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# British Humanitarian Political Economy and Famine in India, 1838-42.

In the spring of 1837 the colonial press in India began to carry disturbing accounts of growing agricultural distress in the Agra region of north-central India.[1] Failed rains and adverse market conditions had created a fast deteriorating situation as peasant cultivators increasingly found themselves unable to access to enough food to eat. By spring 1838 news of the situation had reached Britain, and the metropolitan press began to report on what the Indian Famine Commission would later refer to as 'the most grievous famine experienced in Upper India since the commencement of British rule.'[2] As the death toll crept ever upwards, the attention of British colonial philanthropists and reformers was drawn to India by harrowing descriptions of human suffering, mass mortality, the desertion of villages, and desolation of vast tracts of land.

Public responses to news of the famine varied. Calls for private charitable donations to hastily created relief funds were prominent in colonial Indian newspapers but were less common in Britain. In July 1838, the Leeds Mercury carried a rare plea for subscriptions to a relief fund, asking:

> What is the duty of Britain towards her Eastern possessions? The Presidencies and different stations in India are vigorously aiding the sufferers; let the cry of misery in the East be heard and regarded in the West. The writer recollects that while in India in 1824 that more than £10,000 were raised in that country for the suffering Irish - Let this sum now be returned, and 'with high interest too' - In London and in the principle towns of the United Kingdom, let those who know and feel the evil, call the friends of humanity and our common Christianity together; and their appeal will be liberally regarded. Her Majesty, and the nation, if properly addressed, must respond

[1] E.g. Friend of India, 24 August 1837, 266.

[2] Report of the Indian Famine Commission, pt. 3, (London, 1885), 19.

> to the cry of famine and death... May our country exhibit the influence of its divine religion, which declares 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'.[3]

Its author, James Peggs, was a former Baptist missionary of several years residence in India, a prolific campaigner on Indian social and religious issues, and leading advocate for the abolition of sati in the late 1820s.[4] The call for British public action reflects both the tenor of his previous work, and an emerging sense of humanitarian responsibility to relieve suffering.[5] The Irish Famine of 1845-9 is often considered the first national subsistence crisis to attract large-scale international fundraising activities, with committees in Calcutta in the vanguard of overseas relief efforts. Yet as Peggs' extract demonstrates, an embryonic sense of imperial interconnectedness and tentative flows of charity between India, Britain and Ireland pre-dated that catastrophe. As the Leeds Mercury put it, 'If it be said that they are too far off to have a claim on us, the reply is – they are human beings, and that when Ireland suffered a similar visitation the people of India did not think our sister isle too far off'.[6] Most responses to the famine, however, were characterised by what Michael Barnett terms developmental humanitarianism, rather than emergency relief.[7] The Essex Standard, for example, called not for private charitable giving, but for 'an immediate inquiry into the causes of such calamities', and for 'a system of justice and sound policy' to be introduced to prevent further disasters.[8] As with the Bengal famine of 1770, the dearth of 1837-8 became the vehicle for a wider debate about the impact of East India Company (EIC) rule, the nature of Britain's imperial responsibilities in India, and the subcontinent's role within political economy of the post-emancipation British empire.

[3] Leeds Mercury, 28 July 1838, 6.

[4] See, for example, James Peggs, India's Cries to British Humanity (London, 1830).

[5] Michael Barnett, Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism (Ithaca, 2011), 49 et seq.

[6] Leeds Mercury, 28 July 1838, 6.

[7] Barnett, Empire of Humanity, 39.

[8] Essex Standard, 03 August 1838, 3.

Perhaps surprisingly given its role in catalysing wider debates about empire in Britain, the Agra famine of 1837-8 has received relatively little scholarly attention, especially when compared to the catastrophic scarcities that blighted India in the second half of the nineteenth century. Sanjay Sharma's excellent Famine, Philanthropy and the Colonial State focuses on the responses of the EIC administration and colonial society, and their implications for the development of famine policy across the nineteenth century.[9] Upamanya Mukherjee's Natural Disasters and Victorian Imperial Culture looks at several nineteenth-century famines and epidemics, exploring the role disasters play in the justificatory discourses of 'palliative imperialism'.[10] Both focus on responses to famine in India, however, rather than its coverage in the metropolitan press, in Parliament and East India House, or in the lectures and publications of philanthropic organisations in Britain. This may reflect the persistent assumption that such events engendered little interest at home. 'The protecting influence of the English press is not shed over India', a correspondent to the Asiatic Journal lamented in 1838,

> the expiring rays of its power scarcely penetrate within the doorposts of our Eastern kingdom. The moral force of public opinion is not brought to bear upon the grievances, nor public sympathy attracted towards the sufferings of her population... here is an enormous population exposed to a stupendous periodical calamity, and actual deaths occurring by thousands, and the press is silent - as silent as the graves of the victims of famine.[11]

It also reflects a longstanding assumption that the early nineteenth century was a period of growing imperial self-assurance and complacency regarding the benefits of British rule in India, which was

[9] Sanjay Sharma, Famine, Philanthropy, and the Colonial State: North India in the Early Nineteenth Century (New Delhi, 2001).

[10] Upamanya Mukherjee, Natural Disasters and Victorian Empire: Famines, Fevers and the Literary Cultures of South Asia (London, 2013).

[11] Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register, vol 26, 1838, 278.

contrasted favourably with the slave system of the West Indies.[12] Yet, as this article will show, voices were raised in Britain condemning the handling of the famine, emphasising the colonial state's culpability for the disaster, and questioning the impact of British rule on India's prosperity. Indeed, in emphasising the critical response of sections of the British public to events in India, this paper complicates the dominant narrative of the 1830s as a period of growing imperial self-confidence by highlighting the continued existence of counter-hegemonic voices within metropolitan British discourses on empire in India. At the same time, however, it also explores the limitations of humanitarian political economy, arguing that, while critical of the impact of EIC rule, the alternatives presented by colonial philanthropists themselves remained framed by the logic of imperial capitalism.

In exploring the ways in which news of the Agra famine was received in Britain, this article focuses primarily on two inter-related, but often competing agendas within the metropolitan response. The first is the attempt by colonial philanthropists connected to the Aborigine's Protection Society (APS, founded 1837) and British India Society (BIS, founded 1839) to find a solution to Indian poverty (and to British manufacturers' dependency on slave-grown cotton from America) in commercial expansion and increased cash crop agriculture on the subcontinent.[13] The second is the role ideas about Indian impoverishment played in justifying the exportation of Indian indentured labour to support colonial commodity production in other parts of the empire. Debates between the

[12] Peter Marshall, 'The Moral Swing to the East: British Humanitarianism in India and the West Indies' in K. Ballhatchet And J. Harrison (eds), East India Company Studies: Papers Presented to Professor Sir Cyril Philips, (Hong Kong, 1986), 76.

[13] For more on these organisations, see Charles Swaisland, 'The APS, 1837–1909,' Slavery & Abolition, 21:2, (2000): 265-280; S. R. Mehrotra, 'The BIS and its Bengal Branch, 1839-46,' The Indian Economic & Social History Review 4:2 (1967): 131-154; Zoë Laidlaw, '"Justice to India–Prosperity to England–Freedom to the Slave!" Humanitarian and Moral Reform Campaigns on India, Aborigines and American Slavery,' Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society 22, vol. 2 (2012): 299-324; James Heartfield, The Aborigines' Protection Society: Humanitarian Imperialism in Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Canada, South Africa, and the Congo, 1836-1909 (New York, 2011).

proponents of these opposing schemes are instructive as they reflect the wider fissures within early-nineteenth-century ideas of political economy, in which demands for coercive labour regimes of various types (slavery, convict assignment, indenture) came into conflict with liberal ideals that limited the power of the employer on humanitarian grounds and venerated idealised image of the free wage labourer. Yet although the two projects appear diametrically opposed, this article will suggest that they were based on shared assumptions about the nature of Indian poverty, and the potential for cheap Indian labour to fulfil the various needs of the British imperial marketplace.

