Surely it has left us all a little less human.¹

—John Frederick Muehl, *American Sahib* (1946).

Frederick Muehl travelled from Detroit to India with the American Field Service in 1943. Upon his return to the United States after the war, he embarked on a university career in the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Michigan and put his experiences in India on paper.² *American Sahib* (1946) paints a grim and appalling picture of the conduct of GIs in India and gives his personal account of the Bengal Famine. Muehl recalled that one evening, on his return from the Grand Hotel in Calcutta—one of the many places that still served lavish meals while people died on the streets—he was confronted with the agony of a famished man who tried to approach Muehl in his despair. Muehl instinctively ran away and threw up his as yet undigested five-course meal on the doorstep of his hotel. The shock of seeing a man dying on the street made him nauseated for two more days but he soon became accustomed to the sights.³ He explained his fading empathy with the impact of British imperialism, the “subtle poison” that had corrupted his soul as well as those of other American soldiers stationed in

India. Muehl thus found an explanation of why “his America”, which had liberated Europe and promised peace and prosperity to the world, stood by as famine killed millions in Bengal. He likewise reasoned why it was important for Americans to stop defending the Raj now that the war had been won. Muehl was a late addition to the American critics of British imperialism and colonial rule in India.

When British intelligence services sought to enumerate the sources of support for Indian nationalism in North America in September 1944, the list proved extensive. It began with “republicans – isolationists – imperialists – big business – and elements who are anti-New Deal, anti-Roosevelt, and anti-British.” It went on to cite “liberals, religious and social pacifists, idealist antagonists of anything savouring British imperialism and champion of colonial and coloured people,” and it ended with “communists” and “fellow travellers.”⁴ Though the documents produced by the British intelligence services have to be read with a pinch of salt, they were not mistaken in their estimate of the diverse assortment of American support for Indian nationalism.

Indian nationalism gained visible momentum in North America in the early 1940s, but the face of this nationalism had changed tremendously. It did not have much in common anymore with the revolutionary activities of Ghadriles. Instead it resembled the moderate long-distance nationalism of the India Home Rule League, but with differences in its methods. Apart from a group of Indian nationalists around Syed Hossain, who felt uncomfortable placing the quest for Indian self-rule in the hands of Americans, Indians in the US began to mingle extensively with American sympathisers of Indian nationalism and to draw on their support. One institution that was particularly successful in making Indian nationalism more appealing in the US was the India League of America (India League).⁵ Under the lead of Sirdar Jagjit Singh, better known to his contemporaries as JJ Singh, the India League turned into an institution of mass appeal.⁶ Singh had left India in 1922, driven by his disappointment with Gandhi’s decision to pause the civil disobedience movement. Seeking distance from the Indian nationalist movement, he began to immerse himself in the world of trade and business, first in Great Britain and, after 1926, the United States as well. In the following decades JJ Singh and his brother built a business venture in New York called Singh, Singh & Co. At the same time, he strengthened economic ties between the United States and India in his function as the first president of the Indian Chamber of Commerce. Singh eventually returned to politics in the late 1930s, when, encouraged by Jawaharlal Nehru’s political ascendance, he drew on his business contacts to boost American support for India.⁷ In 1941, Singh joined the India League and began to transform the organisation from a fringe group of mainly Indian supporters of Indian self-rule to an institution of much wider appeal. This transformation started in 1942 with a new campaign that solicited the support of well-known religious, labour and media

representatives. Pearl Harbour provided the canvas against which the India League formulated a compelling demand for US support of India's quest of self-rule. Its campaign boiled down to the slogan "winning the war requires a free India."⁸

It is somewhat ironic that the campaign was drafted by the editor and journalist Sidney Hertzberg (1910–1983). As a former member of the America First Committee, Hertzberg had opposed American involvement in the war; now he appealed to the American desire to win the war to generate support for India's quest for self-rule. The America First Committee united a group of fierce isolationists and pacifists, but Sidney Hertzberg was motivated by his disapproval of British imperialism and his deep-seated belief that British colonial rule was not much better than fascism.⁹ Hertzberg began to help the League land advertisements in leading American newspapers. One result of this cooperation was a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times*, published in September 1942 (figure 4).¹⁰ The ad depicted the League's demand that Roosevelt use his influence over Britain to press for India's right to self-rule. It listed over fifty prominent Americans who supported the League by lending their names.¹¹ The signatories illustrate the different sections of American society that supported the India League in 1942. The support was proof of the connections between the African-American civil rights movement and Indian anticolonialism, evidenced in this case by the name Walter White, secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).¹² The extent to which anti-racism and anti-imperialism provided a common ground for supporters of Indian nationalism also showed in Clare Boothe, who signed the India League appeal in 1942 and elaborated at length on her support of India's demand for self-rule a year later. During the India League's "mass meeting" in August 1943, she delivered a speech in support of the Indian anticolonial movement wherein she declared that her hope was that US involvement in the war was to safeguard the freedom of all peoples.¹³ Despite her close friendship with Winston Churchill, Boothe sharply criticised the British Prime Minister and asked him if he was truly convinced that "freedom was a white man's monopoly" in her exhortation to recognise the right of South Sea Islanders, Malays and Indians to attain freedom from colonial rule.¹⁴ Boothe had first attained fame as the author of a number of plays including *The Women*, which became a Broadway hit and later a Hollywood movie. She also worked as a correspondent for *Life* during World War II and embarked on a political career as a Republican representative for Connecticut in 1942. Boothe used her popularity in these various public roles to raise her voice in support of anticolonial movements in Asia. In addition, she co-drafted the Luce-Celler Act in 1943, which would ease US immigration restrictions on Indians three years later.¹⁵

After 1942, the India League also drew substantial support from a section of anti-imperial protestants, many of whom had served as missionaries in India. Amongst the first to step up was Sherwood Eddy, who signed the appeal in the

INDIA

The Time For Mediation Is NOW

Is India America's business?

Yes, because we need India's millions on our side against Japan. The people of India do not want Japan. They want freedom. If they can be assured of freedom, they will fight against Japan as China is fighting.

How can the Indian people be assured?

Not by words and not by promises. They fought bravely through the first World War, believing that they would be given freedom through an orderly process of reforms to begin immediately after victory. They waited two years and nothing happened. Then they began their own long struggle of which today is only a part. They will not believe promises again.

Action is required, not promises—and action now, before it is too late. All is not well in India. The independence movement is only beginning in full force.

Our Chinese allies are greatly disturbed and are anxious for the allied cause in Asia.

We believe that the present situation in India is unnecessary and can be changed. We believe that it must be changed for our common cause, victory for the Allied Nations.

The Indians themselves have declared that they are ready for fresh negotiations looking toward a government of all parties and religions as a step toward a federal union which might be like that of the United States. We do not prescribe what that government should be but the variety of India's people should not be an obstacle to their union in independence, in view of our own experience as a nation. We are confident that all Indian

elements will participate in a provisional government which would be modeled on a federation.

The time for mediation in India is now.

Japan is busy exploiting the apathy of a people sinking into hopelessness and sullen rebellion. The leaders of the people who alone might rouse them and unite them into resistance are in jails.

It is idle for the United Nations to wait, expecting that to happen which cannot happen unless it is planned and provided for.

We are in grave danger lest the disasters of Burma and Malaya be repeated in India with even more effect.

That Indian readiness to negotiate is unchanged is proved by Gandhi's expressed desire to meet the Viceroy before he was imprisoned and again by his recent appeal from prison. It is only to the benefit of the Allied Nations to take advantage of this reasonable attitude shown not only by Gandhi but by other Indian leaders as well.

We therefore urge upon President Roosevelt and upon Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek that they recognize the interest of the United Nations in the Indian dilemma and that they use their good offices to ask the British Government and the National Congress of India and other leaders to open new conferences, with mutual determination to find that way of action which will most speedily bring India into the ranks of our allies by beginning upon the program of her independence.

