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THE BRITISH EAST INDIA COMPANY AND THE GREAT BENGAL FAMINE OF 1770: TOWARDS A CORPORATE COLONIAL BIOPOLITICS

SENJUTI MALLIK 

ABSTRACT. The Great Bengal Famine of 1770 took 10 million lives. The British East India Company's (EIC) extraction of resources and imposition of brutal tax policies in Bengal exacerbated the disaster. By exploring the intersections of corporate interests, colonialism, and biopolitics, this paper provides a new perspective on the Bengal famine of 1770 by introducing and visualizing it through a unique theoretical framework—corporate colonial biopolitics. Adopting Michel Foucault's notion of biopolitics, my focus is primarily on the corporate colonial biopolitical strategies enforced by the Company, which led to dispossession, violence, and resource extraction exploiting Bengal's landscape and impeding the region's progress and development. The essay unveils the racist policies and profit-driven principles of the EIC and how they prioritized generating revenues, financing its military, and exporting food grain even at the peak of the famine. I point out how the EIC systematically dismantled the Indian agricultural system, fueling deindustrialization in India and ultimately making the region vulnerable to famines. The Bengal famine of 1770 remains unexplored by geographers despite being the first colonial famine in India. One of the primary objectives of this paper is to bridge this gap by shedding light on the geographical dimensions of this pivotal historical catastrophe. *Keywords:* corporate colonial biopolitics, Bengal famine of 1770, British East India Company, deindustrialization, colonial authorities, revenue.

In the last few years, the province had witnessed such a scene of anarchy, confusion, bribery, corruption, and extortion [as] was never seen or heard of in any [other] country; nor such and so many fortunes acquired in so unjust and rapacious a manner.

—Robert Clive (Johns, 1999, 128)

Robert Clive, the first British Governor of the Bengal Presidency (1758–60 and 1764–67), acknowledged through this statement that the East India Company (EIC) in Bengal had perpetrated imperialism, dehumanization, and odious depredation throughout the province. The EIC is known for being a British corporation to operate for profit, an exemplar of early capitalism. One of the most horrific, if under-recognized, impacts of its policies was an enormous famine in Bengal in 1770 and this historic tragedy is known as the Great Bengal Famine of 1770 (*Chiyattorer Monnontor* in Bengali during the Bengali calendar year 1176). The EIC's extraction of resources and imposition of brutal tax policies in Bengal led to the loss of approximately 10 million lives during the famine. The Bengal famine of 1770 has received considerable attention from scholars in fields such as economics (Sen 1977) and history (Damodaran 2006; Dalrymple 2019). However, geographers have yet to explore this topic, leaving a crucial gap in our comprehension of the event.

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This article fills the geographical gap in our understanding of the Bengal famine of 1770. To achieve this objective, the paper introduces a unique theoretical framework—corporate colonial biopolitics—to provide a new perspective on the famine’s complexities. In contrast to most understandings of biopolitics, which center on the state, this view puts private corporations front and center. Through this lens, the paper aims to shed light on the EIC’s actions and its contribution to the catastrophic impacts of the famine. By exploring the intersections of corporate interests, colonialism, and biopolitics, the study highlights how the EIC’s hunt for profit and power led to the disregard of the lives of millions of Bengalis, consequently laying the groundwork for recurrent famines in India in subsequent periods. This paper aims to make three significant contributions to geographical scholarship. The first is to enhance the understanding of colonial famines, the second is to emphasize the corporate nature of early colonialism in India, and the third is to propose a biopolitical interpretation of the first two aspects.

The classic theory of dependency is applicable in this particular context, as one of its key arguments is that developing countries today remain poor primarily because of their prior relationship with their former colonizers (Frank 1979; Cardoso 1982). Underdevelopment in developing nations in this view is an outcome of historical processes and not a “natural” condition (Dietz 1980). Regarding India, the systematic destruction of the Indian agricultural system by the British colonial authorities was intricately connected to the increased susceptibility to famines that followed (Siddiqui 1996; 2016). Several scholars have worked on dependency and deindustrialization in India and noted how Britain’s industrial revolution was fueled by destroying India’s prospering manufacturing industries, particularly textiles (Frank 1970; Bagchi and others 1976; Dutt 1992). Here, I refrain from delving deeply into the nuances of dependency theory and deindustrialization, which have been aptly summarized elsewhere. Nonetheless, it is prudent to acknowledge the relevance of this theory within this scope of this analysis.

The study of famines has witnessed multiple research efforts and debates, leading to the creation of numerous famine theories. Geographical interpretations of famine have evolved over time. In the past, the Malthusian perspective was dominant, which blamed hungry populations for famines. However, this interpretation has shifted toward a more explicitly political view. Famine is a complex phenomenon that involves social structures, political actions, and economic relations, extending beyond crop failures and population pressure (Tauger 2003). This shift is particularly noticeable during periods of colonial rule and warfare, where political factors played a crucial role. As geographers explored the complex interplay between power dynamics, geopolitics, and societal structures, they also began to utilize the notion of biopolitics. Biopolitics is one expression of biopower, which has long been associated with the implementation of controlling the “biological or biosociological processes and



characteristics of human masses” (Foucault 2003, 250). This pursuit emphasized the role of colonial biopolitics in comprehending the intricacies of colonial famines (Nally 2008; Mallik 2022).

This study sheds light on EIC’s actions during its control of Bengal from 1765 to 1857. Throughout history, the Company assigned responsibility for famines in India to various factors such as population growth, traditional agricultural systems, and the incompetence of Indian rulers, effectively absolving itself of culpability. The paper exposes how the Company ruthlessly imposed taxes even during the famine, exacerbating its impacts, and uncovers the Company’s systematic destruction of Indian agricultural systems through its policies, paving the way for future famines. The essay draws upon Amartya Sen’s famine entitlements and capabilities approach (Sen 1977), which emphasizes that landless laborers, artisans, and peasants were the most severely impacted during the famine while money lenders, wealthy merchants, and landowners were among the beneficiaries. Moreover, this paper reveals the Company’s priorities of financing its military and generating profits at the expense of the colonized population. The intent here is to unveil the racist policies and profit-driven principles of the EIC, which were complicated by unforeseeable market fluctuations, which systematically dismantled the Indian agricultural system, sparked resource conflicts, and erased the myriad of possibilities emerging from Bengal’s landscapes, ultimately fueling deindustrialization in India from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century.

