

Introduction

Ending Famine in India illuminates the panoply of historical actors who promoted scientific, religious and political solutions to famine in colonial and early postcolonial India: including medical practitioners, nutritional scientists, social reformers, agricultural experts, missionaries, politicians and colonial administrators. The study of this wide web of actors and agendas locates Indian famines in the intersecting histories of humanitarianism, development, science and (anti)colonialism. It also pushes the geographical boundaries of the history of Indian famines beyond the (future) Indian nation and the British Empire. This book shows that many of the activities geared towards ending hunger in the subcontinent arose in the tripartite relationship of India, Britain and the United States.¹ Our understanding of the history of famine in India has been shaped by national and imperial frames.² Tracing the early and persistent ideological and material investments of North Americans in ending famine in South Asia and the resulting entanglements between Indian and US societies breaks new ground. The book is also novel in terms of its temporal scope, linking periods of time, and hence famines, which are commonly studied separately. The mitigation of famine in India between the “late Victorian Holocausts” and the Bengal Famine of the 1940s has been dealt with only peripherally.³ In this intervening period, famines still occurred regularly on a district level, prompting Indian social service organisations, nutritional scientists, missionaries and colonial officers to undertake and debate anti-famine measures. These minor famines (in terms of their geographical scope and the number of people affected) have received less scholarly attention than earlier and later famines.⁴ *Ending Famine in India* treats them as missing links to tease out continuities in the responses of elites to famine from the late nineteenth to the twentieth century and across the colonial and postcolonial divide. Without claiming to be exhaustive, the book provides a selective account of key moments and actors to highlight historical developments and continuities. Three themes structure the book and are developed in the respective book sections. These are the interplay of famine, nutritional science and food aid; the expansion of American missionary activity in South Asia through famine relief and rural reform; and Indian political mobilisation against the backdrop of famines. Before providing further explanations on the aims and content of the book, some preliminary remarks are offered on the meaning of the term “famine” and the way it is used in this book.

I do not delve deeply into definitional questions, nor offer new insights into the causes and nature of famines in colonial India, which have been studied and extensively debated by economic, political, social and environmental historians.⁵

This is not to say that definitions are futile. The definition of famine carried (and still carries) weight, because it guided political stakeholders and humanitarian aid.⁶ This book, however, traces the policies, relief measures, and scientific solutions that were generated in response to famines, mostly with no agreement among historical actors on a singular definition of the phenomenon. Therefore, rather than taking a univocal definition of famine as a starting point, the book foregrounds ambivalences and conflicts over the claimed existence of famine conditions in India and illuminates the activities taken to mitigate them. In the period covered in this book, the meaning of famine was fiercely debated. The colonial administration in India, aiming to keep relief expenses at a minimum and avoid even larger investments into welfare, differentiated between endemic hunger and famine. By the late nineteenth century, the colonial administration understood famines as exceptional periods that demanded the state to intervene, but viewed India's endemic hunger a burden too great to carry. The understanding of famine in India was shaped by the institutionalisation of colonial famine relief, which began with the drafting of the Indian famine codes in the 1880s and refined the indicators used to monitor the food situation in India.⁷ Rainfall, crop failure, food prices, mortality, crime rates and migration were observed to determine the right moment to set colonial (anti-)famine policies in motion: not too early to avoid offsetting the market but not too late either to prevent the loss of life. The success of the colonial early warning system of famine depended on the accuracy of information and the timeliness of communication across administrative levels. The Indian famine codes further distinguished between scarcity and famine, but how exactly they differed remained unclear. On paper, scarcity existed when paupers began to wander, private charity and credit contracted, grain-trade showed "feverish activity", crime rates rose and people as well as cattle migrated in search for food and fodder.⁸ To determine the tipping point at which scarcity turned into famine, the famine codes prescribed further tests of need once scarcity was evident. So-called test-works offered employment at an outrageously low wage. The rush of agricultural labourers to the test-works was considered further proof of an impending famine. In this case, the responsible local official was instructed to report to the provincial government, which in turn decided to declare a famine or postpone the declaration until further notice. Since the Indian famine codes failed "to fix in formal language exactly the point where conditions of scarcity cease, and where conditions of famine begin" the decision to declare famine rested with the provincial governments.⁹ The absence of a clear-cut definition of famine allowed provincial governments to weigh indicators very differently. Mortality had long been the only criterion to distinguish between scarcity and famine in Punjab.¹⁰ In the early twentieth century, after the experience of major epidemics in India, excess mortality during scarcities was no longer considered a reliable indicator of famine. Now evidence had to be produced that people were

dying of hunger and not diseases. But establishing food deprivation as a cause of death was a difficult undertaking, prone to manipulation and error.¹¹