By exploring the relationship between responses to the famine and political and commercial debates about India's productivity and labour resources, this paper builds on a recent resurgence in interest in the history of humanitarian intervention.[14] The interaction between humanitarian sentiment and the social, political and economic interests of the state have become important and controversial themes, especially in the context of the complex relationship between the emergence of humanitarianism and transnational histories of imperial expansion and exploitation.[15] Discourses of colonial philanthropy redefined how debates about imperial relations were framed, but as this paper will argue, they did not necessarily alter the underlying political and economic impetuses that drove them. By challenging the justificatory discourse of 'civilising mission', post-colonial and revisionist scholars have explored its role in masking economic exploitation and imperial violence and revealed more complex motivations underpinning various policies, practices and reforms.[16] As Lambert and Lester point out, the philanthropic dimensions of imperial expansion were co-constitutive with the more overtly exploitative ones, existing in an uneasy relationship with the coercive power of the colonial state.[17] Humanitarian agendas functioned within this complex matrix

[14] Rob Skinner and Alan Lester, 'Humanitarianism and Empire: New Research Agendas', Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History, 40:5, (2012), 729-747 at 729.

[15] Skinner and Lester, 'Humanitarianism and Empire', 729.

[16] Marshall, 'The Moral Swing to the East', 69.

[17] David Lambert and Alan Lester, 'Geographies of colonial philanthropy', Progress in Human Geography, 28.3, (2004): 320-341 at 321

of moral, economic, political and pragmatic imperatives, which produced fissured and contested ideological formations that were applied unevenly across different colonial sites.[18] This is particularly evident in the 1830s and 1840s, as sentimental humanitarian rhetoric about the plight of Britain's suffering Indian subjects increasingly intersected with commercial and political agendas regarding the subcontinent's productive potential.

Disasters, as Mukherjee points out, are important 'touchstones' in separating those who focus on the supposed improvements wrought by colonialism from those who seek to critique its impact and evaluate its multifarious costs.[19] Metropolitan British responses to the famine in Upper India reflected this fundamental dichotomy between those who presented it as a natural disaster, and those who held the EIC accountable. Thus, as Darren Zook has argued in the context of late-nineteenth-century famine narratives, accounts of 1837-8 were less a description of the famine as a specific event, but rather an elucidation of 'the political agendas of various groups of witnesses.'[20] This paper explores how prevailing attitudes towards India's environmental and climactic vulnerability intersected with concerns over the impact of EIC policy, the needs of the global imperial labour market, and reformist prescriptions for India's future productivity. In doing so it will point to a discursive agenda that sought to politicise the immiserated Indian landscape within the framework of an ongoing realignment of Britain's imperial strategies after the Emancipation Act of 1833. It begins by contextualising metropolitan British responses to the 1837-8 crisis in terms of debates about the causes of famine in colonial South Asia and by outlining how these issues intersected with the immediate concerns of the late 1830s. It then goes on to explore the ways in which the famine was used to mobilise support for the competing agendas of colonial philanthropists who championed East India reform and the West Indian lobby that advocated for the

[18] Skinner and Lester, 'Humanitarianism and Empire', 731

[19] Mukherjee, Natural Disasters, 13.

[20] Darren Zook 'Famine in the Landscape: Imagining Hunger in South Asian History, 1860-1990' in Arun Agrawal and K. Sivaramakrishnan (eds), Agrarian Environments: Resources, Representations, and Rule in India (London, 2000): 107-131 at 108.

indentured labour system. Using the rhetoric of newly formed organisations for colonial reform, such as the APS and BIS, together with debates at East India House and in the press, it assesses the ways in which ideas of agricultural distress in India informed wider debates about imperial humanitarian responsibility, colonial commodity production, free trade, slavery, and labour migration in the formative decade after the Emancipation Act.

**Unnatural Disasters: Famine in Early Colonial India**

The history of British India is punctuated by catastrophic famines. Two great famines in Bengal marked the beginning and end of the colonial period – in 1770 up to 10 million people, or one third of the population, are thought to have died, while 1943 saw the loss of 3 million lives as surplus grain was redirected to help the war effort. Numerous other serious scarcities, with death tolls numbered in the hundreds of thousands, took place in various parts of India in the intervening years. Zook argues that in the late nineteenth century subsistence crises became inextricably connected with India, as 'the geographic landscape of famine was transformed into the mental landscape of chronic poverty.'[21] These discourses had a long pedigree in colonial accounts dating back to the late eighteenth century, which presented India as a land of decay, and attributed agricultural vulnerability to India's capricious climate and 'tropical backwardness'.[22] As late as 1880 the Famine Commission claimed that scarcities were traceable 'in all cases' to 'seasons of unusual drought, the failure of customary rainfall leading to the failure of food crops on which the subsistence of the population depends.'[23] This discourse allowed colonial observers to eschew any connection between imperial exploitation and agricultural crisis, placing the blame instead on the vagaries of the Indian weather.[24] Some contemporaries did question how natural these disasters

[21] Zook, 'Famine in the Landscape', 115.

[22] Mukherjee, Natural Disasters, 21-2 and 36. See also David Arnold, 'Hunger in the Garden of Plenty. The Bengal Famine of 1770', in A. Johns (ed.) Dreadful Visitations: Confronting Natural Catastrophe in the Age of Enlightenment, (London: Routledge, 1999): 81-112.

[23] Cited in Mukherjee, Natural Disasters, 36.

[24] Barnett, Empire of Humanity, 64.

were, however, creating tensions between interpretations that focused on climate, and those that acknowledged varying degrees of colonial culpability.[25]

During the Bengal Famine of 1770 rumours circulated that EIC agents were guilty of directly exacerbating the crisis. 'How is it possible to justify the servants of the EIC, or to clear them, from the charge of rapine, oppression, injustice, and even murder,' an anonymous letter published in the Morning Chronicle asked, 'when it is plain that they were the immediate cause of a late dreadful famine in India, owing to their unbounded avarice?'[26] The Court of Directors asked the Governor-General to investigate claims that EIC officials had engaged in speculation in the grain market, but no Britons were ever prosecuted over it. The 1770 famine did act as a catalyst for a wider-ranging debate about EIC activities in India, however, culminating with the unsuccessful impeachment of Warren Hastings between 1788 and 1795. Edmund Burke, who orchestrated the impeachment trial, accused the EIC of making 'ill use' of the calamity and aggravating the distress for the advantage of individuals.[27] Meanwhile, Adam Smith blamed the catastrophe on EIC interference in the grain market. 'The drought in Bengal,' Smith maintained, 'might probably have occasioned a very great dearth. Some improper regulations, some injudicious restraints imposed by the servants of the East India Company upon the rice trade, contributed…to turn that dearth into a famine.'[28] In The Wealth of Nations Smith argued that the self-interest of the grain trader was the best security against famine, as market mechanisms meant that optimal selling strategies would spread consumption over the harvest year, and reallocate grain from areas in relative surplus to those in relative deficit.[29] This faith in the palliative effects of free trade was belied by experience,

[25] This is most apparent in the late nineteenth century, when four decades of persistent famine influenced nationalist polemics about the impact of colonialism on India's economy, but can also be seen in response to earlier famines. See Zook, 'Famine in the Landscape', for more.

[26] Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser, 14 August 1772, 1.

[27] Edmund Burke, The Works of the Right Honorable Edmund Burke, vol 10 (Boston, 1877), 180.

[28] Adam Smith, An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations, (Edinburgh, 1827), 215.

[29] Adam Smith, Wealth of Nations, 213 et seq.

though the laissez-faire approach it ushered in had a long-lasting influence, both on later famine policy and on the political economy of organisations like the BIS.