We urge all those who are in sympathy with this statement to express it in all ways open to free American public opinion.

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Vice-President, American Council for American Unity,
N. Y.

ROGER N. BALDWIN
Director, American Civil Liberties Union, N. Y.

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Fig. 4. India. The Time for Mediation is now. An ad placed by the India League of America in the *New York Times*. Source: *New York Times* (28 Sep 1942), 9.

New York Times as the former national secretary of the YMCA India chapter. Eddy, who was now in his mid-seventies, had been a long-time proponent of Christian internationalism.¹⁶ Further personal contact underpinned the India League's connections to the American missionary movement. Pearl S. Buck's missionary past

put her in a unique position to mediate between “the east” and “the west”. Her reputation as a cultural interpreter gave her support of Indian independence a certain weight. Buck grew up in China as the daughter of Presbyterian missionaries and lived there until her return to the US in 1932. Taking up a career as a writer and leading expert on China, she underwent a considerable personal transformation. Buck grew increasingly sceptical of the tenets of her Christian fundamentalist upbringing and eventually upset her church by divorcing her first husband and marrying her publisher Richard Walsh (1886–1960).¹⁷ As the owner of the John Day Company, Richard Walsh published Buck’s work and the writings of Jawaharlal Nehru and M.K. Gandhi. Joining forces, the couple founded the East and West Association in 1942 that strove to enhance the cultural exchange and understanding between Asia and the US. It published a magazine called *Asia and the Americas*. The East and West Association brought Walsh and Buck in ideological and geographical proximity to the India League. Even the offices of both organisations were housed in the same building. This foreshadowed the formal ties that would emerge in 1944, when Buck and Walsh joined the India League as honorary director and chairman respectively.¹⁸ The support the India League received from the East and West Association illustrated a larger trend. In the 1940s, organisations that promoted “cultural exchange” between India and the US aimed to knit the two countries closer together, and fed American opposition to British colonialism.

Time-wise, American support for India’s quest for self-rule began to grow noticeably with the India League’s efforts to make the American public aware of Bengal’s suffering. Since the outbreak of World War II, the interception of letters and telegrams that contained information of potential harm to the British war effort had thinned the stream of information that connected India and the United States.¹⁹ In addition, the attention of the American press for events in South Asia was diluted by the war in Europe.²⁰ The economic disruption caused by the war in India, and the suffering it began to produce in Bengal towards the end of 1942, remained largely invisible to the general American public throughout 1943. This changed to some extent in late November 1943, when the US American press eventually provided snippets of the famine in Bengal. *Life* magazine printed the drawings of its war-art-ist correspondent Millard Sheets that pictured death and agony in Bengal.²¹

A month earlier, in October 1943, JJ Singh had appealed directly to President Roosevelt for food aid to India. The Roosevelt administration had known about the severity of the crisis in Bengal long before the American press picked up on the famine. US diplomats in India had cabled a series of straightforward descriptions about the unfolding tragedy and forwarded the famous photographs taken by journalists of the Calcutta-based newspaper the *Statesman*. Roosevelt however demonstrated no concern for the famine-afflicted population of Bengal and decided to prioritise the Anglo-American alliance, aiming to ward off the further rise of fascism in

Europe. Instead of the President, Singh's letter was answered by Paul Alling, Chief of the State Department's Division of Near East Affairs, who declared that the US was making efforts to alleviate the crisis. Although there is no evidence of such official involvement, Singh's success in eliciting an official response is nevertheless remarkable. The American and Indian press covered Singh's correspondence with Alling and helped draw attention to the India League's demands.²² This was when the thanksgiving season gave the India League further opportunities to harness the guilt of the well- and the over-fed. Members of the League went out on the streets and distributed leaflets that asked American readers, "Can America stuff while India starves? [...] Will you reach a hand of sympathy to the hungry multitudes?" British intelligence noted with dismay that the India League appropriated the famine for a political purpose.²³

UNRRA

"Humanitarianism was entering a new phase of global governance" in November 1943, as the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, better known as UNRRA, became the sole institution to administer state-led food assistance.²⁴ It was the outcome of an initiative by British and Canadian diplomats who argued for the necessity of cooperation in the administration of aid to liberated countries in the aftermath of the devastation caused by the war. UNRRA was rooted in earlier Anglo-American cooperation in coordinating relief and drew from the experience of World War I; however, it was in many ways an unprecedented attempt to internationalise aid. Its underlying motivations were multiple and included strong economic incentives such as the calculation that relief would allow for the distribution of surplus commodities and would stabilise Europe's economy in favour of Anglo-American trade interests. In addition, it was the product of a refutation of American isolationism, and the belief that cooperation in the area of relief would enable engagement in other internationalist projects. Though the UNRRA comprised of forty-four member states, including India, the US was its largest monetary donor and exerted a tight control over the institution.²⁵

The efforts of the India League to mobilise US support for Bengal in its fight against famine coincided with the formation of UNRRA. Seeking to take advantage of this moment, Singh was among the first to argue that India was a legitimate recipient of UNRRA's assistance. He opined that India had not only profoundly contributed to the British war effort, but the economic and political disruptions of the war were central ingredients in the Bengal famine, bringing the famine within the remit of UNRRA.²⁶

India had become a member of UNRRA in November 1943, when Indian representatives under the lead of the Agent General for India Girja Shankar Bajpai

signed the organisation's founding agreement. India thereby also agreed to contribute eighty million rupees to UNRRA's relief budget. Although UNRRA was conceived as a new international forum where India's national aspirations could be put into practice, the Indian delegation and Bajpai in particular failed to demand assistance for Bengal. Bajpai, an Indian civil servant and representative of the British Indian government, merely echoed the British representative John J. Llewellyn, who reiterated that Britain was already offering aid to the province.²⁷

In light of this opposition, Singh's efforts to bring UNRRA to Bengal seemed futile. But when he, in a final effort, turned to the Congressman Karl J. Mundt, he struck a victory. Singh convinced Mundt of the legitimacy of his demand and the latter pushed an amendment that allowed for famine relief in India through UNRRA. At this time, the Congress was currently preparing the allocation of US food grains to UNRRA and as the largest contributor, the influence of the US Congress on the body was significant. In spite of the opposition of the Assistant Secretary of Agriculture, Dean Acheson, the Congress followed Mundt, and UNRRA was forced to change its statutes in March 1944. Although the amendment made no explicit reference to India, the wording adopted allowed for the provision of relief to countries affected by famine. This could have paved the way for the shipment of American grain to Bengal, but UNRRA's help never reached Indian shores. UNRRA depended on the official British request of assistance, which Churchill was unwilling to give.²⁸ On the one hand, the Churchill administration had successfully sat out the crisis for over a year, and, with the conditions in Bengal easing, there was no incentive to alter course. On the other hand, the British were alarmed by US attempts to access the Indian market. Even as American goods provided through the Lend-Lease Agreement sustained the British war effort, US politicians had used the negotiations to push for the imperial preference system to be dismantled.²⁹ This added to the reluctance on the part of the British administration to seek assistance via international relief mechanisms, as the demand for food aid provided an opportunity for the US to access British colonial markets.³⁰