I take readers through four distinct sections. The first elaborates on the literature on famine theories and how they have been transformed over time. The second explains Foucault’s notion of biopolitics and how this concept facilitated the reinforcement of colonial biopolitics through the occurrence of recurring famines in colonial India. The third part explores the history of the British in India and the Great Bengal Famine of 1770, foregrounding its background, impacts, and the role of EIC during the crisis. The fourth section underscores a biopolitically informed analysis of this corporate famine. The conclusion summarizes the key themes and calls for further research in this area.

EXPLORING FAMINE: DIFFERENT THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

The concept of famine has expanded greatly beyond its original definition of simply referring to hunger, food shortages, and mass starvation. It now encompasses a broader range of factors such as poverty, war, and the failure of markets (Devereux 1993). Gráda (2009, 4) defined famine as a “shortage of food or purchasing power that leads directly to excess mortality from starvation or hunger-induced diseases.” A failure of harvest during a given year owing to a lack of rainfall and subsequent drought might lead to famine. But famines can hardly be explained by one simple environmental factor or by a single theory. De Waal (2017) argues that famines are not just a result of inadequate food



production, but are also shaped by social, economic, and political factors. These components can include disruptions in the market and political or military shocks, even if they do not occur simultaneously. Observers of famine started paying more attention to elements like famine relief at appropriate times and the concept of excess mortality and began to shift their focus from solely analyzing crop production and food availability to examining the food distribution system (Alamgir 1980; Sen 1982; Rubin 2009). Most famine scholars acknowledge that gaining insight into the historical and socioeconomic processes is crucial to comprehend the complex dynamics of famines (Howe and Devereux 2004; Rubin 2019).

Two significant theories were proposed to explain the origins of the famine. The Food Availability Decline theory (FAD) attributes famine to a decrease in the availability of food due to crop failures, natural disasters, or war (Devereux 1993). The FAD approach resembles a Malthusian perspective, holding population pressure accountable for causing food shortages. On the other hand, the Failure of Exchange Entitlements (FEE) theory acknowledges the importance of external factors and argues that famine primarily occurs due to the interplay between preexisting structural vulnerabilities, such as poverty and a crisis event like war that disrupts the market supply of food (Sen 1982). This disruption can cause certain segments of society to be unable to acquire food, even if sufficient supplies are present.

Famed economist Sen (1982) developed the entitlements approach to interpret famines. He rejected the FAD theory due to the pressure of overpopulation in a region, arguing that famines might be avoided if food is distributed properly during and after the crisis. Analyses using this approach identify certain occupational groups such as landless laborers, informal sector workers, artisans, and pastoralists as vulnerable, explaining the reasons for their vulnerability. To simplify, if some other groups of people get rich and can afford to buy more food, food prices will increase, thus exacerbating inequalities in exchange entitlements. This perspective emphasizes class as a key factor in determining vulnerability to famine. Sen therefore relocated the causes of famine from Malthusian food availability to poverty and entitlements. This approach serves as a useful tool to understand which groups have better access to food and which groups are disadvantaged during times of scarcity (Franklin-Lyons 2013). This notion of redistribution of whatever food is available emphasizes the political dimensions of famines and the role of power, which are notably missing from Malthusian accounts.

Watts and Bohle (1993) also considered the exchange-entitlement model as the initial approach to constructing a historical narrative of famines in various social contexts. George (1980) proposed that famines should be analyzed by focusing on specific economic systems of production as well as the regimes of power that exist within society. Devereux (1993) has given a useful explanation



to bridge the gap between the FAD and FEE approaches. According to him, some famines are triggered by FAD (like droughts or floods), and others are triggered by exchange entitlement decline (some groups face more food crises than others, adverse governmental policies, wars, political conflicts, and the like), identifying this “trigger” requires complex analysis. De Waal (2017) grouped the causes of famines into three categories: long-term causes (population change, migration, climate change), medium-term causes (government changes, policy changes, political, or social instability), and triggers (war or drought).

Colonialism played a vital role in the prevalence, magnitude, and devastation caused by famine. Famines were not unusual phenomena in South Asia before the arrival of the British, but the advent and expansion of colonialism rendered peasants more vulnerable to famines mainly due to the self-serving policies of the British authorities (Sasson and Vernon 2015). Davis (2002) argued that the famines during the colonial period in India were not solely attributed to insufficient food supplies. Rather, they resulted from a confluence of factors, including environmental conditions, political economy, and a multifaceted economic crisis precipitated by the market repercussions of droughts and crop failures. It is estimated that approximately 25 million Indians died due to famines from 1770 to 1900, with an additional 35 million fatalities from twentieth-century famines (Arnold 2005; Tharoor 2018).

Several studies explored the similarities between the Indian and Irish famines by interrogating the colonial assumptions prevalent in the British administrative systems during these famines (O’Sullivan and Lucking 2000; Gray 2006). International geopolitics, profits from trade, and the relationships among colonial authorities, wealthy merchants, and native cultivators all played a significant part in shaping famines. These factors can be best reflected by the fact that South Asia was devastated by a series of famines and the Famine Commission Report documented that from 1765, when the EIC took over the *Diwani* of Bengal, to 1858, Bengal experienced 12 famines and four severe food scarcities (Damodaran and others 2014). There were also 25 major famines during the British *Raj*, the period of rule by the British Crown over the Indian subcontinent from 1858 to 1947.

CONFLUENCES OF COLONIAL BIOPOLITICS AND FAMINES

One of Michel Foucault’s most influential notions was biopower and biopolitics. Biopolitics involves political governance and control of the “bios” of people—that is, their bodies and minds. The primary task of biopolitics is to convert people into governable objects. Foucault (2007) defined biopolitics as “the state-led management of life, death, and biological being a form of politics that placed human life at the very center of its calculations” (quoted in Nally 2008, 716). The main purpose of biopolitics is to “create acceleration of goods, progression of



ideas, innovations, emotions, and orders through the social body and to mobilize the public to gain commercial, political, moral, or social progress” (Rutherford and Rutherford 2013, 415). The various ways in which a state controls its territory and people are referred to as governmentality (Foucault 1978). As per Macey (2009, 189), biopolitics “is a subset within the broader category of government or governmentality where the population that is controlled by biopower is divided into human groups known as races.” In India, the ruling colonial authorities used statistics and surveys, prime apparatuses of surveillance to classify people in a country or region into such categories of race, class, gender, and age.

