

Capital, policy and the Great Indian Famine, 1876–78

The Great Indian Famine of 1876–78 was one of the most devastating humanitarian crises in India's colonial history. Affecting over 30 million people across southern regions like Madras, Mysore and Bombay, it claimed between six and ten million lives. Although the initial cause was environmental – a failure of the monsoon triggered by a global El Niño event – the famine's deadly scale was not inevitable. It was shaped by political choices about how capital was raised and spent under British rule.

"In Kadapa district, I saw one hundred men lying in the dust, their limbs too weak to move, their eyes following the grain cart as if in prayer." **Indian relief officer's account (1877)**

British officials applied a strict belief in *laissez-faire* economics, insisting that markets, and not governments, should determine prices and supply. As food prices soared, many families could no longer afford basic grain, even though food was still available in parts of India. Rather than intervene, colonial authorities allowed grain to be exported overseas to preserve Britain's trading reputation. Millions starved – not due to lack of food but because they couldn't access it. Even as crops failed, the colonial government continued to collect taxes from Indian peasants. Relief camps were eventually opened, but help came with conditions. Under Sir Richard Temple's new policy, known as the 'Temple wage', starving people were required to perform hard labour in exchange for daily food rations – just 1,600 calories a day, far below subsistence. The camps were overcrowded and unhygienic, allowing diseases like cholera and dysentery to spread. Those too weak to work were turned away.

While famine swept through the countryside, the British state prioritised imperial prestige and military strategy. In 1877, at the height of the crisis, £5 million was spent on the Delhi Durbar, a lavish ceremony where Queen Victoria was declared Empress of India. Meanwhile, the military budget surged, as Britain prepared for the Second Anglo–Afghan War. In contrast, famine relief in Madras accounted for just 1.8% of provincial spending. These decisions reveal where colonial capital was directed: not towards human survival, but towards imperial control.

One of the few critical responses came from the Anglo-Indian newspaper *The Friend of India and Statesman*. The paper condemned the mismanagement of relief camps, criticised Viceroy Lytton's policies and called the famine a moral disgrace. It argued that 'no man need die of starvation', a direct challenge to the government's refusal to intervene. Although the newspaper didn't call for an end to British rule, it demanded a more compassionate, ethical empire.

This famine was more than an environmental crisis. It was a result of economic and political choices that placed trade, taxes and prestige above the lives of Indian people. The criticism that followed reflects a wider debate: should Indians *accommodate* British rule and demand reform from within or begin to *resist* colonial power more fundamentally? The famine helped to shape this debate and exposed the human cost of imperial priorities.

Bibliography

Laakso, E. (2024) 'No man need die of starvation: *The Friend of India and Statesman* as a critical voice during the 1876–1878 Great Indian Famine'. Available at: <https://helda.helsinki.fi/bitstreams/0a08489e-9c6d-4851-ba43-51486d55fcc5/download>