In the wake of the 1770 crisis, British officials in India began to seek ways of preventing future crises. An early articulation of 'civilising mission', the building of public granaries and botanic gardens, together with sporadic interventions to feed hungry children, or prevent slave-trafficking of famine victims, represented EIC attempts claim legitimacy by accepting some traditional duties of Indian rulers.[30] They were also inextricably linked to the articulation of 'palliative imperialism', which justified colonial presence by positioning the British as resolvers, rather than instigators of India's natural disasters.[31] Confident in the power of European scientific knowledge, Sir Joseph Banks believed that new agricultural technologies would eventually result in the 'abolition of famine'.[32] The reality was very different; serious scarcities continued to blight India, and their frequency and severity were exacerbated under colonial rule. As Ravi Ahuja points out, 'Transformations and higher levels of integration of the subcontinent's political, economic and social structure merely changed the causes of famine' as increasingly climactic events were compounded and exacerbated by the functioning of market forces, speculation and misdirected state intervention.[33]

The early nineteenth century saw the development of functioning British systems of colonial governance, and the so-called 'Era of Reform' of the 1820s and 1830s is often portrayed as 'a

[30] Richard B. Allen, 'Suppressing a Nefarious Traffic: Britain and the Abolition of Slave Trading in India and the Western Indian Ocean, 1770-1830', The William and Mary Quarterly, 66:4, (2009), 873-894 at 887.
[31] Mukherjee, Natural Disasters, 36.
[32] Cited in Arnold., 'Hunger', p. 92.
[33] Ravi Ahuja, 'State Formation and 'Famine Policy' in Early Colonial South India', The Indian Economic & Social History Review, 39:4 (2002): 351-380 at 351.

laboratory for the creation of a liberal administrative state'.[34] The EIC itself sought to project an image of slow, but progressive improvement of India that granted the inhabitants 'good government;…security to personal freedom; [and] security to their possessions'.[35] The reality was more chaotic, however, as laissez faire economic policies and individual taxation eroded collective social networks and damaged agricultural productivity.[36] Increased tax demands were not accompanied by investments in the land, as the colonial state appropriated the revenues to pay for export goods and military spending.[37] As a result, they failed to implement any extensive infrastructural improvement, and offered only the most basic and reactive systems of famine relief. As early as 1789, Indian commentators were criticising the EIC for failing to continue traditional practices of 'sinking wells, digging reservoirs, building bridges or planting orchards.'[38] The 'Permanent Settlement' instituted by Cornwallis in 1793 was lauded by colonial officials for providing Indians with security in their landed property, but in practice it resulted in higher taxation that hit the peasantry particularly hard. The impact was exacerbated by inflexible and arbitrary methods of collecting the revenue that made little allowance for poor harvests, or times of extreme dearth.[39] This undermined farmers' ability to cope with seasonal hardship, compounding rural poverty and increasing vulnerability to starvation.

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[34] Thomas Metcalf, Ideologies of the Raj (Cambridge, 1997), 29. For more on liberal ideologies and India, see Andrew Sartori, Liberalism in Empire: An Alternative History (Berkeley, 2014); Uday Singh Mehta, Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought (Chicago, 1999).

[35] Debate at East India House, 19 December 1839, Asiatic Journal, 18, (1839), 66.

[36] For an overview of this literature see David Hall- Matthews, 'Famines in (South) Asia', History Compass 2, no. 1 (2004), 2.

[37] Damodaran, 'The East India Company, Famine and Ecological Conditions', 85.

[38] Georgina Brewis, ''Fill Full the Mouth of Famine': Voluntary Action in Famine Relief in India 1896–1901', Modern Asian Studies, 44:4 (2010): 887-918 at 892.

[39] See Ranajit Guha, A Rule of Property for Bengal: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement (Delhi, 1982). For more on the political economy of EIC-controlled India, see Sudipta Sen, Empire of Free Trade: The East India Company and the Making of the Colonial Marketplace (Philadelphia, 1998); Anthony Webster, The Twilight of the East India Company: The Evolution of Anglo-Asian Commerce and Politics,

The 1837-8 famine represented the culmination a period of distress and economic depression caused by a combination of adverse climatic, ecological and market conditions that Christopher Bayly calls the 'scarcity cycle of the 1830s'.[40] Indications of impending famine in the Doab and trans-Yamuna tract of the North-West Provinces (the region between Delhi and Allahabad) were apparent from the summer of 1837 onwards. The failure of the summer and winter rains resulted in the loss of both the kharif and rabi crops, inflicting a double blow to regional agricultural productivity.[41] By the beginning of 1838, famine conditions were established, and the death toll was rising rapidly. Initially the EIC continued the laissez-faire approach that had characterised their response to previous famines, but by early 1838 the situation was so bad that Governor General Lord Auckland, who had recently toured the famine-stricken regions, admitted that 'the largest expenditure is required in order to palliate the evil, and prevent the total depopulation of the country by starvation and emigration.'[42] With public scrutiny of the situation growing, the EIC was forced to intervene in an attempt to mitigate the crisis.

The colonial state's relief efforts were influenced by ideologies underpinning recent Poor Law reforms in Britain and Ireland. As David Nally notes, these created a legal distinction between poverty and indigence, between the able-bodied pauper and the labouring poor. The New Poor Law ended the practice of 'outdoor relief' and dictated that conditions of state relief in workhouses must, on principle, be worse than those experienced by the lowest paid labourer outside.[43] In India these principles were reinforced by orientalist assumptions about the Indian's natural indolence, leading

1790-1860 (London, 2009); Christopher Bayly, Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770-1870, (Cambridge, 1988).

[40] Bayly, Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars, 292-98.

[41] Kharif crops include rice, maize, sorghum, and pearl millet. The rabi crops include wheat, barley, oats, and chickpeas, among others.

[42] Sanjay Sharma, 'The 1837-38 Famine in UP: Some Dimensions of Popular Action', The Indian Economic & Social History Review, 30.3, (1993): 337-372 at 339.

[43] David Nally, "That Coming Storm": The Irish Poor Law, Colonial Biopolitics, and the Great Famine, Annals of the Association of American Geographers, 98:3, (2008): 714-741 at 721.

the EIC to eschew gratuitous relief in favour of forcing the destitute to labour on 'works of public utility' in return for food. Although the colonial state presented this as a charitable intervention, the system offered little more than starvation rations in return for backbreaking physical labour. Despite this, demand for the scheme grew and colonial officials soon began retrenchments, cutting the already meagre 'wages' and instituting an 'every other day' policy for recipients. Wary of open-ended responsibilities and rising costs, they considered it enough to limit, rather than to prevent mortality.[44] Anyone incapable of physical labour was cast back on private charity, with famine relief funds set up in Calcutta and other urban centres. These voluntary relief committees were also influenced by metropolitan ideas about the deserving and undeserving poor, however, and rejected the Indian practice of freely distributing cooked food from open air kitchens. Instead they channelled relief efforts through residential poor houses, where strict tests of need could be applied, with the result that many died before they could reach the relief centres.[45] Michael Barnett describes the EIC response in 1837-8 as a major humanitarian failure, referring to the 'heart-breaking' response of a colonial state caught between the growing 'recognition of its special responsibilities to the colonised' and its own financial and political interests and ideology.[46]

Back in Britain, news of the famine prompted questions about the EIC's culpability for the disaster, both in terms of their inadequate response to the immediate crisis, and of the long-term impact of colonial policies on India's rural economy. The Court of Directors maintained that the famine, though deplorable, had arisen from natural causes, and that their presence in India had bestowed 'the blessings of good government and security' on the subcontinent. Others disagreed; East India reformers such as Robert Montgomery Martin and Sir Charles Forbes repeatedly lobbied the Court of Directors regarding its responsibility for Indian agricultural distress. 'Did they not wring a most enormous revenue from the bowels of the land and the blood of the people?' Martin

[44] Barnett, Empire of Humanity, 64.

[45] Brewis, 'Fill Full the Mouth of Famine', 843.

[46] Barnett, Empire of Humanity, 64.

asked the Court of Directors in 1839. 'Yes, England had levied in India in 60 years, no less than one thousand million sterling. And what had they given in return for it? Famine - nothing but Famine!' It was a theme that speakers for the APS and BIS would take up with vigour in their critique of EIC rule. The remainder of this article will discuss the wider context in which metropolitan responses to the 1837-8 famine were situated, before exploring two competing ways in which the famine entered these debates - as a catalyst for emerging calls for the expansion of colonial commodity production on the subcontinent, and as a justification for the exportation of Indian labour to other part of the empire through the indentured labour system.

