

Détail

Decoding Colonial Policies: Unraveling the Nexus of Labour, Infrastructure, and Famine Relief in 19th Century India

Explore the award-winning thesis by Amal Shahid, post-doctoral researcher at CRHIM and the recipient of The Pierre du Bois Prize for the best doctoral thesis in international history.



What led you to undertake a doctoral thesis?

I wanted to have more in-depth knowledge on how to do historical research. When I did my master's in economic history research at the London School of Economics I focused on the impact of literacy rates on famine mortality in India, which is when I delved into the topic of famines of the 19th century in the subcontinent. It was an economic history thesis based on quantitative methods. Being a master's thesis, it was very short. There was just so much more I wanted to know about the topic. Studying in Britain, there was a prevalent narrative that Britain brought infrastructure and railways to India. I had a sense that something was off because, looking at the mortality data and census records, I knew that the economic situation of India in the second half of the 19th century was dire for the labouring poor. So, that's how I became interested in the topic. I applied to different universities and got accepted in Geneva at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies.

What led you to choose your subject of study?

When I started my PhD, I was more interested in public works infrastructure and the labor that was constructing it. And I knew from my master's thesis that it was somehow linked with famine. At the end of the third semester, we have to write the *Mémoire Préliminaire de These*. It is then that I realized with some preliminary research that there is a core connection between colonial infrastructures and famine relief. This connection became apparent as the primary means of providing famine relief under the British government in India involved employing relief-seekers in the construction of the very railways and roads Britain presented as a gift of modernization. I chose to focus on the famine period in the northern belt of India, also known as the Gangetic belt. Rich in river tributaries and agriculture, I found it intriguing that despite its agricultural abundance—with commodities like opium, rice, and wheat—this region grappled with famines, presenting a paradox that became a focal point of my research.

I assume that these archives you visited primarily consist of official records formerly maintained by the colonial state? How did this influence your research process?

Certainly, historians face a significant challenge, especially when delving into subjects from the 19th century, such as my own research. Gaining a bottom-up perspective becomes nearly impossible. To overcome this obstacle, besides reading official sources against the grain, I turned to translations of vernacular newspapers. This proved to be a valuable source, as newspapers, while presenting claims, also serve as glimpses into popular opinions. The translations of these vernacular newspapers provided insight into what people were expressing about the famines.

Going into those archives, what were your main findings ?

The sources indeed pose a challenge, primarily being top-down in nature, making it difficult to read against the grain and discern the underlying reality. However, a notable shift occurred in governance, transitioning from the East India Company to the British Crown in 1858. This change brought about a transformation in the approach toward Indians, shifting from a civilizational narrative to one rooted in colonial difference. The focus moved away from civilizing Indians to coercing them into labor which was seen as essential for their freedom. British liberalism, as applied in India, emphasized that freedom was inherently tied to labor, forming a form of despotism structured around labor productivity. The goal was to create an ideal laborer for the colonial state, instilling discipline, freedom, improvement, and progress.

These utilitarian ideas were simultaneously imposed during the Industrial Revolution in Britain, and through new poor laws from 1834 onwards. However, while in Britain, these policies constituted a welfare approach for everyone, in India, they were exceptional, enacted only during famines. This illustrates the concept of colonial difference, where the British government in India refused general poverty policies, as the primary goal was not to tackle poverty. To comprehend this, viewing famines not merely as events but as a process is crucial. Famines evolved due to widespread poverty, exacerbated by years of heavy taxes and consequent changes in the social structure, rendering people more vulnerable to mortality.

In practical terms, how were the policies for famine relief put into action?

Famine relief operated through four ways. The first involved relief works, obliging people to work for their aid. The second, poorhouses, catered to those too weak for labor, though these structures were temporary and exclusive to famine periods. The third way, village relief, demonstrated a lack of understanding of social structures, as British-appointed village heads compiled lists of deserving individuals. Families of a higher caste, where the women would not work were deemed worthy of this kind of relief, whereas lower caste people either had to work or go to the poor houses to survive the famine, hereby deeply entrenching the existing inequalities of the villages. The fourth way was to start giving money or seeds to farmers to start growing crops again, which constitutes a core contradiction to the colonial discourse around famines. For the British, the cause of famines was framed as a lack of work rather than a lack of food. Framing the issue in this way helped to obscure the export-driven economy of the colonial state that was largely contributing to the shortage of food.

To conclude, what was your thesis experience?

My experience was profoundly marked by the pandemic. I was lucky to the extent that most of my archival work was finished before the pandemic started. However, the pandemic prevented me from going to more regional archives, and from potentially finding more pertinent sources for my thesis. I was fortunate to have the support of a research assistant for one of the archives. I plan to revisit archives and explore more sources for turning the thesis into a book.

The writing process itself faced considerable delays due to the pandemic. As a recipient of an FNS mobility grant, I had to relocate multiple times, unsure of how long I could stay in each place given the unpredictable nature of the pandemic. Despite the challenges and uncertainties, this period allowed me to sit and reflect on my diverse and seemingly disconnected sources. Connecting these varied threads into a cohesive narrative, especially one that emphasizes a bottom-up perspective, posed a significant challenge. It became crucial for me to delve deep into source analysis and learn how to build a narrative from seemingly disparate sources that shared a common underlying thread.

Following the completion of your thesis, could you share the focus of your current work at the Institute of Political Science?

I am currently employed as a postdoctoral researcher on the FNS Eccellenza project 'Moral and Economic Entrepreneurship: A Collaborative History of Global Switzerland 1800-1900'. The overarching project seeks to trace Swiss presence in various colonies of the 19th century. My sub-project focuses on the Basel German Evangelical Mission, or simply Basel Mission Society, which was present on the west coast of southern India from 1834 onwards. More specifically, I am interested in the Mission's economic activities, because it had its own company called the Basler Handelsgesellschaft from 1859 onwards. Alongside proselytizing activities, the Mission invested in various industries on the coast such as weaving, tailoring, dyeing, tile and brick-making, and even a printing press. Some missionaries were also interested in plantations and agriculture. I look at these moral-economic exchanges with an attempt to understand the exchanges and effects on the Indian society.

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