Foucault (1981) used biopolitics to delineate the boundary between healthy and unhealthy bodies. The various tactics taken by the government include different calculations at the state level and distinct standards of how an individual should conduct himself in various domains. This notion also relates to biosecurity issues of securing and safeguarding the health of specific population groups and excluding others as a threat (Braun 2007). To put things together, biopower is the capability to manage, seize, observe, control, and exercise influence on the living conditions of individual bodies and groups of population (Nally 2011). In this vein, colonial authorities in India wanted to know the demographic characteristics of the population in detail to calculate the size of the laboring population as well as the dependent nonlaboring population (Legg 2005). Therefore, until the mid-nineteenth century, there were sporadic enumerations of the population, but they were systematized with the decennial censuses beginning in 1871. Due to this process, as Chakrabarty (1989) pointed out, “labor” emerged as an efficient category that the state wanted to monitor.

A Foucauldian analysis reveals that from the eighteenth century onwards colonized people were envisioned primarily as biological beings rather than political subjects (Rutherford and Rutherford 2013). This view permeated state management of epidemics and famines. Biopolitics underlines the ways the state regulates, manages, and surveys diseases, particularly in those populations who are considered “less able” to manage themselves. This idea was concurrent with the development of surveying diseases, and scientific methods of surveillance like statistics to maintain a healthy and productive population. Heath and Legg (2018) argued that biopolitical power incorporates a racial dimension employed to eliminate specific groups of people, elucidating the rationale behind the institutionalization of torture as a governing mechanism during the colonial rule in India. Legg (2006), while exploring the population expansion of Delhi from 1911 to 1947 (before India gained independence), noted how the people were not treated as self-governing individuals but rather viewed as resources and objects. The calculations of the colonial government were mostly carried out from a distance through the coordination of low-cost policies, including sanitary regulation, statistical management of targeted people, and population organization.



Catastrophes like famine contributed to the establishment of new trajectories of calculation, intervention, and direction for the colonial administration. Several works examined Foucault's concept of governmentality with respect to colonial India (Kalpagam 2000; Chakrabarty 2002; Chatterjee 2004). For example, Chatterjee (1993) emphasized the role of race in establishing colonial rule in India. Kalpagam (2000) stressed the genealogies of calculations that enabled the constitution of the "economy" in India, creating a new type of rationality in colonial India. He noted that labor productivity in colonial India was based on the disciplinary control of the laborers. Bhattacharya (1998) argued that the colonial government framed the discourse of famine regulatory measures concerning the total number of poor people. People who were fit to work but refused to put in their labor were denied relief in case of a famine.

CONTEXT OF THE EAST INDIA COMPANY IN BENGL

The EIC was a British trading company established on New Year's Eve in 1600 under the reign of Queen Elizabeth I that played a major role in the colonization of India. It operated in India and other parts of Asia from the early seventeenth century to the mid-nineteenth century (Stern 2016). Initially, it was a joint stock company, and the main purpose of the Company was to trade in spices and other goods from Asia. The royal status was given to the Company charter by the British Crown, and it had specific advantages. Scholars argued that this grant of the royal charter was similar to providing intellectual property rights or patent rights on formulating new knowledge. To maintain the validation of its charter from the Crown periodically, the EIC had to keep its goodwill and relationship with the Crown (Seth 2012; Mishra 2018). It is also worth mentioning that around the same time as the EIC, several other companies were formed by merchant adventures who were granted royal charters for the exploitation of trading opportunities. They were Muscovy, the Levant, the Royal African Company (dealing with ivory and slaves on the African Coasts), and the Hudson Bay Company (trading in North America).

As a chartered monopoly, the EIC was responsible for maintaining an army, administering territory, and overseeing a bureaucracy of civil servants. The Company established its own legal system, which was not entirely subject to British courts, and was given the authority to engage in treaty negotiations, print currency and claim jurisdiction (Marshall 1996). The purpose of the Company was mainly to serve the private profit-generating interests, basically those of the Crown, which included extraction of plentiful resources from Bengal, enforcing systems of regulation, surveillance, and violence, all aimed at guaranteeing the smooth operation of trade and collection of revenues.

In 1608, the first Company ship named the *Hector* landed in India (present day Surat, Gujrat) to trade spices and other luxury goods like textiles. They were given a permit by the Mughal emperor, Jahangir, to establish a factory



in Surat, Gujrat, in 1613 (Banerjee and Iyer 2005). It established several factories in different places in India such as Madras, Ahmedabad, Bombay, and Surat, and as business gradually flourished, profits increased by trading salt, cotton, indigo, silk, and later opium, and tea. Until then, most factories were established on the western and southern coasts of India, but the Company's intention to was establish factories in all areas under the Mughal Empire, especially in Bengal as that area was productive and commercially very successful (James 2000). By the mid-seventeenth century, the EIC moved eastwards near the Bay of Bengal and established several factories in Balasore, Hughli, Patna, Malda, and Dhaka to trade silk, muslin, and rice (Sen 2021).

The Company started negotiating with the Mughal Governor of Bengal to grant it trading rights and tax exemptions by issuing a royal edict (*Shahi Farman*) to trade easily in Bengal. In 1717, Mughal Emperor Farrukhsiyar granted tax-free monopoly trading rights to the EIC in Bengal. As per this new law, the EIC could even issue a *Dastak* (trade permit) where all customs duties could be waived. Due to this special trade permit, the EIC was not required to pay taxes (Lawson 2013). In 1756, Siraj-Ud-Daulah became the *Nawab* (king) of Bengal. The EIC in the meantime, became involved in local Indian politics. They conspired against Siraj-Ud-Daulah to remove him from his throne by making friendship with his commander-in-chief, Mir Jafar, who aspired to be Nawab. Finally, in the Battle of Plassey in June 1757, Siraj-Ud-Daula was defeated (Dalrymple 2019). This battle laid the groundwork for British expansion and the establishment of the EIC's dominance in Bengal. As per Stern (2011), this victory of the EIC at the Battle of Plassey in 1757 and the subsequent assumption of the Mughal office of *Diwan* (revenue collector and administrator) transformed the commercial company into a company-state and a merchant-empire.

It is important to note two profoundly significant events in this context: the Battle of Buxar and the Treaty of Allahabad. In 1761, Mir Qasim, who was the son-in-law of Mir Jafar, took over as the new Nawab of Bengal. However, the EIC expected him to act as a subservient ruler, a role to which he did not agree to serve. In 1763, he led his army to fight against the EIC, but was defeated. During that time, Qasim sought help from the Nawab of Awadh Shuja-Ud-Daula and the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II, and together, these three leaders formed an alliance to rid themselves of British influence (Singh 2017). In 1764, the EIC fought against this alliance in the Battle of Buxar, which resulted in a British victory.