**'Beggars in their Native Land': Indian Poverty and British Colonial Philanthropy**

It is sometimes assumed that the negative impacts of colonial rule went largely unacknowledged in early nineteenth-century Britain. Yet unease with the nature of EIC governance, and particularly with the severity of the land tax, was apparent throughout the 1820s and 1830s alongside more optimistic interpretations of colonial benevolence. Liberalism was not a coherent doctrine, for while most believed that the human condition could be improved prescriptions for achieving this varied. Radical attitudes to reform clashed with more conservative ideas, as well as with the day-to-day exigencies of colonial rule. Thus, the decade that witnessed the Anglicising administration of Lord William Bentinck, epitomised by the prohibition of sati (1829) and Macaulay's Minute on Education (1835), also saw growing criticism of the EIC, as metropolitan British reformers accused the Company of doing too little, acting too slowly, and prioritising its profits over the condition of the people.[47] 'The fatal mistake in India is to consider the natives merely contributors to the advantages of the East India Company…' Irish reformer and anti-slavery activist Daniel O'Connell reminded Parliament in 1831, 'The country is really theirs, not ours, and

[47] Metcalf, Ideologies of the Raj, 29.

we are criminal in not considering their interests and indefeasible rights as the paramount object of our solicitude.'[48]

As Maurice Bric points out, O'Connell was drawn to debates about India because they provided a platform to discuss imperial responsibility to relieve the suffering of 'universal man'. These resonated with debates about Ireland at a time when questions about the repeal of the Act of Union and about rural poverty and land management there were becoming increasingly contentious.[49] Indeed, contemporaneous debates over the Irish Poor Law provide an important comparator to those about famine in India. In both cases, the long-established idea that impoverishment was an indicator of inherent backwardness was increasingly being challenged by reformers who attributed it to British mis-governance and neglect. Likewise, in both places ideas about managing rural destitution through local investment in infrastructure and the reclamation of wasteland for agricultural development were ultimately subordinated to schemes that sought to drive smallholders from the land and forced the poor to seek a subsistence as mobile landless wage labourers.[50] These policies ultimately resulted in mass emigration from both India and Ireland in the mid nineteenth century. Such conflicts also reflected wider divisions in British imperial political economy, between those who supported coercive labour discipline to ensure a malleable workforce for plantations and other large-scale enterprises (whether in the India, Ireland, the West Indies, Australia, New Zealand, or the Cape) and those who promoted a more liberal 'free labour' relations on humanitarian grounds.[51] Such debates were thrown into sharp relief in times of famine, as widespread distress and rising mortality forced the issue of agricultural precarity and labour

[48] Cited in John Hyslop Bell, British Folks & British India Fifty Years Ago (London, 1891), 24.

[49] Maurice Bric, 'Debating empire and slavery: Ireland and British India, 1820–1845.' Slavery & Abolition, 37:3, (2016): 561-577.

[50] See Nally, "That Coming Storm", 730-31. For more on the Irish Poor Law, see Peter Gray, The Making of the Irish Poor Law, 1815-43 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).

[51] For more on the political economy of anti-slavery, see Seymour Drescher, The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor versus Slavery in British Emancipation (Oxford University Press, 2002).

mobility into the spotlight, and Malthusian ideas about population control were juxtaposed against humanitarian impulses to relieve suffering.[52]

The late 1830s saw an upsurge in philanthropic interest in agricultural labour conditions in India. While the late eighteenth century had seen heated political debate about the tangible impacts of EIC rule, by the early nineteenth-century British philanthropic interest in the subcontinent tended to be more concerned with its moral, rather than its material condition. Galvanised by a rapidly expanding missionary movement and epitomised by the campaign against sati in the 1820s, focus tended to be on the spiritual salvation rather than the physical welfare of India's inhabitants.[53] When agricultural conditions did attract evangelical attention, it was in the context of abolitionist attempts to position India as a 'free labour' supplier of colonial commodities that would undercut the slave-grown produce of the West Indies. Influenced by the economic arguments of Adam Smith, leading abolitionist James Cropper argued for an equalisation of the sugar duties to allow 'free-grown' Indian sugar to be imported on the same terms as West Indian produce, on the basis that free labour would always out-perform slavery in an open market.[54] As a result, in the 1820s it was the West India lobby rather than the anti-slavery movement that was most likely to highlight the impoverishment and insecurity of 'free' Indian labourers.[55]

In the late 1830s, shifts in the landscape of British colonial philanthropy created space for a reappraisal of Indian conditions and the impact of EIC policies on Indian socio-economic structures. The successful termination of the campaigns against slavery and apprenticeship in 1833 and 1838

[52] For more on Malthusian attitudes to poverty and famine in Ireland, see Cormac Ó. Gráda and Kevin H. O'Rourke, 'Migration as disaster relief: Lessons from the Great Irish Famine', European Review of Economic History, 1:1, (1997): 3-25.

[53] See Susan Thorne, Congregational Missions *a*nd The Making Of An Imperial Culture In Nineteenth-Century England (Stanford University Press, 1999), 33 et seq.

[54] For more on this see David B. Davis, 'James Cropper and the British Anti-Slavery Movement, 1823-1833', The Journal of Negro History 46.3 (1961): 154-173

[55] See Andrea Major, 'The Slavery of East and West: Abolitionists and 'Unfree' Labour in India, 1820–1833', Slavery & Abolition, 31:4 (2010): 501-525.

respectively had freed British abolitionists to turn their attention to other parts of the world, including to continued existence of slavery in the American South, Cuba, Brazil, and to the wider impacts of colonialism on 'native' populations globally.[56] Thus, although concerns about conditions in the newly emancipated sugar colonies remained prominent in public debate, Catherine Hall notes that the late 1830s saw a shift in focus from slavery itself to larger questions of 'what would come after' and how Britain's 'native subjects' should be governed.[57] The widening horizons of Victorian anti-slavery movement were captured in the geographically expansive remit of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (BFASS, 1839), while concern about the treatment of indigenous populations was epitomised by the Select Committee on Aboriginal Peoples (1835-7) and the formation of the Aborigines Protection Society (APS, 1837).

The 1830s also witnessed the intensification of debates about free trade and free labour, as different interest groups within Britain sought to (re)negotiate their access to various imperial opportunities. Mauritian and West Indian planters had long been vociferous in their defence of the protective tariffs that gave their slave-grown commodities a commercial advantage in the home market. After Emancipation, they found their former slaves were often unwilling to work on the terms they wanted. Their expectations regarding the continuation of plantation labour were also at odds with the ideals of evangelical domesticity encouraged by some missionaries, which included the withdrawal of female field labour and the establishment of communities of smallholders working their own land.[58] From 1834 onwards the planters began to turn their attention to India as a potential source of cheap labour, as they fought to defend their profit margins from African wage demands. Meanwhile, the Charter Act of 1833 had ended the EIC's commercial operations and

[56] For more on the Victorian Anti-slavery movement, see Richard Huzzey, Freedom Burning: Anti-slavery and Empire in Victorian Britain (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).

[57] Catherine Hall, 'The Lords of Humankind Re-visited', Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies 66, no. 3 (2003): 472-485 at 474.

[58] See Catherine Hall, Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination 1830-1867 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002) for a detailed account of this.

opened India to potential European settlement. This gave renewed life to debates about the role of independent enterprise in unlocking India's commercial potential that had been ongoing since the removal of the EIC's trading monopoly in 1813.[59] Debates about Indian agricultural precarity were thus intimately connected to economic agendas that sought to exploit her natural and labour resources, as well as to abolitionist and humanitarian imperatives and agendas. This uneasy union between humanitarian and commercial imperatives was at the heart of responses to the 1837-8 famine by organisations like the APS and BIS.

The APS was founded by Dr Thomas Hodgkin in 1837 to raise public awareness of the impacts of colonial expansion on indigenous populations, and pressure government to adopt more ethical policies towards them. Zoe Laidlaw notes that although the Select Committee had focused on Britain's settler colonies, 'the APS cast its net more widely when deciding who needed its protection.'[60] Though it was largely focused on Britain's settler colonies, India was increasingly perceived as presenting its own unique set of problems. The continued existence of slavery on the subcontinent after 1833 and experiments with Indian indentured labourer were both causes of abolitionist concern. When news of the Agra famine reached Britain, APS members led by Quaker industrialist and anti-slavery activist Joseph Pease turned the organisation's attention to India, securing the services of famous abolitionist orator George Thompson to be their main spokesman on the issue. The resulting political and economic critique of EIC governance went well beyond the remit of the APS, however, and a new organisation – the British India Society – was founded in July 1839.

Unlike the missionary movement, or earlier campaigns against Hindu socio-religious practices such as sati, the BIS prioritised material improvement over spiritual conversion or moral reform. Indeed, they rejected any suggestion of religious interference, and even removed the word

[59] See Webster, The Twilight of the East India Company; Huw Bowen, *The Business of Empire: The East India Company and Imperial Britain, 1756–1833* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[60] Laidlaw, 'Justice to India', 305-6.

