

The British in India: Slavery and Famine

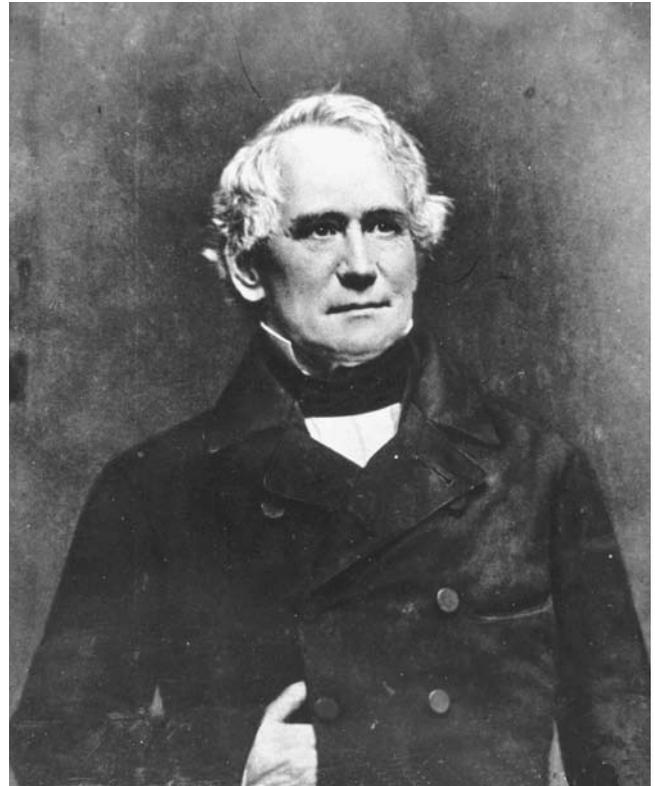
Here are excerpts from Henry C. Carey, The Slave Trade, Domestic and Foreign: Why It Exists, and How It May Be Extinguished (1853), Chapter XII, "How Slavery Grows in India."

...Nearly a century has now elapsed since, by the battle of Plassey, British power was established in India, and from that day local action has tended to disappear, and centralization to take its place. From its date to the close of the century there was a rapidly increasing tendency toward having all the affairs of the princes and the people settled by the representatives of the company established in Calcutta, and as usual in such cases, the country was filled with adventurers, very many of whom were wholly without principle, men whose sole object was that of the accumulation of fortune by any means, however foul, as is well known by all who are familiar with the indignant denunciations of Burke.¹ England was thus enriched as India was impoverished, and as centralization was more and more established.

Step by step the power of the [British East India] Company was extended, and everywhere was adopted the hindoo principle that the sovereign was proprietor of the soil, and sole landlord, and as such the government claimed to be entitled to one-half of the gross produce of the land. "Wherever," says Mr. Rickards, long an eminent servant of the Company,

"The British power supplanted that of the Mohammedans in Bengal, we did not, it is true, adopt the sanguinary part of their creed; but from the impure fountain of their financial system, did we, to our shame, claim the inheritance to a right to seize upon half the gross produce of the land as a tax; and wherever our arms have triumphed, we have invariably proclaimed

1. "The country was laid waste with fire and sword, and that land distinguished above most others by the cheerful face of fraternal government and protected labour, the chosen seat of cultivation and plenty, is now almost throughout a dreary desert covered with rushes and briars, and jungles full of wild beasts. . . . That universal, systematic breach of treaties, which had made the British faith proverbial in the East! These intended rebellions are one of the Company's standing resources. When money has been thought to be hoarded up anywhere, its owners are universally accused of rebellion, until they are acquitted of their money and their treasons at once! The money once taken, all accusation, trial, and punishment ends."—Speech on *Fox's East India Bill*.