The Treaty of Allahabad, signed in August 1765 after the defeat of Mir Qasim's alliance in the Battle of Buxar, marked a momentous turning point in the history of British colonialism in India. The treaty made Robert Clive the governor and commander-in-chief of Bengal. Also, in this Treaty, the Mughals realized the new military and political order and awarded the Company the



office of the *Diwan* and the right to collect the territorial and customs revenues of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa (Bowen 2002). As per the Diwani Rights of Bengal granted by Shah Alam II to the EIC, the Company had the right to administer and collect taxes from Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa, thereby making the Company the imperial tax collector in Bengal (Wilson 2016). By 1820, these provinces had formed the eastern wing of a vast new British colony in India. The Company extracted vast amounts of wealth from India by forcing people to harsh labor. These events invite us to think about colonial governance beyond the terms of the state, but rather as a corporate phenomenon.

The EIC was questioned on political grounds due to several factors: severe impacts of the Bengal famine of 1770, threats of a French invasion in India, the emergence of different groups describing the interests of the Company's servants who returned from the East, and the realignment of opposition forces inside the Parliament (Guha 1982). Robert Clive was charged with corruption for appropriating £234,000 from the Company (Seth 2012). In 1858, a market crash, political meddling, expensive military campaigns, and a lack of accountability, the EIC's reign came to an end with the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 (Levine 2007). After this rebellion, the British Crown took direct control over India, abolished the Company, and established the British *Raj*, the period of British colonial rule from 1858–1947.

THE GREAT BENGAL FAMINE OF 1770: UNVEILING AN EPIC TRAGEDY

BACKGROUND OF THE FAMINE

The husbandmen sold their cattle; they sold their implements of agriculture; they devoured their seed-grain; they sold their sons and daughters, till at length no buyer of children could be found; they [ate] the leaves of trees and the grass of the field; and in June 1770 the Resident at the Durbar affirmed that the living were feeding on the dead. Hunter (1897)

The Great Bengal Famine of 1770, widely considered one of the most tragic events in the history of South Asia, was one of the deadliest famines in human history. Although there are varying estimates of the number of fatalities caused by this famine, it is often agreed that approximately 10 million people died as a result, a conclusion based on an estimated prefamine population of 30 million in Bengal (McLane 2002). The Bengal region in 1770 covered a vast area, including the present-day Indian states of West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, Assam, a portion of Orissa, and what is today Bangladesh (Chaudhary and others 2016). Figure 1 depicts the extent of Bengal from 1740 to 1828.

In 1768, a partial crop failure occurred in Bengal and Bihar, caused by inadequate monsoon rains (Damodaran and others 2014). The following year, during the summer when the monsoon rains usually replenish soil moisture, there was continued scarcity of rain, causing tanks and ponds in the villages in Bengal to dry up, resulting in desiccated soil and ambient dust (Dalrymple 2019). According to district officials and village reports, one-third of Bengal's total



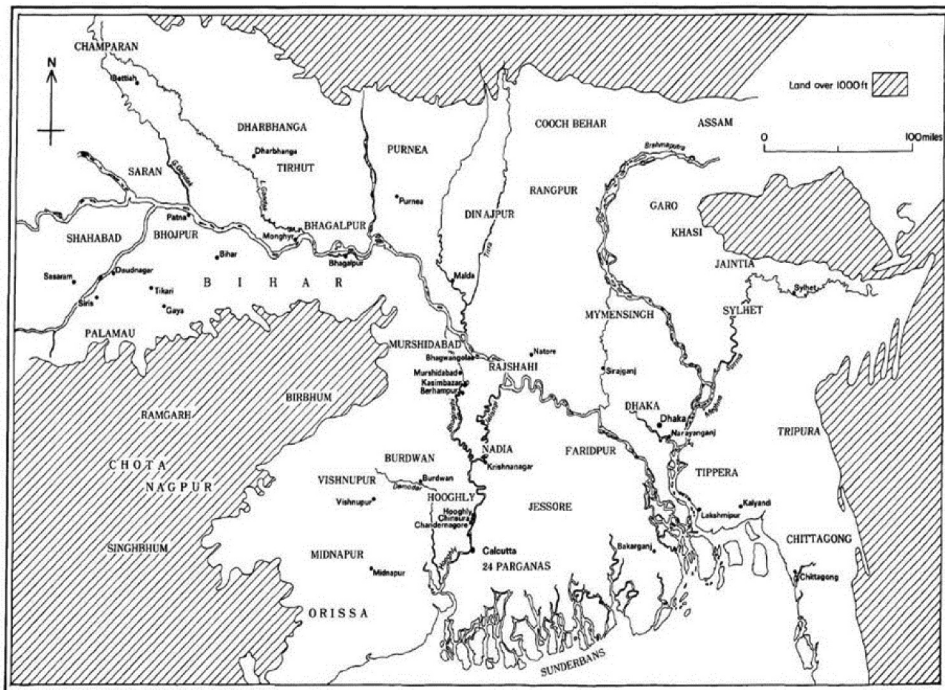


FIG. 1.—Bengal from 1740–1828 (names of places included in the essay).

Source: Marshall (2006).

population perished, one-third of the cultivated area was abandoned, and two-thirds of Bengal's aristocracy were devastated by the famine that ensued (McLane 2002).

The EIC, in control of Bengal at the time, received widespread criticism for its actions during the crisis, including forced tax collection, prioritizing profit maximization over famine relief efforts, hoarding rice for its military staff, and exporting food grain, leaving the local population to starve. The stockpiling of food grain led to skyrocketing prices and food scarcity, making it impossible for the local poor population to afford food (Mukhopadhyay 1988; Bowen 2002). These actions greatly contributed to the famine's severity.

In a single year, Bengal usually had three harvests: a scanty pulse in spring (*rabi*), an important rice crop in autumn (*aus*), and the main and great rice harvest (*aman*), the largest of the year, in December. In 1768, the harvests were poor, and from mid-August to January 1769, the region received no rainfall (Sur 1976; Wilson 2016). The harvest of December 1769 was a failure due to this rare drought. Several places also faced occurrences of dreadful fires that subsequently led to the massive destruction of grain stores in Purnia. By February 1770, 70 percent of the



largest of Bengal's three annual rice crops had been destroyed. The price of rice soared by 500 percent in Bengal and millions starved (Damodaran 2006). In addition, an epidemic of smallpox appeared in May 1770 that lasted for three months and from which millions died.