Conflicting views and counter-narratives complicated how famine was understood, debated and responded to in British India. Indian writers, economists and politicians revealed flaws in anti-famine policies and the measurement of famine. They also expressed their dissent with the colonial approach to famine that limited state responsibilities to short-term hunger relief, at the expense of welfare policies that eliminated endemic hunger and poverty. “‘Famine’ had not been officially ‘declared’ in any part of India when we were there, but if famine means hunger and want, the masses of the people of India are never free from it.”¹² Published in the report of a delegation spearheaded by the India League’s leader V.K. Krishna Menon (1896–1974) in 1933, the statement echoed long-standing criticism of the colonial government for ignoring, if not producing, poverty, mal- and undernutrition outside of famines. Beyond the confines of colonial administrative language, the word famine denoted a range of different phenomena. Its inflationary use was often intentional and served the purpose of challenging colonial anti-famine policies and drawing the attention of donors. Although famine decreased in scope in the early twentieth century, the promise of ending famine in India still held power to release resources and political support. The numerous activities explored in this book came about not least because the importance of freeing India from famine had become widely accepted, with famine in India not only being a popular cause of humanitarianism but framed as a danger to political stability and economic development in and beyond South Asia.

Nutritional Science, Famine and Food Aid in South Asia

The advance of chemical science and dietetics in mid-nineteenth century India was followed by the emergence of nutritional science as a discipline in the early twentieth century. Famines in and outside India drove nutritional innovation, because they offered physicians the opportunity to study alimentary requirements and the bodily effects of food deprivation on a large scale. The results of the scientific study of food and food consumption were a new body of knowledge and a language of nutrition.¹³ Their impact on food aid and anti-famine policies in India is the focus of this first part of the book. Despite the vast body of literature on food, nutrition, and science in colonial South Asia, the (lack of) influence of nutritional scientific opinion on the historical genesis of food aid in South Asia is largely unexplored.¹⁴ An exception is the work of Nadja Durbach whose study of British institutional feeding, including the management of famine relief in nineteenth-century India, revealed the limited impact of nutritional knowledge on state practice.¹⁵ Chapter 1 shows that the discrepancy between nutritional standards and food allocation in state-controlled institutions studied by Durbach for the nineteenth century remained visible in the

colonial management of famine in the later period. Although nutritional studies again and again pointed to the insufficiency of relief rations in terms of their size and content, the economic rationale that guided colonial famine relief discouraged its reform. In order to understand to what extent colonial famine relief violated nutritional standards of the time, chapter 1 reviews the famine codes, the rules and guidelines that governed the administrative responses to famine in colonial India from 1883 onwards.¹⁶ The introduction to the principles of colonial famine relief also provides essential context for the second and third parts of the book that shift attention to missionary interventions and Indian nationalist mobilisation. My review of the famine codes extends beyond 1901, when the last all-India famine commission published its report, and which commonly marks the end point of historical studies of colonial famine relief. In the decades that followed, colonial anti-famine policies developed even more unevenly across India as changes to them were introduced on a provincial level. Although not generalisable, the findings of the individual studies discussed in the chapter exemplify some of the ongoing debates and negotiations over famine relief in the early twentieth century. They also allow me to trace the influence of Indian social reformers on the revision of colonial famine relief. In Madras in the 1920s and 1930s, for instance, the Servants of India Society drew on nutritional studies to deplore the inadequacies of colonial famine relief and to insist on its reform.