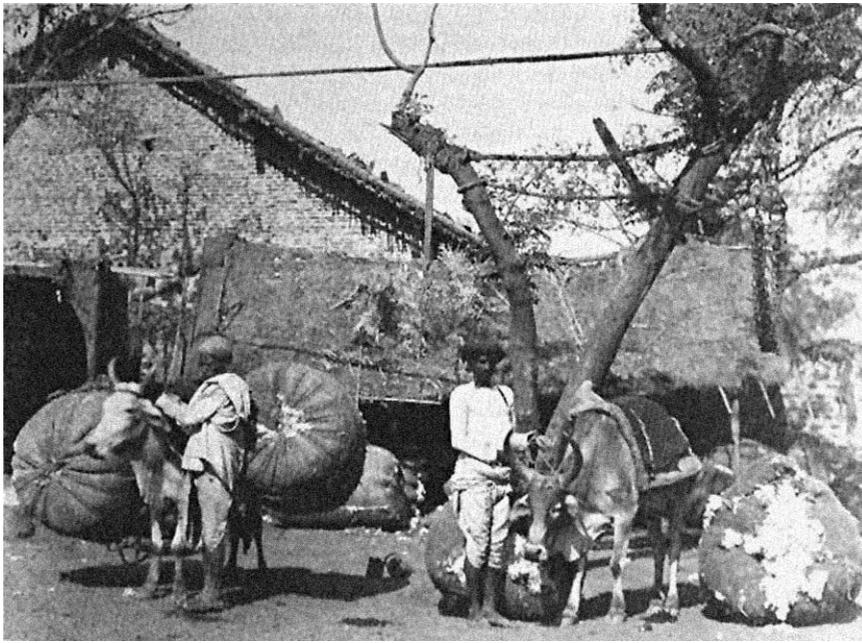
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Henry Carey, the chief economic advisor to Abraham Lincoln, was the leading proponent of the American System of political-economy, and enemy of the anti-human British system.

this savage right: coupling it at the same time with the senseless doctrine of the proprietary right to these lands being also vested in the sovereign, in virtue of the right of conquest." —*Rickards' India*, vol. i, 275.

Under the earlier Mohammedan sovereigns, this land-tax, now designated as rent, had been limited to a thirteenth, and from that to a sixth of the produce of the land; but in the reign of Akber (16th century) it was fixed at one-third, numerous other taxes being at the same time abolished. With the decline and gradual dissolution of the empire, the local sovereigns not only increased it but revived the taxes that had been discontinued, and instituted others of a most oppressive kind; all of which were continued by the Company, while the land-tax was maintained at its largest amount. While thus imposing taxes at discretion, the Company had also a monopoly of trade, and it could dictate the prices of all it had to sell, as well as of all that it needed to buy; and here was a further and most oppressive tax, all of which was for the benefit of absentee landlords.

With the further extension of power, the demands on the Company's treasury increased without an increase of the power to meet them; for exhaustion is a natural consequence of absenteeism, or centralization, as has so well been proved in Ireland. The people became less able to pay the taxes, and



Under British rule, Indian cultivators were forced to produce for export, and heavily taxed, while denied necessary infrastructure, like roads, to move their products to market. As one observer noted, "In this predicament, the cargo of cotton lies sometimes for weeks on the ground, and the merchant is ruined." Shown: Indian and European merchants trade at the Bombay cotton market, ca. 1870.

as the government could not be carried on without revenue, a permanent settlement was made by Lord Cornwallis, by means of which all the rights of village proprietors, over a large portion of Bengal, were sacrificed in favour of the Zemindars, who were thus at once constituted great landed proprietors and absolute masters of a host of poor tenants, with power to punish at discretion those who were so unfortunate as not to be able to pay a rent, the amount of which had no limit but that of the power to extort it. It was the middleman system of Ireland transplanted to India; but the results were it first unfavourable to the Zemindars, as the rents, for which they themselves were responsible to the government, were so enormous that all the rack-renting and all the flogging inflicted upon the poor cultivators could not enable them to pay; and but few years elapsed before the Zemindars themselves were sold out to make way for another set as keen and as hard-hearted as themselves. That system having failed to answer the purpose, it was next determined to arrest the extension of the permanent settlement, and to settle with each little ryot, or cultivator, to the entire exclusion of the village authorities by whom, under the native governments, the taxes had uniformly been so equitably said satisfactorily distributed. The Ryotwar system was thus established, and how it has operated may be judged from the following sketch, presented by Mr. Fullerton, a member of the Council at Madras:—