The central and western regions of Bengal, particularly the districts of Murshidabad, Rajshahi, Birbhum, Hooghly, and Nadia, were the primary areas affected by the famine (Damodaran and others 2014). Murshidabad, an important silk-growing area, suffered one of the highest mortality rates during the famine (Figure 2). In contrast, the low-lying delta regions of East Bengal were less severely affected by the famine due to the abundant supply of water, even during dry periods.

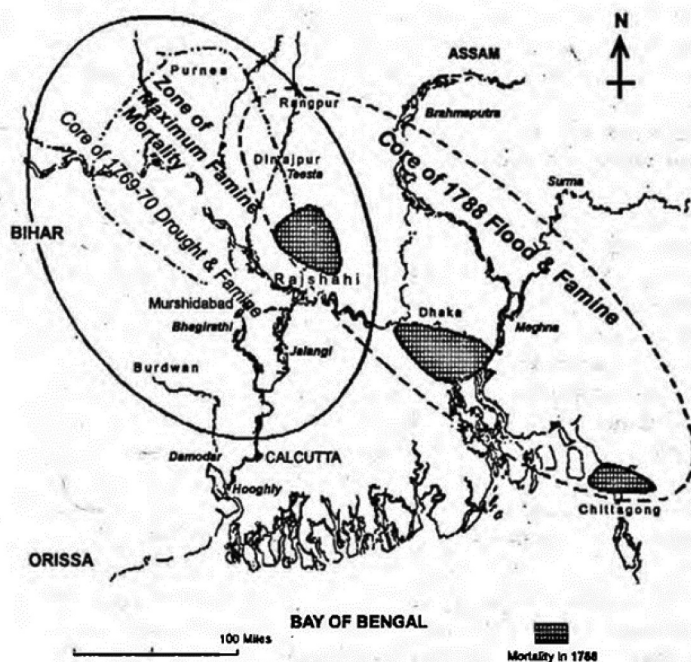


FIG. 2.—The 1770 Famine-affected region.

Source: Datta (2000).



THE DIWANI RIGHTS: A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR TO THE DEVASTATING IMPACTS OF THE FAMINE

The EIC, driven by a relentless hunger for profit, abused its right to collect taxes before, during, and after the famine, prioritizing revenue collection over providing relief. This behavior reflects a vision of India in which Indians, especially poor Indians, did not matter. This behavior is evident from the fact that the EIC collected more revenue during 1770–71 than the previous year (Table 1). The Company's main goal was to generate a revenue surplus and send it to Britain, which could only be achieved by investing in export products and selling them back to India. The EIC had various costs to manage, such as the significant rise in the number of troops and military expenditures. The number of its troops in Bengal increased from 3,000 in 1756 to 26,000 in 1766, and military expenditures grew from £377,002 GBP (Great Britain pounds) in 1761–62 to £886,909 in 1765–66 (Bowen 2002). As a result, the Diwan was a crucial source of income to fund and cover these military expenses. To add to the Company's difficulties, Shah Alam II demanded a yearly payment of 2,6000,000 rupees (£325,000) from the Company's increased revenues (Wilson 2016).

PARADOX OF HUNGER IN BENGAL'S ABUNDANT AGRICULTURAL LANDSCAPE: THE ROLE OF THE EIC

The magnitude of the famine was amplified by market failures and poor transportation networks. The EIC intervened in the market system with devastating consequences. Private merchants were prohibited from transporting grain (Travers 2005). The Company issued orders forbidding the export of grain from one district to another, except for Murshidabad city. Directives also forbid the authorities at Chittagong, preventing them from exporting grain anywhere else except to Calcutta. Likewise, merchants were compelled by the Company to sell rice at fixed prices. These restrictive regulations made it exceedingly difficult for traders to import rice from other parts of the country into the famine-stricken districts. The shortage of money, specifically silver coins, caused trade to cease completely. The unsuccessful importation policies induced a chain reaction where the neighboring districts could not send relief

TABLE 1.—NET REVENUE COLLECTIONS IN BENGAL FROM 1768–69 to 1771–72.

YEARS	NET REVENUE COLLECTIONS IN RUPEES (RS)
1768–69	1,52,54,856
1769–70	1,31,49,148
1770–71	1,40,06,030
1771–72	1,53,33,660

Source: McLane (2002).



by supplying grain to the hungry masses (Arnold 1999). To sustain the troops protecting the British forts, the administrators confiscated rice from merchants' stocks and allocated it to the builders and soldiers (Wilson 2016). This event illustrates the valuation of white lives in the service of the EIC over brown lives dying of hunger, a biopolitical management of bodies rooted in racism and colonial indifference.

In 1770, the death toll in the districts was staggering 20,000 per month, while those who were alive received allotments of only 150 rupees per month. The Company contributed only £4,000 as relief measures for a total period of six months. Apart from the £4,000, the Company added £4,700 to cover extra expenses, but this expenditure remained inadequate (Damodaran 2014). Hunter (1897, 37) writes "The total, however, proved wholly insufficient to touch the evil, and before the managers of the fund were aware, £15,000 had been expended in importation." Figure 3 illustrates the total EIC revenues and expenditures in India from 1762–1781.

The entire EIC colonial government was held responsible by the indigenous people for exploiting the tragedy for its own benefit. A thorough investigation of the incident was never conducted, not surprisingly, given the low regard in which Indian famine victims were held. There were even allegations that the local officials of the ruling authority had emptied boats carrying rice from other regions and coerced impoverished farmers into selling their seed stock for the next harvest (Dalrymple 2019). John Cartier, an important member of the Council, explained his concerns to the board of the Company so that at least some remissions in the land tax were authorized, but he was informed later that although the agony was massive, the council could not tolerate any revenue losses and it even increased the land tax by 10 percent in the following year.

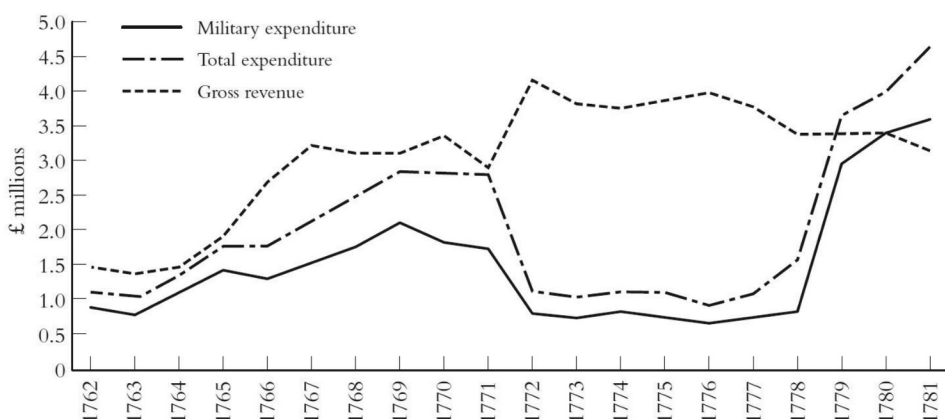


FIG. 3.—Revenue and expenditure in India by the East India Company from 1762–1781.