The India Famine Relief Committee

Buck and Walsh, who were not yet official members of the India League in late 1943 but had spoken frequently about the legitimacy of India's demand for self-rule, watched the inertia of the US government with increasing impatience. In November 1943 they formed a voluntary agency, the India Famine Relief Committee (IFRC), to raise money to assist famine-stricken Bengal.³¹ The couple was experienced in running aid campaigns. Buck previously set up the China Emergency Relief Committee in 1938 to cater to the needs of China's civilian population suffering under the Sino-Japanese war. In 1941, her Committee joined United China Relief,

an umbrella organisation that combined private American aid for China, and Buck became its public face.³² Her dual engagement for China and India might account for the overlap of members of aid committees. One case in point was Henry Luce (the husband of Clare Boothe), who was one of the first to be elected to the Board of Directors of IFRC.³³ Like Buck, Luce had grown up as the child of missionaries in China, and had established himself as a China expert in the interwar period.³⁴ This coincided with his growing media empire: Luce was owner and editor of *Life*, *Fortune*, and *Time* magazines, which enabled him to exert tremendous influence over American perceptions of China and now India. *Life* ran its first article on the famine at the same time as Luce joined the IFRC. Luce then assigned the Magnum photographer William Vandivert to Bengal to take pictures of human misery.³⁵ Vandivert's images of the dead corpses and the skeletonised bodies of Indian men and women appeared in *Life* in December 1943, and were the first photographs of the famine to be printed in the American press. Although the images were meant to shock, Vandivert refrained from criticising the British famine management.³⁶ The omission of criticism was congruent with Luce's own understanding of the famine. Luce was among those who saw no contradiction between promoting Anglo-American solidarity on the one hand, and recognising the need for American assistance in Bengal on the other. As he had famously heralded the ascendance of the "American century" in 1941, Luce expressed his conviction that America would turn into the world's "Good Samaritan."³⁷ Thus according to Luce, helping starving Indians clearly was an American task and he was not alone in this estimation. The IFRC now had over a hundred members, a notable fraction of whom were prominent American protestants like the YMCA leader John R. Mott, the aforementioned Sherwood Eddy, and the Christian philanthropist and pastor of the famous New York Riverside Church, Harry Emerson Fosdick. Other names included Gandhi biographer Louis Fischer as well as Albert Einstein, who supported the Committee as part of his wide-ranging social and political engagement.

By this time, the IFRC was prepared to jump into action, but as a charitable institution it was bound to comply with the official regulatory mechanisms that controlled and directed American philanthropy since mid-1942.³⁸ As a first step in this process, the committee appealed to the President's War Relief Control Board, an agency connected to the State Department but operating independently of the government. Since its establishment in July 1942, any relief agency was required to get a license from the Board, which was therefore in firm control of the private charitable sector.³⁹ The IFRC managed to clear this first obstacle and was officially recognised "as a channel for American contributions for relief in India."⁴⁰ Seeking to turn over its funds to the AFSC, it worked out a relief budget jointly with the Quaker organisation. The budget estimated Bengal's needs at 900,000 US dollars, allocated at a monthly rate of 100,000 US dollars over the next nine months.⁴¹ Complying

with official war regulations of a private charity, which permitted independent fundraising campaigns only in exceptional cases, the IFRC turned to the National War Fund for money. The National War Fund took up its work in October 1943, aiming to make American private philanthropy more efficient and to tie it closer to the US war needs. To this end, it conducted annual aid drives, soliciting donations mainly through community chests, women's organisations, and business groups. It allocated money to registered relief agencies following established quotas, with the goal of providing "welfare and recreational services to the US armed forces, their auxiliaries, and the merchant marine; to provide relief to occupied countries" and "to give assistance to unoccupied areas and aid to refugees."⁴² Among the largest contributors to the National War Fund was American labour.⁴³ Since the US entered the war, the labour movement used its well-oiled fundraising mechanisms to raise substantial funds for both national and overseas relief work. The IFRC enjoyed labour support from the beginning. The secretaries of the still-separate American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organisations (CIO), William Green and Philip Murray, were both members of the IFRC. As a result, the IFRC had the backing of a vital section of the organisation even before its appeal to the National War Fund. Nevertheless, it soon faced considerable obstacles.

"British Censorship" in the United States

The famine in Bengal gave the India League a powerful and emotive topic to generate public interest in India. However, institutional and individual attempts to mobilise relief for Bengal on humanitarian grounds were incapacitated by the IFRC's association with Indian nationalism. Critics disavowed the IFRC as overtly political and anti-British, and hence, anti-war.

The British War Relief Society (BWRS) was a section of the National War Fund, and administered American private donations for relieving the distress of people under the jurisdiction of the British Empire. Problems arose when it requested the IFRC to submit its publicity material for prior approval. In its own estimation, the BWRS aimed to prevent that "publicity regarding India [...] cause[d] offense to other parts of the Empire."⁴⁴ Though the BWRS was an American institution, a British faction on its board exerted a vital influence on the organisation. The BWRS therefore showed a conspicuous preference for relieving the distress of the war primarily in Britain. It was also sceptical of the IFRC's motives, and assumed that it would use the National War Fund as a platform to promote Indian political demands.⁴⁵ Walsh, who led the negotiations with the BWRS, sharply rebuffed the request to control the IFRC's publicity material, calling it an attempt to enact "British censorship."⁴⁶ At this point, the IFRC merely secured enough money to finance its intended relief in Bengal for an initial four months. During that time the

conflict with the BWRS further escalated. After an initial advancement through the National War Fund, the BWRS handicapped the IFRC by delaying budget decisions. When the hearing before the budget committee eventually took place in July 1944, eight months after the IFRC had commenced its work, the BWRS presented contradictory arguments to discourage funding. It declared that the famine in Bengal was now over and thus relief was no longer required. At the same time, it emphasised that Bengal's needs exceeded the capacities of both the IFRC and the National War Fund. Conspicuously, the BWRS referred to endemic hunger and poverty in India, conveniently placing Bengal's needs outside the mandate of the National War Fund, which was exclusively for emergencies. As a result of lobbying of the BWRS, the IFRC was denied further funds. Representatives of American labour insisted that the money they had raised for India (200,000 US dollars) be forwarded to the IFRC, a demand the National War Fund fulfilled.⁴⁷

The IFRC remained in close contact with the AFSC throughout the process as the Quaker organisation awaited funding for its relief work in Bengal.⁴⁸ The fact that little money was forthcoming threatened to jeopardise the aid efforts. Although the decision of the National War Fund to withdraw its support came as a shock, it had a beneficial side-effect. After the official refusal of the National War Fund, Buck and Walsh were allowed to seek funds independently from it. In the process, the IFRC became American Relief for India which began to work outside of the structure of the National War Fund. Articulating their contempt for the politics of the National War Fund that had seemingly given in to pressure of the BWRS, Buck and Walsh officially joined the India League of America.⁴⁹ Ironically, the National War Fund, which had tried to contain Indian nationalism in the United States, drove prominent public figures closer to the India League. The decision of the National War Fund against financing famine relief in Bengal also caused a larger outcry. The War Relief Control Board considered forbidding foreign nationals from serving on the National War Fund to prevent imperial politics from influencing the administration of American relief.⁵⁰ In addition, those forces in the National War Fund who supported financing relief for India (mainly labour representatives, leading Quakers and businessmen) joined the newly formed American Relief for India to secure funds for the AFSC.⁵¹ As American supporters for India reorganised into American Relief for India, the representation of American business interests grew significantly. The shipping agent and government counsellor Henry F. Grady became the chairman of American Relief for India. Grady had visited India in 1942 as delegate of an American Technical Mission, which advised on the expansion of India's war production and at the same time sought to push into the Indian market. As British power in India was diminishing, American business was hopeful of gaining greater access. Grady would become the first US ambassador to India after independence, when he would use his presence in New Delhi to foster American

investments in the subcontinent.⁵² The *New York Times* drew attention to the appeal for funds of American Relief for India, aptly summarising the US business interest in attending to the Indian famine:

For American business men India is one of the mightiest potential markets on the globe, about to enter upon an industrial era that will release the latent energies of one fifth of the human race. She will want machinery for farm and factory; she will want tens of thousands of products that America can provide. We of this country have a stake in India. For our well-being, if for no higher reason, we can no longer think of India as outside our world. We cannot deny her our interest or leave her ills and misfortunes to others to cure.⁵³

Although not an entirely new phenomenon, the entanglement of capitalism and aid acquired an extra dimension in World War II, given India's nearing independence and the dominant role of the US in the international administration of food relief. There was no effort to conceal this link.