“Imagine the revenue leviable through the agency of one hundred thousand revenue officers, collected or

remitted at their discretion, according to the occupant’s means of paying, whether from the produce of his land or his separate property; and in order to encourage every man to act as a spy on his neighbour, and report his means of paying, that he may eventually save himself from extra demand, imagine all the cultivators of a village liable at all times to a separate demand, in order to make up for the failure of one or more individuals of the parish. Imagine collectors to every county, acting under the orders of a board, on the avowed principle of destroying all competition for labour by a general equalization of assessment, seizing and sending back runaways to each other. And, lastly, imagine the collector the sole magistrate or justice of the peace of the county, through the medium and instrumentality of whom alone any criminal complaint of personal grievance suffered by the subject can reach the superior courts. Imagine, at the

same time, every subordinate officer employed in the collection of the land revenue to be a police officer, vested with the power to fine, confine, put in the stocks, and flog any inhabitant within his range, on any charge, without oath of the accuser or sworn recorded evidence of the case.”²

Any improvement in cultivation produced an immediate increase of taxation, so that any exertion on the part of the cultivator would benefit the Company, and not himself. One-half of the gross produce may be assumed to have been the average annual rent, although in many cases it greatly exceeded that proportion. The Madras Revenue Board, May 17th, 1817, stated that the “conversion of the government share of the produce (of lands) is in some districts as high as 60 or 70 per cent. of the whole...”³

The tendency thus far has been, as we see, to sweep away the rights not only of kings and princes, but of all the native authorities, and to centralize in the hands of foreigners in Calcutta the power to determine for the cultivator, the artisan, or the labourer, what work he should do, and how much of its products he might retain, thus placing the latter in precisely the position of a mere slave to people who could feel no interest in him but simply as a tax-payer, and who were represent-

2. Quoted in Thompson’s Lectures on India, 61.

3. Rickards’ *India*, vol. i, 275.

ed by strangers in the country, whose authority was everywhere used by the native officers in their employ, to enable them to accumulate fortunes for themselves....

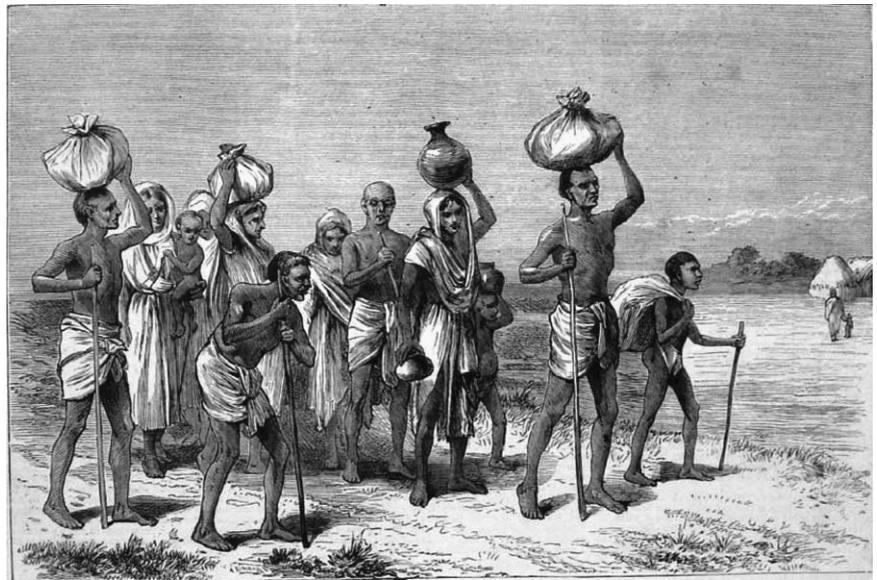
[Further on, Carey shows that the cotton, and other agricultural products, that Indian farmers are forced to produce for export, to pay the ever-increasing taxes, are often left to rot on the ground, rather than reaching markets:]

“In this predicament the cargo of cotton lies sometimes for weeks on the ground, and the merchant is ruined.”

“So miserably bad,” says another writer, “are the existing means of communication with the interior, that many of the most valuable articles of produce are, for want of carriage and a market, often allowed to perish on the farm, while the cost of that which found its way to the port was enormously enhanced; but the quantity did not amount to above 20 per cent. of the whole of the produce, the remainder of the articles always being greatly deteriorated.”