‘Christian’ from their published prospectus, replacing it with the word 'humane'.[61] 'I avow that we are neither a commercial society, a religious society - that is, having no religious object - still less a political society;’ Thompson told a meeting in Manchester in 1839, ‘but a society for diffusing information and directing public feeling and intellect, with a view to the advancement of the true welfare, in all respects, of the natives of India.'[62] Such claims were somewhat disingenuous, of course, as commerce, religion and politics were all tightly interconnected in the BIS worldview. The organisation did diverge from previous traditions of evangelical reform, however, by focusing on the damaging social, economic and political impacts of colonialism, rather than on India’s own perceived spiritual and civilizational shortcomings.

The BIS combined discourses of colonial philanthropy and universal abolitionism with a critique of EIC policies and practices, advocating an interlocking series of reforms designed to 'regenerate' India and reposition it within global networks of trade and commodity production. At the heart of its agenda was the idea that expanding cash crop agriculture and removing artificial restrictions on Indian trade would allow the subcontinent to become a 'free labour' producer of sugar, cotton and other colonial commodities. This, it was argued, would both undermine the economic competitiveness of slave grown produce of Cuba, Brazil, and the American South, and bring prosperity to England by securing a reliable supply of cheap, ‘free grown’ cotton. 'Do justice to India,' BIS spokesman George Thompson exhorted his listeners,

> and banish the demon of intestine warfare from Africa! Do justice to India and drive the miscreant man-thief from the banks of the Niger and Gambia! Do justice to India and see the fetters fall from the limbs of the slave! Do justice to India and see your wharves covered, your warehouses filled and your looms made busy, and your populations clothes by the produce of the East, with the fruits of the industry of the

[61] Bell, British Folks and British India, 80.

[62] George Thompson, Lectures on British India: Delivered in the Friends' Meeting House in Manchester, (Pawtucket, 1840), 18.

> conquered and countless millions, who cry from the banks of the Ganges, and the Brahmapootra and the Indus![63]

In calling upon their audience to challenge slavery and colonial exploitation by becoming patrons of India's 'peaceful, bloodless and anti-slavery commerce', the BIS drew on economic strategies for undermining slavery that had been pioneered by James Cropper in the 1820s.[64] The Smithian principles and assumptions that had underpinned the campaigns to end the EIC's monopoly, open India to independent commerce, and level the commercial playing field by equalizing the sugar duties were thus central to the political economy of the BIS.

The intertwining of commercial and philanthropic agendas allowed the BIS to attract an eclectic membership and draw on diverse communities of support. Its inaugural meeting was chaired by leading Parliamentary Abolitionist Lord Brougham, while the audience included some of the leading lights of the British anti-slavery movements, as well as American abolitionists Rev. John Keep from New York and William Dawes from the Oberlin Institute, whose report of the meeting appeared in William Lloyd Garrison's Liberator.[65] Also present were 'old India hands' such as Charles Forbes, Major Gen. Briggs, and Francis Carnac Brown, as well as East India merchants, and members of the Indian aristocracy and entrepreneurial elite – Nawab Iqbal al-Daula of Awadh, Prince Jamh ood-Deen (son of the late Tipu Sultan), Mir Afzal Ali and Mir Karim Ali (agents of the Raja of Satara) and Jehangeer Nowrojee, Hirjeebhoy Merwanjee and Dorabjee Muncherjee of Bombay.[66] In keeping with the overlapping nature of philanthropic campaigns in this period, several key members (or future members) of reformist organisations such as the APS, BFASS, and Anti-Corn Law League (ACLL) were present, while the BIS also later courted the

[63] Thompson, Lectures on British India - Manchester, 6.

[64] Thompson, Lectures on British India - Manchester, 6.

[65] 'Letter from England', The Liberator, August 9, 1839, 1.

[66] For more on Indians in nineteenth-century Britain, see Michael H. Fisher, Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain, 1600-1857, (New Delhi, 2006).

support of traders and manufacturers in urban centres like Manchester.[67] Relationships between the various groups were not always harmonious, however, as BFASS and the ACLL clashed over tariffs on slave-grown sugar, while the BIS resented BFASS's refusal to include conditions in India in its remit. ACLL wanted to resolve free trade issues at home before turning their attention to India, while members of the BIS worried about the moral fibre of their commercial allies.[68] As early as September 1839, Thompson noted the problems inherent in mobilising the merchant classes, writing to Elizabeth Pease that he was wary of 'the value of the co-operation of commercial men, who are merely such, and do not see the force of moral principles. We must not rely on them or expect them to aid us in doing the great work, except when they can promote some special object of their own.'[69]

Debates about Indian poverty and productivity intersected with domestic concerns, as economic depression, rapid industrialization and urbanization, and debates about the new Poor Laws in England and Ireland all raised questions about how best to manage impoverishment among the labouring classes. The harrowing depictions of famine in India in 1837-8 foreshadowed a politicization of hunger that was deployed much closer home during the so-called 'Hungry Forties'. As Peter Gurney has demonstrated, the horrors of starvation were invoked in both ACLL and Chartist rhetoric in the early 1840s. In particular, their emphasis on access to bread as vital to the maintenance of a 'civilised' working class resonated both with racialized depictions of impoverished Irish 'potato-eaters' and accounts of famine-stricken Indians reduced to eating vermin

[67] The provisional committee of the BIS comprised Lord Brougham, General Briggs, Sir Charles Forbes, Sir C. E. Smith, Dr. Bowring, Joseph Pease, Jonathan Backhouse, William Aldam, A. Haviside, William Adam, Francis Carnac Brown and George Thompson. Thomas Clarkson was its nominal president, though age and ill-health prevented him taking an active role.

[68] For more on the relationship between the ACLL, the anti-slavery movement and East India reformers, see Simon Morgan, 'The Anti-Corn Law League and British Anti-Slavery in Transnational Perspective, 1838-1846', The Historical Journal, 52:1 (2009), 87-107.

[69] Raymond English Anti-Slavery Collection, John Rylands Library, GB 133 REAS/3/6, George Thompson to Elizabeth Pease, 14 September 1839.

and carrion, and even to cannibalism.[70] The Chartists for their part were critical of colonial exploitation of the working man overseas, but were even more hostile towards metropolitan elites who focused their attention on distant others rather than addressing the problems of the English working class and were known to disrupt BIS meetings on these grounds. As a result, leading BIS members were keen to emphasis the benefits of a regenerated India for the British labouring classes.[71] In a private letter to Elizabeth Pease, BIS spokesman George Thompson remarked 'I begin to feel as though every smoking chimney, every noisy machine, and huge brick edifice, and piled up cotton waggon, and pale faced factory child, called me to go forward with all boldness and earnestness in the cause of the slave in America - which is the cause of India. The enterprises must be wedded and proceed indissolubly together, till they together triumph.'[72] Thus, as Rob Skinner and Alan Lester point out, 'the long-distance webs of concern spun by humanitarians' did not exist in a vacuum, but intersected with commercial and political interests and were 'intrinsic to the politics both of empire itself and of nation-state formation.'[73] Expressions of humanitarian horror at the famine became entwined with political debates about how India should be governed, while prescriptions for its relief encompassed debates about how her supposed reserves of surplus manpower could best be utilized in the service of colonial commodity production, in India and elsewhere.

**'We Must Regenerate India': Humanitarianism and Colonial Commodity Production**

The speeches and writings of the APS and BIS contain some the most vocal discussion of the 1837-8 famine in Britain. One of the BIS's first independent publications, the pamphlet British Subjects Destroyed by Famine, provided details of 'a succession of Famines, which have destroyed

[70] Peter J. Gurney, ''Rejoicing in Potatoes': The Politics of Consumption in England During the 'Hungry Forties', Past and Present, 203:1, (2009): 99-136.

[71] For more on Chartist attitudes to empire, see Gregory Vargo, "Outworks of the Citadel of Corruption" the Chartist Press Reports Empire', Victorian Studies, 54:2, (2012): 227-253.