7.2 Indo-US Alliances on the Eve of Independence and After (1946)

Indian Food Needs and US Negligence

The end of World War II contributed to a temporary easing of the food shortage in India as the import of rice from India's eastern neighbour Burma resumed in late November 1945 following Britain's regaining control of the region. However, a series of meteorological events soon tipped the balance again. The failure of the monsoons in Madras and Mysore in late 1945, coupled with poor rains in the Deccan region and cyclones in the Godavari-Krishna Delta, resulted in poor wheat and paddy harvests at the beginning of the next year. Food scarcities first appeared in the South and the East and threatened to spill over into a nation-wide famine in the subsequent months. The Government of India, still under British control, enacted a food-rationing scheme to keep famine at bay.⁵⁴ Rationing being a makeshift measure at best, the British colonial government of India planned to offset the food scarcity at least partly by importing grain from the US. The British colonial administrations in Whitehall and Delhi officially requested US assistance via the Combined Food Board in January 1946: they received a negative response. The visits of both the British food minister and the food secretary in Washington likewise failed to generate support from the Truman administration. A British-Indian delegation of politicians and scientists was then put together in February 1946. The head of the delegation, A. Ramaswami Mudaliar, who would later be the first president of the UN Economic and Social Council, reminded the US public that India was not

asking for charity but rather merely permission to purchase American grain. The Agent General for India Girja Shankar Bajpai reiterated Mudaliar's urgent request in March 1946, aligning with official British statements by stating "the outlook for India is famine."⁵⁵ The mission eventually returned to India believing an agreement had been reached with the Truman administration; however, the latter demonstrated no efforts to send grain.⁵⁶

The formation of the Combined Food Board, which began to administer the flow of food commodities between North America and its European allies in 1942, had cemented US dominance in the global food trade. The latter further extended its control over food in the allied nations' colonial territories, including India, through the London Food Committee, a subordinate body of the Combined Food Board. This made the Combined Food Board "responsible for food for more than half of the world's population", as Lizzie Collingham points out.⁵⁷ Although, theoretically, the Board was run from 1943 onwards by the US, Britain, and Canada, the economic strength of the US, which offered most of the commodities administered by the Combined Food Board, meant its overwhelming influence on decisions taken on matters of international food relief.⁵⁸ Though the International Emergency Food Council eventually replaced the Combined Food Board in July 1946, this did little to weaken the food monopoly of the US. The new Council included a much larger membership, but given that the US still produced the majority of the world's food surplus, it remained in control of the international food trade.⁵⁹ New hopes for a more egalitarian international body to administer food surpluses were stirred in September 1946, when John Boyd Orr, the first Director-General of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), suggested forming a World Food Board to create a supra-national institution to balance worldwide scarcities. The newly sworn-in Indian interim government, represented in the FAO by an Indian delegation led by K.N. Katju, strongly supported Orr's plans.⁶⁰ Although Orr was also supported by other countries including France, Austria, Poland, and Greece, his plans met with strong opposition from the US, which rejected the potential interference in its trade.⁶¹

The dominance of the US in the world's food surplus administration is a crucial factor explaining why little international assistance was provided both to remedy the famine in Bengal and in response to the British colonial government's request to meet India's food needs in 1946. The US had no incentive for allowing its food surpluses to reach India until India became important in the US government's efforts to ward off the spread of communism in Asia.⁶² During the famine in Bengal, the US government echoed the Viceroy of India, who declared that there was no need for US involvement in famine relief.⁶³ In 1946, rather than widen the scope of its commitments, the US administration focussed on the colossal task of rehabilitating war-devastated Europe and therefore channelled its food commodities to UNRRA

and its voluntary relief agencies.⁶⁴ With the US joining the allied fight against the axis powers in 1942, North American agriculture was geared to meet the needs of a nation at war. As the war drew to a close, US agricultural production recorded a new high. However, when peace became imminent in 1945, the overflowing granaries that had previously sustained the war threatened to cause an economic slump. The US Department of Agriculture pre-emptively slashed harvests targets and began to feed farm animals large quantities of the wheat and maize that had originally been produced to nourish human bodies. As the US worked towards reducing its surpluses, allied troops moved across war-ravaged Europe to find that the need for food aid was greater than expected. In addition, droughts affected vast land areas in Africa and Asia, creating a further deficit in the world's food reserves. A year after the war ended, famine threatened one-third of the world's population. The world looked to the Truman administration for assistance but the Food Department's hasty efforts to reduce the nation's agricultural output had already yielded results. The US government needed to re-enact austerity policies in order to meet the world's food requirements but feared upsetting its voters. As the US government found itself ill prepared to meet the task of attending to the world's food crisis, it offered little grain to India.⁶⁵ Instead, the US administration adhered to the idea that hunger in India fell within the purview of the (former) British colonial administration in Whitehall and Delhi.

The India Famine Emergency Committee and its Mission to India

In 1946, news of the impending famine spread like bushfire across India and gave way to panic, hoarding, and protests. In February 1946, the *Hindustan Times* reported on "a spectacular hunger march" of 50,000 people in Lucknow demanding the end of rationing.⁶⁶ A month later, in a tragic re-enactment of scenes documented during the Bengal Famine, officials in Calcutta ordered the removal of people from the cities' streets, followed in April by the collection of the unidentified dead bodies of victims of starvation. Indian Congress leaders, recently released from prison, made the food crisis a part of their negotiations for self-rule. They opposed the Viceroy's efforts to jointly form a Food Council, because of the fact that Indian representation at the centre of the government had still not been granted.⁶⁷ The situation grew dire over the subsequent months because of the failure to secure imports. Officials responded by further cutting the ration amounts, leading to widespread under- and malnutrition.

In April 1946, the cofounder and key ideologue of the CPGB, Rajani Palme Dutt, arrived in India to report on the Cabinet Mission. The latter was to oversee the formation of an interim government for India, which would assist in the smooth withdrawal of the British from the subcontinent. The Cabinet Mission attracted

a plethora of correspondents like Dutt, and increased the visibility of India to international audiences. As he conferred with Indian politicians and assisted the CPI in carving out a space for the party in post-colonial India, Dutt used his four months in India to collect first-hand information about famine in the country, which he cabled to the *Daily Worker* in London. Dutt predicted “the death of many millions from starvation” if immediate action was not undertaken. On behalf of the SIS, he travelled across Mysore, which was gravely affected by the famine, to inspect the government’s rationing system and to make recommendations for its improvement.⁶⁸ In Bombay, Dutt also attended the premier of IPTA’s *Dharti ke Lal*, K.A. Abbas’s famous appraisal of the famine in Bengal, which was released in time to exploit the increased presence of an international audience. IPTA invited delegates and accompanying journalists for a second screening of the movie in Shimla in May. While members of the mission remained absent, Dutt reported that North American and British journalists “were genuinely impressed.”⁶⁹ Other artists who had previously chronicled the famine in Bengal again lent their pens to the communist *People’s Age* to portray the current food crisis. In June 1946, in one of the many biting commentaries he produced during the year, Chittaprosad visualised an alleged statement of president Truman. Answering the question of whether India should be assisted with US grain, the president presumably answered: “the world is a bitch with too much a litter. We have to decide which puppies to drown first.”⁷⁰ The Australian communist *Tribune* published the Chittaprosad’s caricature a few months later, followed by photographs taken by Sunil Janah, who had travelled across the South of India to capture the famine conditions for the CPI.⁷¹ Janah travelled with the famous American photographer Margaret Bourke-White, a correspondent for *Life* magazine. The two assisted each other: Bourke-White financed the trip (which meant, as Janah noted, that *Life* financed communist activity); conversely, Janah played intermediary and facilitated Bourke-White’s work in India.⁷²

In light of the deteriorating food situation, former supporters of food aid for Bengal in the US concentrated their efforts on the new task of securing grain for India. The India League contacted Pearl Buck who agreed to spearhead the efforts and set up the India Famine Emergency Committee (IFEC). It seemed evident at the time that diplomatic efforts had failed to convince the Truman administration to overhaul its India policy. Continuing JJ Singh’s earlier critique of UNRRA, IFEC demanded that the Combined Food Board end its preferential treatment of Europe and base its grain allocations on a principle of equality. This would oblige the food regime to allow India to purchase grain. IFEC carried out a neatly designed campaign modelled after the government’s own propaganda efforts over the following months, into early 1947.