It will scarcely be difficult now to understand why it is that cotton yields the cultivator but a penny per pound. Neither will it be difficult, seeing that the local manufacturers have everywhere been ruined, to understand why the producer of the more bulky food is in a condition that is even worse, now that the consumer has disappeared from his side. If the crop is large, grain is a drug for which scarcely any price can be obtained; and if it is small, the people perish, by thousands and ten of thousands, of famine, because, in the existing state of the roads, there can be little or no exchange of raw products. In the first case the cultivator is ruined, because it requires almost the whole crop to pay the taxes. In the other he is starved; and all this is a necessary consequence of a system that excludes the great middle class of mechanics and other working-men, and resolves a great nation into a mass of wretched cultivators, slaves to a few grasping money lenders. Under such circumstances, the accumulation of any thing like capital is impossible. “None,” says Colonel Sleeman, “have stock equal to half their rent.” They are dependent everywhere on the produce of the year, and however small may be its amount, the taxes must be paid, and of all that thus goes abroad nothing is returned. The soil gets nothing. It is not manured, nor can it be under a system of absenteeism like this, and its fertility everywhere declines....

The soil is being exhausted, and every thing necessarily goes backward. Trees are cut down, but none are planted; and



The British deliberately caused famines in India, in order to force the indigenous population into relief works, such as road-building. The tenant-laborer, writes Carey, “is mercilessly turned from his land and his mud hut, and left to die on the highway.” Here, Indians on their way to the relief works, published in the London News, 1874.

the former sites of vast groves are becoming arid wastes, a consequence of which is, that droughts become from year to year more frequent....

In former times extensive works were constructed for irrigating the land, but they are everywhere going to ruin—thus proving that agriculture cannot flourish in the absence of the mechanic arts:

“In Cavendish, very many bunds [river-banks formed for purposes of irrigation] which were kept in repair under former governments, have, under ours, fallen to decay; nevertheless, not only has the population increased considerably under our rule, but in 1846 or 1847, the collector was obliged to grant remission of land tax, because the abundance of former years lay, stagnating in the province, and the low prices of grain from that cause prevented the ryots from being able to pay their fixed land assessment”⁴

We have here land abandoned and the cultivator ruined for want of a market for food, and wages falling for want of a market for labour; and yet these poor people are paying for English food and English labour employed in converting into cloth the cotton produced alongside of the food—and they are ruined because they have so many middlemen to pay that the producer of cotton can obtain little food, and the producer of food can scarcely pay his taxes, and has nothing to give for cloth. Every thing tends, therefore, toward barbarism, and, as in the olden time of England and of Europe generally, famines

4. Chapman’s *Commerce and Cotton of India*, 97.

become steadily more numerous and more severe, as is here shown:—

“Some of the finest tracts of land have been forsaken, and given up to the untamed beasts of the jungle. The motives to industry have been destroyed. The soil seems to lie under a curse. Instead of yielding abundance for the wants of its own population, and the inhabitants of other regions, it does not keep in existence its own children. It becomes the burying-place of millions, who die upon its bosom crying for bread. In proof of this, turn your eyes backward upon the scenes of the past year. Go with me into the north-western provinces of the Bengal presidency, and I will show you the bleaching skeletons of five hundred thousand human beings, who perished of hunger in the space of a few short months. Yes, died of hunger in what has been justly called the granary of the world. Bear with me, if I speak of the scenes which were exhibited during the prevalence of this famine. The air for miles was poisoned by the effluvia emitted from the putrefying bodies



Queen Victoria, Empress of India, ruled over a people broken by poverty, inhumane treatment, famines, and despair. As one British author wrote: “And this occurred in British India—in the reign of Victoria the First. Nor was the event extraordinary and unforeseen. Far from it: 1835-36 witnessed a famine in the northern provinces; 1833 beheld one to the eastward; 1822-23 saw one in the Deccan. They have continued to increase in frequency and extent under our sway for more than half a century.”

of the dead. The rivers were choked with the corpses thrown into their channels. Mothers cast their little ones beneath the rolling waves, because they would not see them draw their last gasp and feel them stiffen in their arms. The English in the city were prevented from taking their customary evening drives. Jackalls and vultures approached, and fastened upon the bodies of men, women, and children, before life was extinct. Madness, disease, despair stalked abroad, and no human power present to arrest their progress. *It was the carnival of death!* And this occurred in British India—in the reign of Victoria the First! Nor was the event extraordinary and unforeseen. Far from it: 1835-36 witnessed a famine in the northern provinces; 1833 beheld one to the eastward;