Source: Wilson (2016).



IMPACTS OF THE FAMINE

People died in vast numbers throughout the summer of 1770. The scarcity of food was so extreme that desperate people even consumed the leaves of trees and grass of fields. In June 1770, reports surfaced that the living were feeding on the dead, an illustration of necropolitics at its most literal (Mbembé and Meintjes 2003; Damodaran and others 2014). The streets were congested with corpses, and farmers sold their livestock and tools. In their desperation, some sold their children. Thus, even the smallest and most vulnerable of Indians were subjected to the EIC's biopolitical reign of terror. The most vulnerable groups that suffered the worst were landless laborers, artisans, and boatmen. The cultivators suffered substantial losses as the high mortality rate not only resulted in a decline in available labor supplies, but also a loss of livestock.

Depopulation was one of the significant major consequences of the famine, mainly caused by high mortality rates. Some people migrated from severely affected regions to comparatively less affected ones. Others relocated to places that were relatively immune to the famine (Chaudhuri 1949). Many famine-stricken people moved from western Bengal to eastern Bengal and from western Bihar to Benares and Oudh. People fled from one village to another in search of food. If they stayed back, they would have to pay revenues, and to escape from this burden, many moved to other destinations. EIC officials, to reduce expenses, terminated several positions. This move generated massive unemployment and many people deserted these places in search of jobs.

The districts of Birbhum, Bishnupur, and Purnia were the most affected by depopulation. Birbhum had 6,000 rural communities before the famine; in 1785, 1,500 communities disappeared, and their lands reverted into jungle. Among four villages in Rajshahi, the number of families plummeted from 1,033 in 1769–1770 to 373 in 1770–1771 (Bose 1993). The number of weavers who worked in the looms of the Company in Malda was slashed in half after the famine. Fiske (1904) even believed the Bengal famine to be more detrimental than the Black Death (bubonic plague) that terrified Europe in 1347–51. He argued (Fiske 1904, 67) “The Black Death of the fourteenth century was, perhaps, the most fearful visitation which has ever afflicted the Western world. But in the concentrated misery which it occasioned the Bengal famine surpassed it, even as the Himalayas dwarf by comparison the highest peaks of Switzerland.”

Despite efforts to repopulate areas devastated by the famine, vast expanses of land remained barren and unused. The lack of inhabitants posed a significant problem for the EIC, as they struggled to convert these wastelands into cultivable land. By 1772, 40 percent of arable land was lying in waste, and by 1776, this number rose even higher. Ironically, the EIC's racist neglect of Indian famine victims came back to haunt it in the form of labor shortages.



CORPORATE COLONIAL BIOPOLITICS: THE PLUNDER OF BENGAL OVER A CENTURY

EIC CORPORATE GOVERNMENTALITIES

The monopoly of the Company obtained under the Royal Seal was anticipated to yield for England an annual territorial revenue of seven million pounds sterling, exercise control over an army of 60,000 men, and the lives and fortunes of thirty million Bengali inhabitants. Colonial trading corporations like the EIC were given privileges to acquisition, purchase, and possession of lands, property, and stock. They were also authorized to govern territories, oversee emigration and settlement, engage in wars and alliances with indigenous adversaries, and manage civil and military administration (Sen 2002; Mishra 2018). The EIC, as allowed by the charter, had the liberty to generate huge quantities of stocks, enabling the company to secure loans and distribute dividends to cover the interest on the funds raised, similar to the practices in the ministry. Sen (2002, 44) describes the Company as “an ‘under-government’ supported by Indian revenues, with its defense and administration overseen by the ‘mother government’ at Westminster.”

The Bengal famine of 1770 is an explication of EIC’s corporate governmentality underpinning the huge number of deaths that accompanied it. Seth (2012) scrutinized the nature of corporate governance by the EIC in depth and highlighted the challenges inherent in its governance structure. Among these challenges, he identified the most severe as the principal-agent problems existing between the management and headquarters in Britain and the employees and managers operating in the Indian subcontinent. The efficient delivery of information was a serious problem due to the considerable distance involved. The Crown consistently provided protection for the Company’s chartered status, while the Company fulfilled the financial obligations of the Crown. Due to this, numerous Company executives, having amassed considerable wealth in India, concluded their service tenures and transitioned to roles in the British parliament. A contractual arrangement between the Company and its overseas employees granted them low wages and the right to engage in private trading, albeit with the looming threat of dismissal. The various governing tactics employed demonstrate how Bengal served as an ideal ground for the EIC to exploit the power it acquired and reap its benefits. This illustrates a manifestation of biopolitics on a global scale, wherein the valuation of Indian lives, separated by vast distances, varied differentially.

The period of most pronounced intervention in the Company occurred between 1757–1765, driven by the aspiration to generate enormous profits as a means of augmenting the meager salaries of the Company’s employees. In pursuit of abundant resources from Bengal, the Company implemented mechanisms of control, surveillance, and violence, ensuring the facilitation of commerce and the extraction of territorial revenue (Mishra 2018). The British government, wanting a share from the diwani earnings, compelled the



Company to disburse £400,000 to offset its war debts. Company officials situated in the subcontinent were incentivized to initiate wars, with each war providing an opportunity for officials to access the treasuries of local rulers, thereby accumulating additional personal wealth (Sen 2021). From its very inception the Company allowed “private trade” for personal benefits and this internal trade worsened the situation during the famine. Notably, in 1768–69, despite crop failures leading to a rise in grain prices, famine did not ensue (Damodaran and others 2014). Consequently, this profit-seeking ideology exerted profound and extensive influences, extending beyond the lives of 10 million people, and impacting the economic and social fabric of the affected indigenous communities.