The US government had started appealing to American humanitarian sentiments to persuade customers to voluntarily scale back their consumption. US president Truman created the International Famine Relief Committee in early 1946

to this end, which subsequently embarked on a propaganda campaign to convince Americans of their duty to assist the world. The former champion of American food relief (and later US president) Herbert Hoover was appointed as the government's special food envoy. Accompanied by an entourage of agricultural economists, Hoover was sent to inspect the world's food needs and to produce simple messages to mould public opinion favourably towards American food aid.⁷³

One of the first acts of IFEC was to address letters of protest to the US administration after Herbert Hoover's global travel itinerary revealed that India was omitted from his world tour. Hoover had followed orders from President Truman, who strove to exclude India from American efforts to ward off the global food crisis. IFEC protested publicly against this neglect of India and claimed its first victory: Hoover was to visit India briefly. In April 1946, he clarified the US position towards India in a speech in Bombay, broadcast over the radio. He publicly acknowledged that India was in dire need of additional grain imports to avoid a nation-wide calamity, but asserted that wheat should be forthcoming from Australia instead of North America.⁷⁴ Indian press responses in the aftermath of Hoover's visit to India bore witness to the widespread disappointment at the lack of assistance from the US. Due to the growing nervousness of US officials about the spread of communism in Asia, the Commissioner of India, George Merrell, kept the Secretary of State particularly well informed about the publications of the communist sections in India, which vociferously criticised American responses to the Indian food crisis and received support from abroad. Merrell reported to the Secretary of State:

During the past few months virtually all dailies read by the Mission—pro-Hindu, pro-Muslim and pro-British—have exhibited a remarkably Anti-American bias in their editorials and in their handling of news stories on the subject of food [...] the reader gains the impression that the average American is not only a glutton, but a racketeer, or at best a candidate for an institution for the feeble-minded.⁷⁵

The brevity of Hoover's visit to India caused disappointment not only in India but also among proponents of American food aid in New York. This disappointment was all the greater because Hoover had visited India without his entourage of experts. Many believed that without this expertise, his report on India's food needs lacked authority and would therefore exert little influence on the Combined Food Board. This dissatisfaction sparked IFEC's decision to send its own delegation of experts to inspect India's food situation.

The American Famine Mission to India consisted of nine prominent American men and women, most of whom were longstanding members of the India League. Among them were Gandhi biographer Louis Fischer and the journalist and editor Sidney Hertzberg. Other members included Lilian Smith, who was a

well-known writer, feminist and civil rights activist, Joseph Willen, vice-president of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies in New York, and Henry Smith Leiper, Ecumenical Secretary of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ. Likewise travelling to India were Mary Jean Kempner, who wrote for *Vogue* magazine, and Dorothy Dunbar Bromley, journalist and feminist who joined the mission as a correspondent of the *Herald Tribune*. Lastly, the scientific authority of the mission was the economist and author of *Food for the World* (1945) Theodore W. Schultz.⁷⁶ Schultz was also chairman of the Department of Economics at the University of Chicago and advisor to both the US government and the newly founded Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) at this time. The Committee counted on Schultz's authority as a renowned American economist and agricultural expert, but more importantly, on his ability to influence the Secretary of Agriculture Clinton P. Anderson to act on behalf of India. The publicity campaign focussed on the mission's core group of nine, but they were accompanied by additional journalists and the group grew while travelling in India. Bradley Smith, a professional photographer who would later attain fame for his pictures of jazz icons, was paid to take pictures and make films of the mission.⁷⁷

The American Famine Mission to India arrived in Karachi at the end of June 1946, on the day the Cabinet Mission announced their failure to negotiate the formation of an interim government. Whereas the British Cabinet Mission returned to London, the Americans began to travel across India in a chartered British army plane and visited, among other places, New Delhi, Bhopal, Poona, Calcutta, and Madras. They arranged meetings with government officials as well as inspected regions most affected by the recent scarcities. The mission succeeded in attracting some attention, not least because of its far-reaching networks. The Quaker Horace Alexander and the journalist Phillips Talbot joined the mission temporarily and assisted in spreading the word; the mission also crossed paths with Margaret Bourke-White.⁷⁸ Furthermore, K.A. Abbas contacted the India Famine Emergency Committee to arrange for the screening of *Dharti ke lal* prior to the leaving of the Americans.⁷⁹ In addition, the editor of the *Statesman*, who had previously played an eminent role in bringing the Bengal Famine to the attention of the world, sent copies of his famine reports from 1943 and 1944 to the mission members and met them in India.⁸⁰ Most importantly, however, India's Congress politicians, who were soon to form India's independent government, were interested in using this opportunity to reach American audiences. Representatives of the INC including Jawaharlal Nehru, Mohandas K. Gandhi, and Sarojini Naidu welcomed the mission in Delhi.⁸¹

The mission members held press conferences in every town they visited, explaining its purpose by emphasising the dire need for first-hand information gathered by "prominent Americans [...] to report to the American people" so that the scales may be tipped in the US and wide support for India unleashed.⁸² Schultz

summarised the problem: “there is [...] some suspicion that these big figures do not mean anything unless they can be confirmed by eye-witnesses. We have come here to study the statistics and see for ourselves what is happening.”⁸³ After months of press reports and diplomatic efforts in India, the US, and Britain, it is puzzling that the need to send a group of Americans for confirmation was felt. Indeed, expert opinion on India’s food needs was readily available. Rather than proving a lack of information, the American Famine Mission to India illustrates that the battle for food was primarily fought in the American press. And this is what IFEC did: before, during, and after the mission’s visit to India, those members of IFEC who remained in New York made full use of any means of advertising to broadcast the mission’s objectives. A total of three hundred items were brought out in US newspapers and in the organisational publications of the AFSC, Church World Service, the labour movement, and NAACP. In addition, IFEC released a full report of the mission’s findings, 15,000 copies of which were circulated widely. IFEC also made extensive use of radio broadcasts and secured fifteen minutes on air for each member of the mission in different local and national radio shows.⁸⁴ Upon the mission’s return, IFEC urged President Truman to meet the former’s members. Truman delegated Hoover to meet the returned mission, knowing that the latter would be in California at the time. The mission delegates finally conveyed their report to the Secretary of Agriculture. The report reiterated India’s food deficit and the need to raise the allotment of food for India considerably so as to avoid a deterioration of the food crisis.⁸⁵ Although the US government seemed unimpressed by IFEC, food assistance for India slowly materialised.