The discussion on the intersection of nutrition science and famine relief is expanded to the 1940s and 1950s in chapter 2 of the book. Against the backdrop of famine in Bengal, World War II and India's quest for food security after independence, the collaboration between Indian and American nutritionists, philanthropists and political activists grew and led to new initiatives to meet India's food needs. Economic and political rationales contributed to the rising popularity of food supplements and blended food that were increasingly applied to mitigate starvation in India. Remedies for hunger developed and tested in South Asia in these decades radiated further, demonstrating South Asia's role as a hub for humanitarian engagement and knowledge production in nutrition. The chapter looks beyond the role of India in the development of British imperial famine relief to help anchor South Asia in the global history of food aid.¹⁷

From Famine Relief to Community Development: The American Missionary Movement in South Asia

How famines allowed American missionary expansion in South Asia is the focus of the second part of the book. It takes American famine relief for India in the late nineteenth century as its starting point and ends with the contribution of missionaries to Indian Community Development after independence. (North) American humanitarianism of the 1890s had important historical precursors, but it visibly

picked up steam in this decade. Sharing one's wealth to assist foreign populations became popular in the United States at this time. Fundraising committees and relief providers mushroomed during wars and famines to put American money to work.¹⁸ The urge of Americans to assist foreign populations gained considerable momentum in the World War I era, which constituted another turning point in the history of American foreign relief.¹⁹ The history of US-sponsored famine relief in colonial South Asia follows a similar timeline. It began with the mobilisation of unprecedented amounts of US grain and money to assist the work of missionaries in India in 1896. The geography of international disasters and US foreign policy directed American humanitarianism towards specific regions of the world. After World War I, American humanitarianism focussed on Europe and the Near East, but in the shadow of this aid drive, Americans also opened their pockets to relieve famine in colonial South Asia.²⁰

Historians have demonstrated that American humanitarianism was a complex phenomenon. It was nourished by imperial ambition, tied to economic interests and steeped in religious rhetoric. It drew strength from the missionary movement that provided personnel and ideological support, particularly in the nineteenth century.²¹ The participants and motivations of American international disaster relief grew even more diverse as time progressed. Missionaries continued to provide relief abroad in the interwar period, however, secular-minded do-gooders outstripped the missionary involvement in humanitarianism at the end of the Progressive Era.²² With the secular Anglo-American humanitarian movement focussing on Europe, missionaries remained the primary vehicles of US humanitarianism in South Asia during and after World War I. Chapter 3 of the book examines American famine relief in India against this historical context. Without neglecting the domestic changes in the United States that fanned the growth of US humanitarian involvement in South Asia, it seeks to deviate from the common approach of tracing the roots of American humanitarianism primarily and exclusively in the United States. I draw from the findings of historians, most notably Ian Tyrrell and David Hollinger, who studied how missionary work in (what came to be known as) foreign mission fields profoundly shaped American society.²³ With this purpose in mind, the chapter studies the famine relief work of the American Marathi Mission (AMM) which spearheaded American humanitarianism in the Bombay province. The focus on the work of a single relief provider in one region of South Asia may seem small on first sight, but it allows for drawing out larger processes. I shift back and forth between the American East Coast and western India to examine the link between the growth of humanitarian spending in the United States and the work of American missionaries in India. I detail the efforts of missionaries to gear the humanitarian spending of Americans to colonial South Asia; I illustrate how the reliance on Indian mission members and the partial integration of American aid in British colonial structures undermined the branding of US missionary work as uniquely American.

Chapter 4 broadens the book's perspective on the history of the American protestant response to famine in India both with regard to the temporal scope of the study and the historical actors populating it. It examines how the wish of the American protestant mission movement to demonstrate its capacity to help the prevention of famines in India contributed to its growing involvement in rural development in the interwar period. Recent literature on rural reconstruction and agricultural education in India has broken new ground. It has highlighted, on the one hand, the long historical genealogy of post-war and post-independence community development and, on the other hand, the early American involvement.²⁴ In his study of the Young Men's Christian Association in India, Harald Fischer-Tiné has illustrated the contributions of this American missionary institution to rural reform in the interwar period and its influence on later secular development work in South Asia and beyond.²⁵ Prakash Kumar has used the Allahabad Agricultural Institute as a case study to gain new insights into the American character of rural reform, which he argues coexisted and interacted with British colonial and Indian approaches to agricultural education and reform.²⁶ Chapter 4 builds on this literature and seeks to contribute to its debates. I foreground the historical continuity of interwar and post-independence missionary rural work, examine the intersections of famine and rural reform and explore the gendering of agricultural education. The chapter also offers a modest contribution to the history of the global food system by showing how missionaries contributed to reframing food security as a matter requiring a global framework and international coordination. Historians have demonstrated that the disruption of agricultural production and the return of famine to Europe during World War I lifted the deterrence of mass starvation onto the agenda of European and North American politicians and economists. Instead of considering food provision as a national and regional matter, global food imbalances were foregrounded and international coordination and cooperation were considered important remedies in the 1930s and 1940s.²⁷ This shifting response to food shortages between the world wars has not been associated with the American mission movement, and is seldom studied in relation to South Asia.²⁸ In this context, chapter 4 demonstrates that framing food security as a problem of global dimensions undergirded the efforts of missionaries to internationalise rural mission work.