It is imperative to recognize the indigenous, preexisting social framework prevalent in Bengal and to juxtapose the contrasting agricultural land tenure systems that prevailed under the Mughal dynasty with the EIC’s governance strategy. Bengali society was divided into *zamindars* (landowners who leased land to their tenant farmers), the hereditary revenue collectors of the Mughal Empire, and a broad base consisting of landless laborers and a huge number of poorer farmers. Most people lived in villages as *ryots* (peasant farmers with tenants having different sizes of landholdings and statuses) (James 2000). Prior to the advent of the Company’s dominion in India, the Indian rulers governed their subjects differently from the British, demonstrating greater benevolence and support toward their peasantry (Siddiqui 2020). They administered various tax relief programs, regulated food prices to curb inflation, and prohibited the export of food from famine-affected areas. During periods of scarcity, individuals also provided charitable aid. This tradition of charitable giving was opposed by the British, as they believed it would attract more unemployed people to the area. Here, we are confronted with two starkly different biopolitical visions, one that took brown lives seriously and another that did not.

After the arrival of the Company, it established three primary revenue systems: *zamindari* in Eastern India, *ryotwari* in Southern and Northern India, and *mahalwari* in Western India. The zamindari system introduced a Permanent Settlement Act of Land Revenue in 1793 that treated the land as a capital asset (Gidwani 1992; Ray 2011). Cultivators were required to pay rent on their land in addition to taxes based on their crop share. Since the land was private property, landowners could lend money to the peasants, and, in times of poor crop yields, high interest rates were levied by moneylenders (Banerjee and Iyer 2005; Davini 2009). Peasants who were unable to pay back loans were compelled to relinquish their lands to moneylenders, leading to extensive land dispossession. According to Guha (1982), the Permanent Settlement was introduced to create capitalist farming in Bengal’s agriculture. He writes (Guha 1982, 9) “the famine was the most conclusive evidence of the worthlessness of the existing economic policies and the best reason that could be there for seeking an alternative in terms of a more stable and comprehensive land settlement.”



Biopower has been utilized in the analysis of famine management and disease control, often involving the use of controls, surveillance, and regulations (Legg 2005). Colonial biopolitics, on the other hand, refers to the use of power and control by colonial governments over the bodies of colonized populations (Nally 2008; Nally 2011). This approach involves various biopolitical techniques to regulate and manage colonized populations, including medical interventions, public health policies, and population control measures. Sen (2021) meticulously examines the politics and discourse surrounding the 1770 famine by scrutinizing early colonial archives and travel reports from servants of the English and Dutch East India companies. Within these historical records, racial stereotypes depicting Indians as lazy and culpable for the entire tragedy emerge. The travelogues vividly illustrate the transportation of grain during the famine, showcasing how those affiliated with the EIC profited while the Indian populace suffered.

Europeans consistently regarded Indian bodies as possessing inherent qualities of femininity and docility, juxtaposed with the perception that European bodies were vulnerable within the Indian tropics (Sen 2002). These writings expose the notion of colonial biopolitics that exacerbated the starvation. As Travers (2007, 5) puts it, “In fact, the Company relied on such pejorative connotations of Asian laziness and despotism to justify its takeover of territories in the Indian subcontinent. Eighteenth-century Britain primarily viewed Indians as “corrupted by heat and the harem into terminal effeminate.”

Attributing all responsibility solely to the Company oversimplifies the situation, as a segment of the native elite actively collaborated with the Company in its daily operations. At the height of the famine, British merchants and Indian agents engaged in hoarding practices for personal gain, leading to a surge in grain prices (Martin 2015). The cost of rice surged from 110 pounds per rupee in normal times to a mere 5 pounds per rupee during the famine. Approximately 120,000 *maunds* (1 *maund* = 37.32 kg) of rice were estimated to have been withdrawn from the market and stored separately for the company’s military use (Sen 2021). Unfortunately, this period coincided with a colonial transition phase, as the Company sought to disentangle its commercial interests from territorial governance.

The destitute, emaciated bodies of starving Indians held such negligible significance to Company officials that they lay abandoned alongside animals without eliciting concern. The corpses of poor Indian farmers were left unattended outside British residences, attracting scavenging dogs and jackals. One eyewitness vividly documented the harrowing scene: “One could not pass along the streets without seeing multitudes in their last agonies, crying out as you passed, My God! my God! have mercy upon me, I am starving; whilst on other sides numbers of dead were seen with dogs, jackals, hogs, vultures, and other beasts and birds of prey feeding on their carcasses (quoted in Sen 2021, 151). This stark indifference of the Company officials to the suffering Indian bodies



signifies a manifestation of biopolitics in practice, illustrating the interconnectedness of power dynamics and the systematic neglect of vulnerable populations in times of acute distress.

The annihilation of India's textile industries by the British colonial authorities was closely intertwined with the vulnerability of the region to famines (Frank 1970; Dutt 1992; Tharoor 2016). The Indian textile industries, which were methodically destroyed by colonial authorities (Arnold 2005; Riello and Roy 2009), forced farmers to rely on agriculture for their subsistence. This dependence made the Indian economy highly reliant on seasonal monsoons, enhancing the vulnerability of farmers to droughts such as the one that occurred in 1769.

Siddiqui (1996) identified three key factors that transformed the colonial Indian agricultural system, rendering it susceptible to famines: an increase in commercial crop production for export (mainly wheat, opium, jute, and tea); the land revenue collection system designed mainly to finance British military troops; and the systematic destruction of indigenous industries. During famines, urban depopulation resulted in a sharp decline in rural employment and handicraft industries, leaving no other options for employment outside the agricultural sector.

In addition to the Company's agricultural destruction and industrial obliteration, there is another vital aspect here, concerning the relations of railways and famines in India. Railways were constructed in India for Britain's benefit primarily to secure the movement of raw materials from India to Britain (Nanda 2003). Raw materials such as cotton, jute, tea, coffee, sugar cane, tobacco, wheat, rice, opium, coal, and iron ore were exported from India largely through the railroads and then subsequently delivered to ports to be carried by steamships to Britain. The expansion of railroads led to an increase in food exports and, subsequently, an increase in the frequency of famines. In 1857, there were 288 miles of railroads in India, which expanded to 19,555 miles in 1895 (Meena 2016). Instead of using these railroads to deliver food during famines, the EIC used them to export food grain and raw materials to Britain. Davis highlighted (2002, 27) how the railroads, which were promoted as a means of preventing famines, were utilized by merchants to "ship grain inventories from outlying drought-stricken districts to central depots for hoarding." In this case, an infrastructure that could and should have been used to save Indian lives was instead transformed into a weapon of biopolitical oppression.