In June 1946, the Department of Agriculture announced the sending of 500,000 tons of grain, which fell short of IFEC’s recommendation by 250,000 tons. Less than half the promised grain was shipped to India in late September. After that, a disruption of transportation succeeded the initial problem of allocation. The shortage of boxcars together with maritime strikes brought American food exports to India to a standstill. In the following months, until the end of 1946, the Department of Agriculture failed to keep its promise. Arguing that more urgent demands arose in the meantime, it used the grain allocated for India to assist other countries. As a consequence, India had received only 100,000 tons by December 1946.⁸⁶

From One Famine to the Next

In May 1947 Congress politician Rajendra Prasad, Food Minister of India’s interim government, and later Indian president estimated India’s grain deficit to constitute three to four million tons. Knowing that the much-awaited wheat harvest could only bring partial relief, Prasad concluded that “the position [was] very difficult if not desperate from another point of view.”⁸⁷ The partition crisis that accompanied

India's political independence in 1947 had exacerbated India's food needs as it disrupted trade, destroyed harvests, and uprooted and displaced millions who now needed to be attended to. While the government of independent India, under the lead of Jawaharlal Nehru now faced the question of sustenance, the planning of the nation's economic and political future had begun earlier.⁸⁸ The National Planning Committee (NPC) of the INC was established in 1938. Headed by Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose, the NPC's twenty-nine expert subcommittees began to sketch out post-independence policies.⁸⁹ The achievement of food security soon assumed a prominent role in the discussions of the NPC and the latter proved unequivocal in the acceptance of a strong role of the state in India's "national food planning."⁹⁰ While World War II and the imprisonment of the Congress leadership temporarily disrupted the work of the NPC, it did not prevent elites from devising plans for post-colonial India. The experience of the Bengal famine provided a strong impetus to national planning and left an imprint on the schemes for India's economic development that were published in 1944.⁹¹ India's business elite, which had secured a prominent position in the NPC, released the Bombay Plan in 1944. It acknowledged the state's need for economic planning, however, set limits to its encroachment on the private sector.⁹² Indian communists who were themselves occupied with detailing India's path to economic prosperity resented the plan.⁹³ "The People's Plan", drafted under the auspices of M.N. Roy and the Federation of Labour, prioritised investments in India's agricultural sector.⁹⁴ Meanwhile, a disciple of Gandhi, S.N. Agarwal, lamented the lack of the plan's "cultural and sociological foundations," renounced them for "merely copying Western plans" and called for a truly Indian scheme for economic development.⁹⁵ Aiming to reconcile economic development with the pursuit of cultural and spiritual progress, "the Gandhian Plan" reiterated the pillars of Gandhian thought that advocated the renunciation of luxuries and placed its focus on India's villages as the nucleus of the Indian nation. While these three plans do not capture the polyphony of ideas on India's postcolonial development, they nevertheless can be used to illustrate that the urgency of solving the food question had been widely shared. Hence, India's industrialists set out to reach a national diet that was balanced in its nutritional composition and rich in its caloric value.⁹⁶ The authors of the People's Plan stated that "the provision of an adequate nutritive diet to the entire people, undernourished for centuries together, must therefore be the first concern of the planning authority."⁹⁷ In accord with Gandhi's longstanding interest in nutritional science, the Gandhian Plan advocated the improvement of Indian diets through national planning and took the recommendations of India's leading nutritional scientist, Wallace Aykroyd, as a benchmark.⁹⁸

When in 1947 the Indian government addressed the national food needs, the measures implemented continued some of the schemes that had been enacted under colonial rule during World War II. In 1943, the colonial administration had

instigated a Grow More Food programme that had envisioned the expansion of food cultivation. Although it had achieved little, the government expanded the programme in September 1946 and a year later, it became part of India's post-independence food planning.⁹⁹ In addition, the last years of the war had seen the introduction of the world's largest food procurement and rationing systems, which however, remained focussed on urban populations and failed to secure a sufficient diet for the bulk of the Indian population. Except for a brief period of decontrol from December 1947 to September 1948, the government of India continued the food control measures enacted during the war.¹⁰⁰ Despite the focus on rising agricultural productivity and managing food procurement, India's food economy remained dependent on imports that threatened to exhaust monetary reserves. Realising that India's hard-won political independence was likely to become the victim of new economic dependencies, Nehru pushed the country to speed up the nation's food production and announced the national target of attaining self-sufficiency in food in the season of 1951–52. His hopes were ultimately shattered when in late 1950 signs of famine in Bihar and Madras rendered the national target unachievable.

In mid-1950, while the Indian government drafted the first Five Year Plan, unfavourable weather conditions, leading to floods in the East and droughts in the South of India, threatened the goal of attaining self-sufficiency in food by 1951. Widespread crop failure affected people in Hyderabad, Kashmir and Uttar Pradesh. However, the poor harvest yields hit Bihar and Madras the hardest.¹⁰¹ What would become the worst food scarcity since India had attained independence caused political turmoil in the country as Nehru and his cabinet strove to belittle the crisis. The INC was well aware that famine could cause a debacle in the soon approaching first general elections.¹⁰²

"What kind of dictionary does Mr. Nehru have in his library?" asked David Cohen, editor of *Unity*, the magazine of the IPTA, which during and in the wake of the Bengal Famine had brought the suffering of the people to the stage.¹⁰³ Cohen went on:

Mr. Nehru has a very fine dictionary, but he has not got a dictionary with the word 'famine' in it, but instead, words like 'distress' and 'acute scarcity', because obviously if Mr. Nehru's dictionary did contain the word 'famine' he would certainly—since he uses a great many words every day—have that word in one of his great many speeches.¹⁰⁴

Unity's polemic against Nehru reveals anecdotal evidence for the continuity in the responses of political activists and groups who wished to hold the government accountable as well as to exploit famine to gain political ground. Although the tables had turned and India gained independence from Britain, the government was careful of publicly admitting the existence of famine. Congress politicians

were well aware that the famine could cause it to lose in the next general elections and further diminish its political influence in Madras, where it faced a strong communist opposition.¹⁰⁵ On the eve of freedom, India's political elite had reiterated the claim that self-government would free India from famine, which left it shouldering a heavy political burden. Many of those who had criticised the colonial state's failure to provide sustenance to India's famine-affected were now part of the government, in charge of implementing the changes they had demanded for decades. It weighed heavy on the Congress government that people in Bihar and Madras were as hungry as they had been under colonial rule.

While famine conditions assumed an alarming scope in Madras and in Bihar, Nehru was opposed to the idea of requesting foreign assistance. Sceptical of the world's super powers, Nehru embarked on the course of non-alignment, trying to keep India out of the Cold War. At the same time, he aimed to foster ties with India's Asian neighbours, hoping to take a lead in the post-war pan-Asian movement that could establish Asia as a counterweight to the dominance of the superpowers.¹⁰⁶ The Minister of Food and Agriculture K.M. Munshi, and the Minister of Finance C.D. Deshmukh differed. Not only did they think that the time was ripe for negotiating with the US about assistance in food matters, the ministers also aimed to foster closer ties to the US administration. Nehru gave in grudgingly to the heightened demand to turn to the US for food assistance. In late 1950, the Indian request of a loan to purchase food grains from the US was officially submitted.¹⁰⁷ Unlike earlier responses of the US government to Indian requests for food aid, the ascendance of the Cold War had led the Truman administration to envision the use of US food aid to draw Independent India closer to the US.¹⁰⁸ In addition, food loans had become a means of the US government to disperse its agricultural surpluses in the after-war period. Hence, in contrast to the prior reluctance of the US president to support India in meeting its food needs, a group of US politicians, including Truman himself, now embraced the request. In February, however, as the draft of the bill that sought to authorise the food loan for India was submitted to Congress, a viable section of its members delayed the passing of the act. Nehru's public endorsement of socialism and his politics of non-alignment had antagonised a fraction of the Congress, which wanted assurance that India would not side with either China or the Soviet Union. It was only in June that the US Congress would eventually pass the India Emergency Food Aid Act of 1951 (also known as Public Law 48), which granted India a loan to purchase two million tons of US grain.