1822-23 saw one in the Deccan. They have continued to increase in frequency and extent under our sway for more than half a century.”⁵

The famine of 1838 is thus described by Mr. George Thompson, late M.P., on the testimony of a gentleman of high respectability:

“The poorer houses were entirely unroofed, the thatches having been given to feed the cattle, which had nevertheless died; so that cattle had disappeared altogether from the land. He says that a few attenuated beings, more like skeletons than human creatures, were seen hovering about among the graves of those who had been snatched away by the famine; that desertion was everywhere visible, and that the silence of death reigned. In one of the villages, he says, an old man from whom they had bought a goat during their former visit, in 1833, was the only survivor of the whole community except his brother’s son, whom he was cherishing and endeavouring to keep alive, and these two had subsisted altogether upon the eleemos-

ynary bounty of travellers. The courier of Lord Auckland had informed this gentleman that when the governor-general passed through that part of the country the roads were lined on either side with heaps of dead bodies, and that they had not unfrequently to remove those masses of unburied human beings, ere the governor-general could proceed onward with his suite; and that every day from 2000 to 3000 famishing wretches surrounded and followed the carriages, to whom he dealt out a scanty meal; and on one occasion the horse of the courier took fright, and on the cause being ascertained—what was it? It was found to be the lifeless body of a man who had died with his

5. Thompson’s Lectures on India, 57

hand in his mouth, from which he had already devoured the fingers.”⁶

The more severe the pressure on the poor ryot, the greater is the power of the few who are always ready to profit by the losses of their neighbours. These poor people are obliged to borrow money on their growing crops, the prices of which are regulated by the will of the lender rather than by the standard of the market, and the rate of interest which the cultivators pay for these loans is often not less than 40 or 50 per cent.

A recent traveller says of the unfortunate cultivator—

“Always oppressed, ever in poverty, the ryot is compelled to seek the aid of the mahajun, or native money-lender. This will frequently be the talukdhar, or sub-renter, who exacts from the needy borrower whatever interest he thinks the unfortunate may be able to pay him, often at the rate of one per cent. per week. The accounts of these loans are kept by the mahajuns, who, aware of the deep ignorance of their clients, falsify their books, without fear of detection. In this way, no matter how favourable the season, how large the crop, the grasping mahajun is sure to make it appear that the whole is due to him; for he takes it at his own value. So far from Mr. Burke having overstated the case of the oppression of the ryots, on the trial of Warren Hastings, when he said that the tax-gatherer took from them eighteen shillings in every pound, he was really within the mark. At the conclusion of each crop-time, the grower of rice or cotton is made to appear a debtor to his superior, who thereupon—provided the ryot appears able to toil on for another season—advances more seed for sowing, and a little more rice to keep the labourer and his family from absolute starvation. But should there be any doubt as to the health and strength of the tenant-labourer, he is mercilessly turned from his land and his mud hut, and left to die on the highway.”

This is slavery, and under such a system how could the wretched people be other than slaves? The men have no market for their labour, and the women and children must remain idle or work in the field, as did, and do, the women of Jamaica; and all because they are compelled everywhere to exhaust the soil in raising crops to be sent to a distance to be consumed, and finally to abandon the land, even where they do not perish of famine. Mr. Chapman informs us that—

“Even in the valley of the Ganges, where the population is in some districts from 600 to 800 to the square mile, one-third of the cultivable lands are not culti-

vated; and in the Deccan, from which we must chiefly look for increased supplies of cotton, the population, amounting to about 100 to the square mile, is maintained by light crops, grown on little more than half the cultivable land.”⁷

Elsewhere he tells us that of the *cultivable surface of all India one-half is waste*.⁸

...It could not be too universally known,” said Mr. Bright in the House of Commons,