THE COMPANY'S UTILIZATION OF FAMINE AS A MEANS OF COLONIAL RULE

At a broader administrative level, officials within the EIC often viewed the famine as an opportunity for intervention in the food market, allowing British supervisors to regulate the supply of food grain (Travers 2005). The EIC portrayed the Nawabs as corrupt and inept, presenting the Company as the only



viable solution to the extensive corruption in Indian governance. Hence, in a classic case of Orientalism, Indians were expected to be grateful for being liberated from Asiatic despotism. Warren Hastings, appointed as the governor of Calcutta by the EIC in April 1772, refused to share power with other Indian rulers and implemented crucial reforms in the Bengal government. In 1773, he wrote to the chair of directors, stating “every intermediate power is removed, and the sovereignty of the country wholly and absolutely vested in the Company” (Travers 2005, 17).

Although the tragedy of the Bengal famine of 1770 caused widespread criticism of the Company’s management, it also provided an opportunity for the British to assert their authority and portray Indians as incapable of self-governance. Despite allegations of misconduct against British officials, no charges were formally brought against them, and Parliament subsequently tightened its control over Indian affairs through the Regulating Act of 1773 and the impeachment of Warren Hastings. In contrast, Muhammad Reza Khan, an Indian accused of monopolizing grain during the famine, was the only person to be put on trial. Though acquitted in 1774, his case served as a platform for Europeans to claim that Indians were unsuitable for high official positions. The Bengal famine, therefore, contributed to the exclusion of Indians from senior positions in their own administration, relegating them to subordinate roles in the colonial bureaucracy. Interestingly, famines also provided a platform for Europeans to stereotype Bengalis as passive and indolent. British official Macaulay once wrote “Whatever the Bengalee does, he does languidly. His favorite pursuits are sedentary. He shrinks from bodily exertion; and, though voluble in dispute, and singularly pertinacious in the war of chicane, he seldom engages in personal conflict” (Johns 1999, 49). Thus, politically, and discursively, the EIC marginalized Indian lives and bodies.

CONCLUSION

The British EIC’s administration profoundly shaped the landscapes of India and viewed it as a reservoir of resources while also attempting to implement agricultural reforms that served its own interests at the expense of Indians. The prevalence of several famines throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries acted as a driving force behind the endeavor to enhance the agricultural system of India. Efforts to ameliorate the agricultural system proved ineffective and further aggravated the disruption of traditional occupations because of alterations in land use patterns. As a result, in the 1830s, many Indians became indentured laborers in tea plantations in Assam and Ceylon, and in rice plantations in British Burma, where they were subjected to brutal treatment to meet the demands of plantation owners for increased profits (Duncan 2007; 2020).

The famine was a direct outcome of the Company’s economic policies. In their relentless pursuit to finance their military expenditures, the British



continued to extract revenues from India. The period between 1764 and 1770 witnessed a significant expansion of their military force, with 44 per cent of EIC's budget allocated to military purposes (McLane 2002). Bengal's revenue alone contributed to almost a quarter of Britain's overall public revenue after 1765. The EIC's acquisitive ambitions reached their zenith in the 1830s–1850s, during which it collected around £20–25 million from Bengal, nearly half of Britain's domestic revenue (Marshall 1996). Despite food shortages, the EIC continued to export food from India paying no heed to control food inflation under the guise of noninterference in the market.

The grim circumstances of the 1770 famine were mirrored in the Great Bengal Famine of 1943 as well. During the 1943 famine, food was stockpiled for the civilian population of the United Kingdom, and military personnel were provided with relief and aid (Mallik 2022). The historical account of exploitation and indifference serves as a powerful exemplar of the imperative of accountable governance for the welfare of all citizens in their colonies.

Emphasizing the notion of corporate sovereignty concerning the EIC is crucial. The EIC functioned somewhat as a “quasi-sovereign,” as these joint-stock corporations didn't fit neatly into the categories of either purely economic entities or straightforwardly sovereign bodies. Foucault's perspective suggests that both sovereign power and biopower operated within the broader framework of governmentality. A significant body of literature has highlighted the “sovereign” nature of these company-states, such as the EIC and Hudson Bay Company (Smith 2018). The EIC's sovereignty emerged through a complex interplay of English charters, Asian grants, and the Company's inherent political behaviors (Stern 2008). To put it in simple terms, English colonial enterprises were granted special powers through royal charters over territories that were not originally under sovereign control at the very first place.

The imposition of high taxes on Indian peasants by the EIC resulted in widespread poverty, famines, indebtedness, and depopulation, aggravated by the lack of concrete and effective policies. Due to the uncertain nature of monsoons, food shortages never took place simultaneously at the same time across all provinces and states within India. Therefore, food could have been easily transported from surplus regions to deficit ones. Unfortunately, the Company's self-serving policies and racist attitudes prevented such movements, thereby, intensifying the impacts of famines (Dutt 1901). Wealthy farmers hoarded food grain, selling it at exorbitant prices in regions afflicted by scarcity, while farmers from relatively unaffected regions were forced to sell their produce to rich merchants and farmers, trapping them in a credit mechanism that left them with few alternatives (Ray 2013). This systemic exploitation highlights the helplessness of native peasants under the EIC's rule, as they struggled to survive amidst a web of institutionalized injustices.



In short, the world system, colonial racism, and the relentless commodification of agriculture were telescoped into Bengal in ways that proved to be catastrophic for its most vulnerable residents.

For future research directions, exploring the framework of corporate colonial governmentality could offer valuable insights into diverse contexts, including other corporate entities like the Hudson Bay Company (HBC). Scholars have suggested that the HBC operated akin to a company-state, possessing its own distinctive form of sovereignty. To safeguard their chartered privileges, HBC governors demonstrated military skills, engaged in diplomatic negotiations, and were expected to serve Britain's national interests. The HBC established its own legal system and purported a commitment to the welfare of preexisting indigenous populations in the region (Cavanagh 2011). However, in practice, indigenous people primarily served as suppliers and clients for the HBC's fur trade operations, rather than being the central focus of the company's directors. The paramount aim for the HBC directors was to exploit the economic opportunities to their fullest within the Hudson Bay region to maximize profits, much like the EIC.

The Great Bengal Famine of 1770 exemplifies the manifestation of corporate colonial biopolitics in India, as the EIC, since its establishment, placed British interests as its foremost priority above all other concerns. The Bengal famine of 1770 has not been previously studied by geographers, nor has corporate colonial biopolitics, practiced by a private company. This paper aims to shed light on the role of colonial corporate power in magnifying the devastating effects of the 1770 famine in India. The Company's only focus was on maximizing revenue, even at the cost of millions of lives of Bengalis. The catastrophic Bengal famine of 1770 not only stands as a pivotal moment in history due to its staggering loss of over 10 million lives but also serves as a poignant reminder of the dire consequences that ensue when corporations prioritize profits over human lives.

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