Anticolonial Famine Relief: Mobilising Against Hunger and Colonialism

How Indian social and political elites employed famines to promote visions of the Indian nation is the central theme of part III of the book that is divided into three chapters. Whereas the first part of the book has shed some light on the intersection of Indian nationalism, food and nutrition, chapter 5 demonstrates how Indian nationalists took on the task of documenting famines and organising for relief in

the first two decades of the twentieth century. The book section thus explicates how ending famine became central to Indian nationalist politics. But it also moves beyond this to study how famine relief became an anticolonial and anti-imperial activity, used by a broader section of activists to express political solidarity with Indian political demands. The anticolonial roots of humanitarianism are commonly understudied.²⁹ Despite earlier confluences of nationalism and famine, the first two decades of the twentieth century deserve particular reflection. In these decades, famine relief acquired a central position in the Indian social service movement, while Indians outside South Asia began to take part in famine relief.³⁰ Driven by patterns of South Asian migration and diaspora formation, Indian activists in North America and Canada began to write about famine and raise money in support of Indian-led relief efforts.³¹ By shifting the geographical focus to North America but tying it to South Asia, Chapter 5 highlights how famines were employed to bridge distance and forge connections between Indians at home and abroad. At the same time, preventing future famines in India even became a concern for opponents of Asian immigration in the United States, who considered famines a cause of Indian migration and political radicalism.³²

Given the richness of historical sources and the importance of the famine in the history of India, chapter 6 focusses exclusively on the Bengal Famine of 1942–44.³³ It revisits the history of the famine to gain a deeper insight into its “transformative effect on Indian politics and national aspirations” that Benjamin Siegel has recently flagged in his seminal book *Hungry Nation*.³⁴ Famine relief in Bengal became an ideological battleground for Indian political forces that vied for significance by relieving hunger. While Hindu/Muslim communalism has become the main framework for examining the 1940s in Bengal, the range of ideologies and political forces that came into play during the famine shows that communalism does not suffice to understand the complexity of the relief effort in Bengal or its political impact.³⁵ Indian social and political movements had diversified in the interwar period.³⁶ On the eve of independence famine relief promoted very different visions of India’s future, now also put forward by Indian women’s organisations, Hindu nationalists and Indian communists.

Clearly, independence did not end starvation nor Indian criticism of the government’s response to famine. Food became central to Indian politics in the first two decades of independence.³⁷ Offering a missing perspective on India’s quest for sustenance, the last chapter of the book examines the continuity of Indian activism in the United States in the 1940s and early 1950s. Political alliances between Indians and Americans had grown in the interwar period. They expanded decisively in the 1940s when anti-British and anti-imperial sentiment was rising in the United States, giving impetus to Indian political mobilisation. Against the backdrop of the Bengal famine, the “Indian food crisis” of 1946 and the famine in Bihar and Madras in 1951,

Americans and Indians lobbied the US government to start food aid and mobilised non-governmental aid themselves. Thus, Indian and American philanthropists, politicians and scientists already collaborated in the field of nutrition and food aid before the official Indo-US food aid agreements were signed into existence in the postcolonial period.

The book ends in the 1950s, right before the onset of the Green Revolution once again changed the historical setting. However, the history of famine in India continues well into the present. Many of the debates and contestations traced in this book are topical. Claiming its ability to provide sustenance to its population continues to be of existential importance to the Indian government and has invited new debates on the adequate measurement of hunger.³⁸ This book does not provide an answer to the puzzle as to why hunger prevails in India, but it offers a historical perspective on debates and conflicts that marked the fight against famine, food insecurity and starvation in South Asia.