[72] GB 133 REAS/3/6, George Thompson to Elizabeth Pease, 20 September 1939

[73] Skinner and Lester, 'Humanitarianism and Empire', 731.

the lives of immense multitudes of human beings' under EIC rule.[74] BIS speakers provided traumatic detail the hardships suffered by the Indian peasantry, drawing on an increasingly well-established stock of imagery: deserted villages, mothers unable to nourish their infants, children destroyed, abandoned, or sold into slavery, rivers blocked by corpses, the dead and dying lining the roads, and wild animals feeding on the living and the dead indiscriminately. The BIS agenda was not one of immediate relief, however, but rather of long-term colonial reform. Thus, although they concluded their pamphlet by noting 'Facts like the above, make an irresistible appeal to the heart of the humane reader, and naturally originate the enquiry – What is to be done?', they did not seek to collect donations, or to pressure the EIC into dealing more effectively with the immediate crisis. Rather, they used the famine to illustrate the need for long-term reform. 'It is not [our] object', they announced, 'to beget a feeling of uninfluential and helpless compassion; but to follow every statement of the necessities of the natives of India, by a clear exhibition of the means by which such necessities may be supplied… British India possesses within itself the capability, when rightly developed, of preventing the recurrence of the appalling events which are now recorded.'[75]

Speeches given by George Thompson, Daniel O'Connell and others in support of the BIS made extensive use of images of Indian suffering. Harrowing images of famine were deployed to mobilised public support by appealing to the empathetic concern of the man or woman of feeling. Indians appeared in these accounts either as emaciated bodies – bleaching bones piled up by the roadside, or distended corpses blocking rivers – or as helpless, homogenous masses whose patient suffering stood as a silent testimony against EIC misrule. Gendered depictions of starvation were common, emphasising the trauma of mothers who were unable to nourish their children in order to evoke sympathetic charity for the innocent victims of famine. Similar approaches were used during the anti-slavery, anti-sati and missionary campaigns to mobilise support among British women, who were presented as the natural champions of their less fortunate sisters overseas. As Hall notes, the

[74] Edward Baldwin (for BIS), British Subjects Destroyed by Famine (London, 1839), 1.

[75] Baldwin, British Subjects Destroyed by Famine, 2.

'suffering bodies of enslaved women and their children evoked a compassion that came to be understood as a moral imperative - the personal body that bore children, suckled and nourished them, was a common bond between those who suffered and those who would help'.[76] 'If there was a love stronger than another in this world, was it not the love of a mother for her offspring?' Daniel O'Connell asked a BIS meeting in 1839. 'To what miserable state must a mother be reduced before she in the night took her dear child and deprived it of life, so that she might not have the torture of seeing it die of starvation in the morning?'[77] O'Connell's question reflects the affective power of maternal distress, but also hints at a dark inverse, as natural affection is perverted by the distorting power of extreme want. As Margaret Kelleher demonstrates, such images would be repeated numerous times during subsequent famines in both Ireland and India.[78] Functioning behind this sentimental humanitarian rhetoric, however, were a set of political agendas that sought to find the solution to Indian poverty in the further opening of India to British commercial interests.

Although the BIS made space within its organisation for direct Indian involvement, inviting Indian delegates to speak on its platform and maintaining links with commercial and civic organisations in Calcutta and Bombay, the 'oppressed multitudes of Hindustan' described in its speeches and publications were presented as passive victims; downtrodden, long-suffering peasants, rendered incapable of defending themselves by the physical inertia of extreme hunger. 'Jackals and vultures approached and fastened upon the bodies of men, women and children before life was extinct.' Thompson reported, 'Madness, disease, despair stalked abroad, and no human power present to arrest their progress.'[79] In reality, of course, the famine of 1837-8 was not characterised by Indian passivity, but rather witnessed a dramatic upsurge in 'famine crime' as people struggled tenaciously to survive. G.R. Girdlestone later remarked on the 'spirit of lawlessness and

[76] Hall, Civilising Subjects, 314.

[77] BIS, Speeches Delivered at a Public Meeting for the Formation of a British India Society (London, 1839), 30.

[78] Margaret Kelleher, The Feminization of Famine: Expressions of the Inexpressible, (Cork, 1997).

[79] Thompson, Lectures on British India - Manchester, 57-9.

freebooting' when 'neither the stores of the merchants nor the grain in transit was safe from attack' and 'the starving people forgot all rights of possession, and violently laid their hands on their neighbours' supplies.'[80] Indeed, Sharma notes that the colonial state's initial impetus towards providing famine relief came not from humanitarian sentiment, but from a desire to prevent a breakdown of law and order.[81] In emphasising only passive victimhood, BIS speakers were making a specific rhetorical choice to render helpless, starving Indians suitable recipients of British charity. As Laidlaw has pointed out, the subcontinent represented an ambivalent case for an organisation like the APS, which usually focused on 'primitive tribes' disrupted by settler colonialism. It was different kind of colonial frontier, and Mughals, Brahmins, and wealthy zamindars had more complex relationships with colonialism than the 'noble savages' of romantic primitivist imagining.[82] Famine sufferers, on the other hand, like 'hill tribes' inveigled into the 'coolie trade', represented the kind of 'helpless victim' of colonial exploitation that could both garner sympathy and act as a powerful and relatively unproblematic indicator of the negative consequences of EIC misrule.[83]

Although it claimed not to be the enemy of the EIC, the BIS provided a searing critique of the Company's activities in India and explicitly blamed the famine on colonial policies of excessive taxation and under-investment. 'Do you ask why this wholesale destruction of human life?' Thompson asked his audience:

> I reply, and while I do so, I am fully aware of the nature of the accusation I bring against the government of India, at home and abroad, and am ready to sustain it – because the people have been virtually robbed of their soil – deprived of the fruits of their industry – prevented from accumulating the means of meeting a period of

[80] Sharma, 'The 1837-38 Famine in UP', 338.

[81] Sharma, 'The 1837-38 Famine in UP', 338.

[82] See Laidlaw, 'Justice to India', 305-6.

[83] See Andrea Major, ''Hill Coolies': Indian Indentured Labour and the Colonial Imagination, 1836–38', South Asian Studies, 33:1, (2017): 23-36.

> drought, and are thus doomed to death should the earth refuse, for a single season, to yield its increase. Our government…has been practically one of the most extortionate and oppressive that ever existed, and…our revenue system in India is one of habitual extortion and injustice, leaving nothing to the cultivator but what he is able to secure by evasion and fraud.[84]

By clearly stating that famines across the period of EIC rule were 'not traceable to war, or…the divine hand', Thompson repositioned the famine as a manmade disaster. Rather than use this admission of colonial culpability to reject the imperial exploitation of the subcontinent altogether, however, he instead called on another, different set of Britons – the philanthropic and private commercial communities that formed his audience – to bring about the 'improvement' of the subcontinent and to rescue India from the slow creep of jungle that accompanied her supposed decline into savage, uncultivated wilderness.

The image of fertile tracts of land being slowly reclaimed by jungle appeared repeatedly in British accounts of the subcontinent, as a marker of its supposed backwardness.[85] As Arnold notes, the term jungle could be used in a variety of ways, to describe a range of different topographical and vegetational conditions, being frequently used to describe 'land that had fallen out of cultivation and so epitomized the decay of civilized society and the encroachment of untamed nature.'[86] It also chimed with a British radical tradition that saw obscenity in unproductive land 'Why are huge forests still allowed to stretch out with idle pomp and all the indolence of Eastern grandeur?' Mary Wollstonecraft asked of Britain's own untamed spaces. 'Why does the brown waste meet the traveller's view, when men want to work?'[87] The BIS was adamant that bringing jungle and desert

[84] Thompson, Lectures on British India - Manchester, 60.

[85] See Pramod K. Nayar, 'The Imperial Sublime: English Travel Writing and India, 1750-1820', Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies 2.2 (2002): 57-99 for more on this.

[86] Arnold, 'Deathscapes', 349.

[87] Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Men (Oxford, 2008 (1st ed. 1790)), 58.

areas back under cultivation would both provide subsistence for Indians and trade benefits to Britain. 'Rescue from poverty and nakedness the Hindoo and Mohamedan on the plains of India', Thompson told his audience, 'put it in the power of the natives of India to cover his head with a turban and his shoulders with a scarf, and you instantly create a demand for the manufactures of your own country, which will put in requisition all the energy and skill of your labouring population.'[88] Such arguments were used to support calls for both the equalisation of trading conditions between the subcontinent and other parts of the empire and the commercial expansion of cash crop agriculture into the uncultivated wastelands and jungles of India.