While the US Congress still debated whether it should send relief, the pressure on the Indian government grew. In early 1951, the Reserve Bank of India surveyed the Grow More Food campaign in Bombay and announced its failure to enlist the support of the peasantry who were hardly touched by the glossy campaign posters hanging in Bombay's urban centres. In response to the criticism, Munshi, who had

been ridiculed for his demand that starving peasants in Bihar should turn to roots and leaves to ward off the threat of food imports a year earlier, now felt induced to defend the Grow More Food campaign.¹⁰⁹ Yet, while Munshi answered the questions of Members of Parliament in April 1951, he admitted that peasants were unlikely to grasp the goals of the campaign: "Ordinary people do not understand it. They simply say 'There you are. 12 oz. have been reduced to 9 oz. Here is scarcity, here is famine. What do you mean by saying that you are growing more food?'"¹¹⁰ In light of mounting criticism, the urgency of raising food imports to meet the nation's food needs was widely acknowledged. For many politicians in India, however, turning to the United States for food was not the first choice. For months, communists had been advertising Chinese and Soviet offers of food and now accused the Food Secretary, Vishnu Sabhaï and the Minister of Food and Agriculture, K.M. Munshi of safeguarding US interests in India by halting negotiations with China and the Soviet Union over the import of rice and wheat.¹¹¹

Since the attainment of independence, the CPI had struggled to position itself in the political landscape of post-colonial India. The INC had expelled communists from its ranks in 1945, despite efforts of P.C. Joshi to move the party closer to the Congress. In 1948, when the Soviet leadership began to renounce the political legitimacy of the INC because of its bourgeois character, the CPI went along with it. The CPI replaced Joshi as its long-time General Secretary with the hardliner B.T. Ranadive. Ranadive took a central role in the party's involvement in peasant revolt, resulting in the ban of the party in Hyderabad, West Bengal and Madras.¹¹² In light of the partial ban of the CPI, the party again aimed to mobilise political support through its cultural front.¹¹³ However, it had lost touch with most of its artists, who had disassociated themselves from the CPI. Independence removed the unifying moment of anticolonialism. Many of the artists who had previously supported communist efforts now embraced the Congress government.¹¹⁴ Artists who had earlier documented hunger in British India, however, did not stop making demands for food security and advocating for social change after independence. In 1951, the IPTA was disenchanted with the Congress government and advocated a strong role for Indian artists in securing the well-being of Indians at large: "to-day the writers and artists of India will no longer be silent, but will enter the battle for life with all the talent and genius and resources at their command, so that the people may be fed, so that the people may be clothed, so that the people may have prosperity."¹¹⁵ Chittaprosad who had chronicled the suffering of Bengal's rural population for the CPI in the 1940s, continued to produce artistic criticism of the political failure to attend to the hunger of the people after he had left the party in 1948. His art, however, had changed, from focussing on agony and despair to picturing the possibility of attaining agricultural plenitude.¹¹⁶ For India's left, and particularly for Indian communists, this vision of plenitude entailed a move towards China and the Soviet

Union.¹¹⁷ When in 1951, India needed to raise its food imports to meet the scarcity in parts of the country, communists emphasised the ability of China and the Soviet Union to render assistance.

In mid-April, the Soviet Union announced to provide China with shipping space, and allegedly passed its own grain reserves through Manchuria to allow China to send one million tons of grains to India as a Chinese-Soviet gesture of goodwill.¹¹⁸ Communists in and beyond India celebrated the Chinese-Soviet offer and claimed moral victory over the US Congress, which was still torn over the intricacies of a wheat loan for India. Those in the US who were in favour of sending food swiftly to India intended the grain to be a gift. However, in the process of passing the respective bill in the Congress, the gift was converted into a loan, with India being asked to repay part of it through strategic materials.¹¹⁹ It was against the background of the debate that the Indian communist weekly *Atom* emphasised: “While the American Congress continues to debate and sit in judgment over India’s foreign policy, China has already shipped large quantities of food-grains and she is determined to implement her offer of one million tons.”¹²⁰

Although China struggled to feed its own population, making it difficult to meet the offer of one million tons of grains, food from China and the Soviet Union soon arrived in India. China sent 10,000 tons of milo on its vessel, followed by 6,700 tons of Ukrainian wheat on board the Soviet *Krasnodor* in late May.¹²¹ The Chinese and Soviet ships were part of 130 vessels that arrived in May and June and to bring food to India, either as an advanced loan, regular import, or gift. The little over 600,000 tons that arrived at Indian ports in this period was nominal compared to the country’s food gap. It was, however, a powerful symbolic gesture. Apart from an expression of Soviet and Chinese communist commitment, the sending of food to India exhibited a moment of pan-Asian solidarity that was also upheld by the Indian diaspora.

In early May, Munshi visited Rangoon and during his stay, posed with the Gujarati community in Burma who had collected grain for India. Its representatives poured grain into the hand of the Indian Minister, who was seen standing behind a bag of grain, which carried the imprint “Burma” in bold letters.¹²² Similar traces of pan-Asian solidarity can be found with regard to China. In May 1951, the China Friendship Association in Bombay was inaugurated and at its first meeting, Chinese diplomats assured that peasants at home wanted to give rice “to the land that gave them Buddha.”¹²³

Rallying Support for India’s National Development

Many Indians who had made North America their home, returned to India after 1947, seeking to take part in the momentous task of nation-building and decolonisation.¹²⁴ Not all of them, however, chose this path. Those remaining in the United

States often used their position and networks to contribute to India's quest for development from afar. Indians who had formerly demanded political independence now facilitated cooperation between India and the United States in areas they conceived as important to India's national development. The India League created a Service Bureau in the fall of 1951 that aimed to become a nodal point between American institutions seeking to work, or already working in India, and the Indian government.¹²⁵ To facilitate the work of American volunteer organisations in India, the Service Bureau answered queries of American voluntary organisations and supplied them with relevant information. For that purpose, *India Today* began a section called Service Bureau Notes that informed its readers about current events of interest in the United States and India as well as about the visits of Indian officials and non-governmental visitors to the US. After independence even the chairman of the National Committee for India's Freedom, Syed Hossain, previously hostile to American participation in Indian nationalist organisations in the US, now enthused about the potential of Indo-US cooperation:

There is much that India can learn from America in modern techniques of industry, commerce, technology and agriculture and we can reasonably hope that America will respond in genuine goodwill and co-operate, to the extent that may be called for, in the modernizing and industrialisation of Indian economy.¹²⁶

Another example of the growing American-based Indian support for national development was the Watumull Foundation. The music teacher Ellen Jensen and her husband Gobindram "Goma" Watumull, owner of two flourishing department stores in Honolulu, had founded the Watumull Foundation in 1942. The couple had moved from Hawai'i to the US West Coast in the 1940s, offering its support to a group of Indian activists who were currently rallying Americans behind the demand for Indian self-rule. The commercial success of Gobindram Watumull enabled the spouses to invest money in political, philanthropic and educational work that gained them wide recognition. They financed the creation of the National Committee for India's Freedom in Washington, which intended to influence policy-makers on decisions of importance to India.¹²⁷ The Watumull Foundation remained a meeting point of Indian intellectuals on the US West Coast after independence. Through a pioneering scholarship programme that enabled Indian researchers to visit the US for their postgraduate and postdoctoral studies, the Watumull Foundation now sponsored research on subjects of alleged importance to India's national development. A number of prominent Indian and US citizens sat on its board of directors that assessed applications for the programme, among them the historian Merle Curti, the senior Indian nationalist firebrand Taraknath Das, former president of the SIS, H.N. Kunzru, and the globally acclaimed statistician

and Jawaharlal Nehru's chief planner P.C. Mahalanobis. Many of the men and women sponsored by the Watumull Foundation later assumed high posts in the Indian government, the WHO and FAO. A well-known beneficiary of the Watumull sponsorship programme was the Indian demographer and the first Indian minister of Health and Family Planning (1967–70) Sripati Chandrasekhar.¹²⁸ Chandrasekhar, who had earned his PhD in sociology from Columbia University with a thesis on India's population problem in 1944, had also travelled the US for a lecture tour on Indian nationalism in the name of Pearl S. Buck's East and West Association in the 1940s.¹²⁹ Chandrasekhar would deem the use of inducements and pressure on Indian women and men a legitimate means to increase sterilisation quotas during his tenure as Indian minister. He was, however, also amongst a group of scholars that claimed that the best way to limit fertility in the long-run was to improve the nutritional health (and hence living standards) of the poor.¹³⁰ Advocates of population control frequently supported nutritional reform and feeding programmes alongside other, often coercive, population policies. This convergence also showed in the activities of the Watumull Foundation in the 1950s that began to promote famine relief for India, at the same time that it became involved in family planning in the country.¹³¹

