

Conclusion

Instead of repeating the findings of this book which are set out in the conclusions of each individual chapter, I end with some general observations. It is not self-evident that this study foregrounds cooperation and connections. Historians and anthropologists have demonstrated that disconnections dominate the experience of mass starvation. Famines destroy lives and throw communities and societies into disarray as they disrupt and terminate social, political and economic relations.¹ But famines in South Asia also prompted the responses of a vast group of individuals and organisations, who intervened in the lives of the famine-afflicted to their benefit and detriment. In so doing, they enforced connections, networks and institution building. As shown in this book, the quest of ending famine in India attracted a growing cast of domestic and international actors in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when relieving famines and curbing malnutrition increasingly aligned with the aims and agendas of historical actors and movements. Mitigating famine allowed Indian nationalists to undermine colonial authority and to discipline the poor, enabled American missionaries to expand their presence in South Asia, and fuelled innovation in food and nutritional science. Despite the fact that, in the decades between the “late Victorian Holocausts” and the Bengal Famine of 1942–44, famine decreased in scope and scale, activities undertaken to mitigate starvation and promote visions of an India free from hunger grew in multiple ways. In this interim period, famines continued to influence the social and political history of the subcontinent through the various debates and activities they inspired. To encompass the activities of actors who promised to set an end to famine in India, the spatial framework that commonly undergirds historical research on famines in South Asia needs to expand. Famine occasioned deepening contact between India and the United States which I investigate against the background of South Asian migration to North America, American missionary activity in South Asia, and the dominance of the United States in the global food aid regime. South Asia became a site of knowledge production on famine relief and rural reform in the twentieth century and a contact zone of British, Indian and American “famine experts”—a finding that anchors South Asia in the global history of food aid, humanitarianism and development.

The topicality of some of the debates covered in this book is glaring. It remains a challenge to bridge the gap between this historical study, which ends in the 1950s, and an analysis of the present without oversimplifying. And yet some continuities seem too significant not to be mentioned, even if only in the closing paragraphs of the book. Contemporary disagreement about the extent and nature of hunger in India is

reminiscent of the political manoeuvrings that accompanied the fight against famine in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and that tapped into science to reveal as well as to minimize the prevalence of hunger. Such continued disagreement showed vividly in a controversy sparked by the publication of the annual Global Hunger Index (GHI) in October 2021. In the report prepared by Welthungerhilfe and Concern Worldwide, India dropped seven points, landing at 101 out of 116 countries.² By confirming that India's food situation was "serious", the GHI questioned the success of the Indian government's recent national campaign to improve the nutritional health of mothers and children.³ The BJP government launched POSHAN Abhiyaan in 2018, an ambitious campaign to combat malnutrition as part of prime minister Narendra Modi's election promise of a "New India" by 2022.⁴ The Indian Ministry of Women and Child Development that oversees the implementation of POSHAN Abhiyaan renounced the GHI, arguing that the report lacked accuracy.⁵ An unnamed government official also recommended the GHI to change its name, as the term hunger was supposedly too drastic to describe the condition of the Indian population.⁶ Critics of the government's social welfare schemes admitted that the statistical basis of some indicators of the GHI could be improved, but found the ministry's blanket rejection of the report unfortunate and unjustified.⁷ Oxfam India, reaffirming the report, also pointed out the delay between the collection of the data and the publication of the GHI: the report did not reflect the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.⁸ At the time the GHI 2021 was published, the pandemic had intensified India's hunger drastically. The scale of hunger and death in India that followed the lockdown even invited critics of the BJP government to compare it to the Bengal Famine of the 1940s.⁹

As hunger retains its political significance, debates on the appropriateness of the scales used to measure hunger and the terms for describing the nutritional health of Indians continue unabated. Meanwhile, the prevalence of malnutrition and undernourishment in India undermines the political success to offset famine.¹⁰ Despite the disagreement between activists and politicians on India's ranking in the GHI, there is sufficient evidence to support the claim that mal- and undernutrition had already been a major killer in India before Covid.¹¹ As the lockdown confined labourers to the cities, leaving millions of Indians without income, starvation reached a new tragic scope in the country.¹² The political response was insufficient: Although public food stocks hit a new high at the beginning of the pandemic, the government did not release stocks in sufficient quantities to meet the needs of the population at risk. The Public Distribution System (PDS), the main instrument to offset food scarcities in India, remains insufficient and exclusionary, and the recent rollback of social security is likely to cause further hardship.¹³ The many forms of hunger that continue to afflict the most vulnerable parts of the population in the aftermath of *Ending Famines in India* may be less sensational. They are no less tragic, nor are they inevitable.