The focus on the need to reclaim wasteland was so prominent in BIS rhetoric that it was affectionately parodied in a poem by John Backhouse, in which wild animals meet to plan their resistance to reformist attempts to cultivate their habitat, with the result that the Durham branch of the BIS was nicknamed 'The Tiger-Expelling-From-Jungle Society'.[89] The BIS emphasis on the slow creep of the jungle was at odds with the history of ecological change in India, however, which saw the erosion of tropical forests and natural habitats. Indeed, their focus on reclaiming what they considered wasteland for cultivation was part of a wider penetration by capitalist economic forces that played a key role in the transformation of tropical environments through the rapid clearance of forests for logging or agriculture.[90] As Richard Grove points out, however, the relationship between imperial economic imperatives towards deforestation of the kind articulated by the BIS, and the actions and ideology of the colonial state with regard to environmental issues, did not always align. Debates about the environmental impact of various forms of deforestation took place in a range of colonial locales, and serious concerns were expressed about the impact of jungle clearance and its relationship to famine in India from the 1820s onwards. Indeed, after 1837-8 fear of the unrest and

[88] BIS, Speeches, 30.

[89] Bell, British Folks & British India, 48.

[90] Richard Grove, 'Conserving Eden: The (European) East India Companies and their Environmental Policies on St. Helena, Mauritius, and in Western India, 1660 to 1854', Comparative Studies in Society and History, 35:2, (1993): 318-351 at 318.

social instability that might result from repetitions of this crisis made the colonial state more responsive to arguments in favour of forest conservation. The medical service, into whose ambit scientific discussion of environmental issues fell, used arguments about the connection between deforestation, increasing aridity, and temperature change on a global scale to push for greater government controls over deforestation.[91] BIS calls for jungle clearance in favour of cash crop agriculture can thus be considered regressive in environmental terms, and at odds with their proclaimed desire to promote the prosperity of India's peasant population and productiveness of her soil. This seeming paradox is explained when we consider that the BIS's model for Indian prosperity was based on economic determinants of market forces and wage labour, rather than on a scientific understanding of the impacts of their plans on India's ecology. The BIS might critique the EIC for exacerbating the conditions by which scarcity could deepen into famine, yet they themselves were bounded by the wider imperial paradigm that saw solutions only in the expansion and refinement of India's place within wider imperial and capitalist networks.

## 'A Wage Scarcely Sufficient to Keep Body and Soul Together': Indian Poverty and Indentured Labour Migration

Reporting on the Agra famine in October 1838, The Caledonian Mercury noted that 'myriads of working people have been reduced to starvation through the general system of making their subsistence contingent upon a certain proportion of the produce they raise, instead of paying them a fixed amount regularly in the shape of money wages.'[92] This interpretation resonates with debates in Ireland around the same time, and is indicative of an emerging colonial tendency to understand poverty and famines as resulting not from a shortage of food, but from as an absence of work.[93] It was partly this ideology, together with a commitment to metropolitan ideas about labour discipline for the poor, that led the colonial state to focus its relief efforts on the provision of

[91] Grove, 'Conserving Eden', 342.

[92] Caledonian Mercury, 22 October 1838, 2.

[93] See David Hall-Matthews, 'Famines in (South) Asia' for more.

employment on public works. These half-hearted efforts provoked censure; the Agra Ukhbar, for example, attacked the colonial government for 'half-admitting' the humanitarian principle of relief, while at the same time trying to extricate itself from financial and moral responsibility by pursuing 'a course as unsound as it was inhuman - to reduce the wages so low that the poor must disappear by death or emigration.'[94] It also underpinned the BIS's suggestion that improved cultivation would result in the uplift of the 'impoverished multitudes of Hindoostan' through the creation of employment in a regenerated agricultural sector. The BIS framed their interest in India as a humanitarian intervention on a grander scale than the colonial state's limited emergency response, but it was still a route to salvation through wage labour that they envisaged.[95]

The 'regeneration' of India's agrarian sector through cash crop agriculture was not the only solution presented for India's apparent crisis of underemployment. Debates about the role of migrant wage labour as an antidote to famine also underpinned defences of the indenture system in the late 1830s. This system, via which Indian labourers were exported under contract to serve for a fixed term (usually five years), sought to tap into the subcontinent's supposedly inexhaustible reserves of surplus manpower as a replacement for formerly enslaved Africans on the plantations of the Caribbean and Mascarenes. Planters in Mauritius had begun to recruit Indian indentured labourers even before the formal end of Apprenticeship; between 1834 and the temporary suspension of Indian emigration in 1838, as many as 25,468 Indian workers arrived on the island. Impressed by this apparent success planters and settlers in other parts of the empire turned their attention to India. The efforts of former plantation owners John Mayo and John Mackay to introduce Indian 'hill coolies' as shepherds and farm hands in New South Wales proved unsuccessful, but the plans of prominent Guiana planters including John Gladstone bore fruit and 396 Indian workers were imported between 1836 and 1838. Concerns about deceptive or coercive

[94] Cited in Mukherjee, Natural Disasters, 70.

[95] See, for example, Joseph Pease, *A Letter…on the subject of Slave Trade and Slavery*, (Darlington, 1842), 4.

recruitment practices, high mortality rates at sea and harsh conditions on the plantations led to the suspension of the system in 1838, however, and a virulent debate ensued about the nature and desirability of indentured migration. When the system was reinstated in 1842, it was under strict government control.[96]

The planters' arguments in favour of 'assisted labour immigration' revolved around the commercial necessity of continuing sugar production in the former slave colonies. They argued that the efficient production of sugar could only be achieved via the plantation model, and that plantation production must expand to meet the ever-increasing demand for affordable sugar.[97] Without immigration, they argued, sugar plantations would go bust, cultivation would grind to a halt, and productive regions would fall into disuse and be reclaimed by forest and sea.[98] The result would be ruin for the planters, misery for the former slaves and economic and social disaster for the islands. Their concerns were shared by observers in Britain. In a series of lectures in Oxford in 1839-41 free trader, academic and future Colonial Secretary Herman Merivale called for 'copious immigration' to the larger sugar colonies to bring down the cost of labour, redress the threat of serious scarcities and high sugar prices, and secure the future of the sugar colonies.[99] Anti-slavery campaigners, including members of the APS, BIS and BFASS, on the other hand, were vehemently opposed to the indenture system. Labour migration might be considered a good thing, but only if prospective migrants entered the contracts voluntarily and were capable of fully comprehending their terms. Transporting 'ignorant and helpless beings' from India was deemed to contravene these

[96] For more, see Jonathan Connolly, 'Indentured Labour Migration and the Meaning of Emancipation: Free Trade, Race, and Labour in British Public Debate, 1838–1860', Past and Present 238.1 (2018): 85-119; Clare Anderson, 'Convicts and Coolies: Rethinking Indentured Labour in the Nineteenth Century', Slavery & Abolition, 30.1, (2009), 93-109; Andrea Major, ''Hill Coolies'.

[97] Madhavi Kale, Fragments of Empire: Capital, Slavery, and Indian Indentured Labor in the British Caribbean (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 109.

[98] William Green 'Emancipation to Indenture: A Question of Imperial Morality', Journal of British Studies, 22.2, (1983): 98-121 at 103

[99] Green 'Emancipation to Indenture', 110.

criteria.[100] When pressed on the issue at the World Anti-Slavery Convention in 1840, Daniel O'Connell summed up the feelings of many present by pronouncing that

> I am fully persuaded that you might as well proclaim the slave trade again as proclaim the admission of the Hill Coolies into our West India colonies; and I am equally convinced that the planters in Mauritius are the worst guardians that could be appointed to protect these labourers. I would rather be a party to the total annihilation of that unfortunate race, than to their being subject to a new species of slavery.[101]

BFASS's rationale for excluding Indian migrants from the global labour market was based on orientalist and racialised assumptions about Indian's lack of agency, the likelihood of abuse within the recruitment system, and the potential for bad faith on the part of the planters and their agents, as well as concern about the impact of indentured Indian immigration on wages and social structures in newly emancipated Caribbean. The impact of emigration on the social and economic worlds the migrants were leaving behind, by contrast, was conspicuously absent from BFASS debates. Concerns with the relationship between labour migration and Indian conditions were apparent in debates about indenture on other platforms, however. At East India House, for example, the focus was less on indenture as 'a new species of slavery', and more on the dynamics between competing sites of colonial commodity production and respective influence of the East and West Indies in imperial decision making.[102]

The first experiments with indentured labour predated the 1837-8 famine, of course, and the indenture system itself cannot be understood as a response to that crisis. News of the calamity formed the backdrop to debates about indenture from 1838 onwards, however, as arguments in favour of labour migration were shaped by colonial discourses on Indian poverty, as well as

[100] Kale, Fragments of Empire, 117.