“That the cultivators of the soil were in a very unsatisfactory condition; that they were, in truth, in a condition of extreme and almost universal poverty. All testimony concurred upon that point. He would call the attention of the house to the statement of a celebrated native of India, the Rajah Rammohun Roy, who about twenty years ago published a pamphlet in London, in which he pointed out the ruinous effects of the zemindary system, and the oppression experienced by the ryots in the presidencies both of Bombay and Madras. After describing the state of matters generally, he added, ‘Such was the melancholy condition of the agricultural labourers, that it always gave him the greatest pain to allude to it.’ Three years afterward, Mr. Shore, who was a judge in India, published a work which was considered as a standard work till now, and he stated that ‘the British Government was not regarded in a favourable light by the native population of India,’—that a system of taxation and extortion was carried on ‘unparalleled in the annals of any country.’ Then they had the authority of an American planter, Mr. Finnie, who was in India in 1840, and who spoke of the deplorable condition of the cultivators of the soil, and stated that if the Americans were similarly treated, they would become as little progressive as the native Indians. He might next quote the accounts given by Mr. Marriott in 1838, a gentleman who was for thirty years engaged in the collection of the revenue in India, and who stated that ‘the condition of the cultivators was greatly depressed, and that he believed it was still declining!’ There was the evidence of a native of India to which he might refer on this subject. It was that of a gentleman, a native of Delhi, who was in England in the year 1849, and he could appeal to the right hon. baronet the member for Tamworth in favour of the credibility of that gentleman. He never met with a man of a more dignified character, or one apparently of greater intelligence, and there were few who spoke the

6. Ibid. 185.

7. Chapman, 22.

8. Ibid, 25.



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During the terrible famine of 1838, according to one reporter, millions of pounds of rice and other edible grains were exported from Calcutta, to feed the kidnapped Indian Coolies, who had been sent to the Mauritius, to work in the fields. Here, Coolie children pick tea in Ceylon (Sri Lanka).

English language with greater purity and perfection. That gentleman had written a pamphlet, in which he stated that throughout his whole line of march from Bombay he found the Nizam's territories better cultivated, and the ryots in a better state of circumstances, than were the Company's territories, or the people residing within them, who were plunged in a state of the greatest poverty; and he concluded his short, but comparatively full, notice of the present deplorable state of India, by observing that he feared this was but the prelude of many more such descriptions of the different portions of the Company's dominions which would be put forth before the subject would attract the notice of those whose duty it was to remove the evils that existed."

We have here confirmation of the correctness of the views of Colonel Sleeman, that the condition of the people under the local governments is better than under the great central government. Heavily as they are taxed, a small part only of the

proceeds of taxes goes, in these cases, to Calcutta on its way to England, whereas, of the enormous salaries paid to English governors and judges, nearly the whole must go abroad, as no one consents to serve for a few years in India, except on such terms as will enable him to accumulate a fortune and return home to spend it. In further confirmation of this we have the facts so fully given in Mr. Campbell's recent work, (*Modern India*, chap. xi.,) and proving that security of person and property increases as we pass from the old possessions of the Company, and toward the newly acquired ones. Crime of every kind, gang robbery, perjury, and forgery, abound in Bengal and Madras, and the poverty of the cultivator is so great that the revenue is there the least, and is collected with the greatest difficulty—and there, too, it is that the power of association has been most effectually destroyed....

[In 1838,] there was a dreadful famine in India; but, "during the prevalence of this famine," as we are told,—

"Rice was going every hour out of the country. 230,371 bags of 164 pounds each—making 37,780,844 lbs.—were exported from Calcutta. Where? To the Mauritius, to feed the kidnapped Coolies. Yes: to feed

the men who had been stolen from the banks of the Ganges and the hills adjacent, and dragged from their native shore, under pretence of going to one of the Company's villages, to grow in the island of Mauritius what they might have grown in abundance upon their own fertile, but over-taxed land. The total amount of rice exported from Calcutta, during the famine in 1838, was 151,923,696 lbs., besides 13,722,408 lbs. of other edible grains, which would have fed and kept alive all those who perished that year. Wives might have been saved to their husbands, babes to their mothers, friends to their friends; villages might still have been peopled; a sterile land might have been restored to verdure. Freshness and joy and the voices of gladness might have been there. Now, all is stillness, and desolation, and death. Yet we are told we have nothing to do with India."⁹

9. Thompson's, 187.