In January 1951, the Watumull Foundation teamed up with MFM that promoted the food supplement MPF to counter global hunger, to form the United Emergency Committee on Famine Relief for India (United Emergency Committee). The committee combined a series of small-scale institutions, mostly from California and with a longstanding history of mediating contacts between India and the United States.¹³² Among them were American Wives for India and the India Students Association as well as a series of Christian organisations, such as the National Conference of Methodist Youth. Ellen Jensen Watumull became the spokesperson of the United Emergency Committee, after she had met Dhanvanthi Rama Rau in India. Rama Rau had started to devote herself to the cause of family planning in the 1940s. At the time she concluded that limiting the poor's fertility was central to the achievement of "social and economic development", and in doing so joined a chorus of proponents of birth control who lamented the differential fertility of India's poor.¹³³ Eager to give birth control a prominent place in Indian national planning, Rama Rau set up the All India Family Planning Association in Bombay in 1949 and convened the first All India Conference on Family Planning in 1951. A year later, international birth control activists assembled in Bombay for the Third International Conference of Planned Parenthood—a milestone in the consolidation of family planning in India. Still under the impression of the conference, the Indian Planning Commission acknowledged the need for a population policy towards the end of 1952 and the Indian government committed itself to family planning in its First Five Year Plan (1951–56). In 1950, however, Rama Rau struggled to rally

supporters behind her crusade, facing fierce opposition from the Minister of Health Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, who rejected the idea of family planning through modern contraceptives. Kaur, who embraced Gandhian teachings of sexual abstinence and rejected the common assumption that population growth constituted a major impediment to development in India, was finding no common ground with Rama Rau.¹³⁴ The latter looked elsewhere for support. At the annual conference of the Institute of Pacific Relations in Lucknow in 1950, Rama Rau inquired with Jensen Watumull about the availability of funds in the US to distribute cheap contraceptives in India. Jensen Watumull who had recently joined the board of directors of MFM (a position she would hold until the late 1970s) used the opportunity that her new networks provided to discuss Rama Rau's request with Margaret Sanger.¹³⁵ The meeting that took place in January 1951 was the starting point for the Watumulls' long-time investment in plans to advance family planning in Asia.¹³⁶ They generously sponsored the Third International Conference on Planned Parenthood in Bombay in 1952, as well as the visit of Indian physicians to the Margaret Sanger Research Institute in New York around the same time.¹³⁷

The timing of the Watumulls' growing interest in family planning on the one hand and in food relief on the other was not coincidental, and the activities of the foundation were indeed interrelated. The Watumulls began to invest in population control in India as the debate on India's food situation gained momentum. The famine in Bihar and in Madras and the ensuing debates on US food aid for India created publicity for the failure of the Indian state to provide substance to its population. In addition, the 1951 Indian census revealed that the Indian population was growing despite war, partition and famine. This alarmed those who had identified India's growing population as a principal cause of mal- and undernutrition in the country and who now felt that the implementation of population policies was urgently needed. That such debates influenced the activities of the Watumull Foundation was demonstrated, amongst other things, in an essay contest in 1951 that invited Indian scholars to submit their studies on "Population Control in Relation to Food in India" and awarded prize money to the best papers.¹³⁸ The winner of the contest was Amolak Ram Mehta (1895–1986), a London-trained physician and former director of the Public Health Department in Punjab. He seemingly impressed the jurors with his demand to introduce family planning to India's poor and his warning that in case of failure "future generations may suffer from a predominantly inferior stock."¹³⁹ Apart from scholars' rising concern with the quantity of the Indian population, a concern with "the quality" of the latter surfaced in debates on population and food in the post-war era.¹⁴⁰ This was in itself not a new development. Interest in eugenics had been growing both in India and outside the country over the last decades, inciting Indian nutritionists to conclude that maternal malnutrition was likely to produce physically and mentally weakened offspring.¹⁴¹ Studies on

malnutrition in India fuelled fears of racial decay that allegedly undermined India's ability to stand as a nation, and, hence, jeopardised political independence.

7.3 Conclusion

Indian nationalism in the United States did not wane in the 1940s but transformed under the growing influence of a wide network of American supporters. Mitigating famine and food insecurity in India remained central topics of organisations and individuals in the United States who had long engaged in efforts to deepen the contacts between India and America, embracing Indian demands for political self-determination. Among them were (former) North American missionaries turned Christian internationalists, the American civil rights movement and American labour, which rallied behind Indian political demands for different reasons. Tapping into this vital support, South Asians in the United States sought to shape official policies towards India and to resolve the problem of food scarcity.

In early 1946, India's food situation looked bleak. Only a few years after famine had claimed a million lives in Bengal, scarcities threatened to throw India into an even greater crisis. At this time IFEC assembled in the US in protest against the decision of the US-dominated Combined Food Board to deny India a higher quota of food imports. Aiming to "secure a fair share" for India in the post-war international scramble for food assistance, IFEC sent a delegation to India that was accompanied by a systematic media campaign, thereby creating awareness for India's quest for food security in the United States. The American Famine Mission to India, which toured the subcontinent in 1946 to mobilise American opinion in favour of US food aid, followed in the wake of decades of efforts by civil society organisations to secure greater US involvement in India.

The end of colonial rule in India in 1947 did not solve the country's food needs overnight. The Indian government undertook multiple efforts to attain food security; the burden it had to shoulder was immense. Freedom from famine was not attained so soon: in late 1950, famines occurred in Madras and Bihar. Despite the fact that India was now governed by its own political elite, the occurrence of starvation continued to be a sensitive political subject after independence and threatened to weaken the legitimacy of the state. The request of the Nehru government for US food assistance in early 1951 raised fears that India's hard-won political independence from British colonial rule was lost to a new economic dependency on the United States. The attempts of Indian politicians at securing food from Russia, China and other regional powers illustrate the continued efforts to tap into pan-Asian and communist solidarities for famine relief.

Seemingly unaffected by the political reconstitution of South Asia, the India Lobby in the United States reassembled again in late 1950 to mobilise food aid for the famine-afflicted people of Bihar and Madras. The United Emergency Committee on Famine Relief for India was a striking amalgam of (former) Indian nationalists, birth control activists and North American do-gooders. It was dominated by two institutions with long-standing ties to the Indian subcontinent: The Watumull Foundation and MFM. The former ran a scholarship exchange programme between India and the United States, hoping to stimulate research on topics of relevance for India's national development. The latter had been formed in 1946 to promote the food supplement MPF among US relief agencies. Together, they aligned to send food aid, including MPF and CARE packages, to India. Prominent members of the birth control movement rendered indispensable support to the United Emergency Committee. US-sponsored famine relief in post-war India was carried out against the backdrop of the perceived threat that India's poor and malnourished posed to post-war utopias of global prosperity. Such fears drove, and reinforced, the heightened involvement of US and Indian birth control activists in mobilising famine relief and nutritional supplements for India in the 1950s.