[101] BFASS, Proceedings of the General Anti-Slavery Convention, (London, 1840), 383.

[102] Debate at East India House, 22 June 1842, Asiatic Journal, 38 (1842): 189-215.

metropolitan debates about the value of mobile, landless labour.[103] The 1837-8 famine reinforced the assumption that poverty-stricken Indian peasants would benefit from migrating, and would be grateful to accept long contracts and relatively low wages to secure a subsistence. Although in practice the majority of the first indentured migrants did not come from the famine-affected regions, prevalent images of widespread agricultural distress created a context in which indenture could be presented not only as a legitimate form of free labour, but also as a desirable and necessary escape route. 'In the vast population of India, poverty and distress but too often appear in the most appalling forms' Governor of Mauritius Sir Lionel Smith remarked. 'Among the few resources open to the sufferers for escaping these calamities, one is emigration to Mauritius, where a constant and large demand for their labour exists.'[104] Abolitionists, and subsequent historians might condemn indenture as a 'new species of slavery', but those who supported it argued that labourers who were already used to undertaking internal migrations in search of employment and to escape hardship should not be deprived of the 'outlet' which Mauritius and the Caribbean could potentially provide.[105] 'It is not proposed to seize on poor helpless savages, and send them closely packed in a filthy slave-ship to a country where they will be forced to labour for others,' The Courier declared, 'It is simply proposed to convey men, who are starving on a wage scarcely sufficient to keep body and soul together, to a country where they will immediately receive much higher wages.'[106]

If supporters of indenture presented it as an escape route for India's impoverished 'surplus' population, those with a sustained interest in India questioned both the morality of the indenture trade, and the assumptions on which it was based. While large swathes of the subcontinent

[103] The desirability of turning small peasant cultivators into landless labourers can also be seen in debates about the Irish Poor Law around this time. See Nally, 'That Coming Storm', 723.

[104] Debate at East India House, 22 June 1842, Asiatic Journal, 38, (1842), 196.

[105] Crispin Bates and Marina Carter, 'Enslaved Lives, Enslaving Labels: A New Approach to the Colonial Indian Labor Diaspora', in S. Banerjee, A. McGuinness, and S.C. McKay (eds), New Routes for Diaspora Studies, (Bloomington, 2012): 67-92.

[106] The Courier, cited in The Spectator, 21 July 1838, 14.

remained uncultivated, one member of the Court of Proprietors argued, India could not be considered to have ‘anything like a superabundant population.'[107] From this perspective, the apparent excess of Indian labour was not a result of inexhaustible manpower resources, but the chronic underdevelopment of India. The 'poverty, misery, famine, and desolation to which the people of India were subjected' did not constitute a moral justification for labour exportation, Robert Montgomery Martin maintained, but rather was a damning indictment of failures of colonial governance. It was disgraceful, he declared, that by sanctioning indentured migration the EIC should 'proclaim to the world that they were not able to provide for their own people in India.'[108] For the reformist sections of the East India lobby, including the BIS and those associated with it, the solution to underemployment and poverty in India was not to export her labour, but rather to improve conditions on the subcontinent by increasing productivity in agriculture and commodity production there. 'If any portion of the population were distressed,' one proprietor told the Court,

> every wise and reflecting man, instead of counselling the emigration of those persons, would say 'Let us exert ourselves and devise means to procure employment for these people; let us enable them to expend their labour on their own soil, in the active cultivation of those articles that are so necessary for their own use, that are the growth of their own country, and the production of which must be so beneficial to us’.[109]

Such arguments couched opposition to labour exportation in humanitarian terms, yet simultaneously accepted the logic of imperial capitalism as a solution to Indian poverty.

**Conclusion**

[107] Debate at East India House, 22 June 1842, Asiatic Journal, 38 (1842), 192.

[108] Debate at East India House, 22 June 1842, Asiatic Journal, 38 (1842), 199-200.

[109] Debate at East India House, 22 June 1842, Asiatic Journal, 38 (1842), 192.

As this article has discussed, news of the Agra famine both catalysed a new critique of conditions in EIC controlled India and fed into ongoing debates about India's potential role in filling the labour and commodity production needs of the post-emancipation Empire. Though seemingly diametrically opposed, both schemes to export 'surplus' Indian labour to the sugar colonies under the indenture system and anti-indenture plans to utilise that labour to grow colonial commodities within India relied on a shared set of assumption about the availability and affordability of Indian labour. Low Indian wages were justified by reference to long-standing orientalist tropes about the limited material needs and wants of the Indian peasant, as well as to India's perceived climactic vulnerability and demographic excess. Such interpretations were reinforced by reports of severe agricultural distress and famine in the late 1830s, allowing capitalist mobilisation of Indian labour within and beyond the subcontinent to be reimagined as humanitarian intervention. Yet observers both at the time and since have questioned the supposed morality of schemes that relied on offering 'free' Indian labour only meagre remuneration, wherever in the world that labour was employed.[110]

Though couched in humanitarian language, the BIS saw the solution to Indian impoverishment in refashioning of the India to fit to the needs of British imperial commerce by transforming it into a site of colonial commodity production and a market for British manufactures. These supposedly philanthropic schemes paid little regard for the impact of cash crop agriculture on rural security, or implications of an influx of manufactured goods for existing socio-economic institutions and artisan communities. Indeed, although ostensibly intended to lift Indians out of poverty, the wider economic argument relied on the assumption that Indian labour was cheaper than the various alternatives. Industrialist John Chapman inadvertently captured the tensions inherent in BIS arguments when writing to Thompson in 1842 about new machinery for processing raw cotton. 'Without the low price of Indian labour this must be a very expensive process;' he admitted, 'it

[110] See for example, Liverpool Mercury, 17 Aug 1821.

would certainly be impossible to continue its use were the state of India to improve so that labour came to its due price.'[111] Such admissions reveal the inherent contradictions within imperial and humanitarian political economy. Both Sumit Sarkar and Blair Kling have noted the fundamental paradox of an organisation that was apparently prepared to benefit from the 'semi-slavery' of low Indian wages, while presenting itself as fighting for 'Justice to India'.[112] Thus, although they couched their arguments in the language of humanitarian intervention, and decried the emerging indenture system as slavery by the back door, BIS prescriptions for India were as closely intertwined with the emerging post-emancipation capitalist economy as those who supported labour migration. The issue at stake in both pro and anti-indenture responses to famine in India, then, was not whether hungry Indians should be expected to work, but where and for whose benefit they should carry out that labour.

The BIS was relatively short-lived. After an initial wave of enthusiasm on its formation in 1839, it soon fractured and was defunct by 1843, having achieved little of what it set out to do. Some historians have traced connections between the BIS, and its counterpart in Calcutta, the Bengal British India Society, and later organisations such as the British India Association, and even the early manifestations of the Indian National Congress, though this is a fractured genealogy at best.[113] Others such as David Turley have written it off as 'a mixture of unconventional religion and radical politics' whose brief existence only indicated the further fragmentation of the British anti-slavery movement.[114] Yet the wide-ranging implications of the BIS agenda, and its vitriolic criticism of EIC rule provides a valuable opportunity to reassess metropolitan British interpretations of colonial activities in India, as well as their sense of imperial, moral and humanitarian

[111] John Chapman, Correspondence with George Thompson (1841-3), British Library, Eur Mss E234/91, Chapman to Thompson, no Date, 1842.

[112] Blair Kling, Partner in Empire: Dwarkanath Tagore and the Age of Enterprise in Eastern India, (Berkeley, 1976), 177. Sumit Sarkar, A Critique of Colonial India. (Delhi: Papyrus, 1985).

[113] See Bell, British Folks, 1.

[114] David Turley, The Culture of English Antislavery, 1780-1860 (London, 1991), 98.

responsibility towards the subcontinent and its inhabitants. Their use of the famine to mobilise support demonstrates how intertwined humanitarian impulses were with commercial and strategic imperatives, as various possible imperial futures were (re)negotiated following the formal end of slavery in the sugar colonies in 1833/4. Debates about poverty in India in this period thus resonate with similar discussions in other parts of the empire, including the West Indies, Ireland and even England itself, and demonstrate some of the challenges, limitations and paradoxes of humanitarian political economy during this formative period.