



Famine Commissions in Colonial India: Analysis, Impact, and Legacy

Dr. Kuldeep Mandal¹

¹ Department of History, T.M. Bhagalpur University, Bhagalpur.

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Corresponding Author:
Dr. Kuldeep Mandal

Abstract:

Famine constituted one of the most devastating and recurrent tragedies in colonial India, profoundly affecting the social, economic, and demographic landscape of the subcontinent. Periodic crop failures, coupled with exploitative colonial policies, inadequate infrastructure, and the prioritization of revenue extraction over human welfare, transformed localized food shortages into large-scale humanitarian crises. In response to these recurring famines, the British administration instituted several Famine Commissions, known in Hindi as Akaal Aayogs, which were tasked with investigating the underlying causes of famines, assessing the adequacy of existing relief measures, and recommending administrative reforms to mitigate future occurrences. These commissions conducted detailed inquiries into climatic conditions, agricultural practices, land tenure systems, and socio-economic vulnerabilities, while also evaluating the effectiveness of relief operations, distribution mechanisms, and public works programs designed to support affected populations.¹ This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the major Famine Commissions during the colonial period, including their methodologies, recommendations, and the degree to which these proposals were implemented by the administration. It further examines the impact of these commissions on governance, highlighting how they shaped policies related to food security, public relief, and administrative accountability. The study also explores the social consequences of famines, including population displacement, mortality patterns, and long-term economic dislocations, illustrating the human cost of colonial mismanagement. Finally, the article assesses the legacy of these commissions in influencing modern approaches to disaster management, including the institutionalization of early warning systems, structured relief frameworks, and the integration of scientific and administrative measures to prevent or mitigate famine-related crises. By critically examining the Famine Commissions, the study underscores the complex interplay between environmental factors, administrative policies, and societal resilience, providing insights into both the shortcomings and the reformist impulses of colonial governance, and their enduring relevance for contemporary disaster management strategies in India.

Keywords: Famine Commissions, Colonial India, Akaal Aayog, British Administration.

1. Introduction

During the period of British colonial rule, India faced repeated and devastating famines that claimed millions of lives and caused immense social and economic upheaval. These famines were often the result of natural factors such as droughts, erratic monsoons, floods, and crop failures. However, their severity and frequency were significantly aggravated by the economic and

administrative policies of the colonial state. The exploitative revenue systems, including Permanent Settlement, Ryotwari, and Mahalwari, placed immense financial burdens on peasants, compelling them to pay high taxes even during crop failures. The prioritization of cash crops for export over food crops, coupled with the commercialization of agriculture, reduced local food availability and increased vulnerability to famine. In addition, inadequate transport infrastructure, inefficient grain storage, and poorly planned relief mechanisms often turned localized food shortages into large-scale humanitarian crises.³

Recognizing the urgent need to address this recurring calamity, the British administration established several Famine Commissions (*Akaal Aayogs*). These commissions were tasked with investigating the causes of famines, identifying administrative lapses, and recommending preventive and remedial measures. They conducted extensive surveys, collected statistical data on population, agriculture, and food prices, and analyzed historical patterns of famine occurrence. The commissions sought to understand the interplay of natural, social, and economic factors that exacerbated famines, while also evaluating the effectiveness of existing relief strategies, including public works, food distribution, and emergency measures. The significance of the Famine Commissions extended beyond immediate relief efforts.⁴ They represented a shift towards a more systematic and institutionalized approach to disaster management in colonial India. By formalizing procedures for assessment, reporting, and intervention, the commissions laid the groundwork for structured administrative responses to large-scale crises. They highlighted the responsibilities of the state in safeguarding the welfare of its subjects, introduced mechanisms for preventive planning, and emphasized the role of coordinated infrastructure such as railways, telegraphs, and irrigation systems in famine mitigation. Moreover, the work of these commissions had lasting implications for colonial governance. They not only influenced policy decisions and the implementation of relief programs during their time but also shaped broader administrative and economic strategies. The recommendations often led to the creation of famine codes, the establishment of relief funds, and reforms in agricultural administration, demonstrating the link between disaster management and governance. While their effectiveness was sometimes constrained by political priorities and limited resources, the Famine Commissions remain a critical example of how the colonial state attempted, albeit inconsistently, to institutionalize responses to human suffering.⁵

This article examines the major Famine Commissions of colonial India, including those established in 1880, 1897, 1901, and 1943, analyzing their methodologies, findings, recommendations, and impact on both colonial administration and society. It also explores the dual nature of these commissions: on one hand, as instruments for alleviating immediate human distress, and on the other, as mechanisms that reinforced colonial control, regulated agrarian economies, and shaped long-term policies in disaster management. By understanding their role, we gain insight into the evolution of administrative planning, state responsibility, and the socio-economic consequences of famine in India, as well as the foundations they laid for modern disaster preparedness and management policies.⁶

The Odisha famine of 1866 stands out as one of the most catastrophic famines in colonial India, resulting in the death of an estimated 500,000 to 1,000,000 people due to starvation, malnutrition, and disease. The sheer scale of human suffering revealed the inadequacy of the existing administrative and relief mechanisms. Relief operations prior to this famine were largely ad hoc, uncoordinated, and heavily dependent on the discretion of local officials, which often led to delays, unequal distribution, and inefficiencies. Food supplies were insufficient, transportation was slow, and bureaucratic red tape

further compounded the crisis. The famine created widespread social disruption, dislocation of populations, and economic distress, highlighting the urgent need for a systematic and institutional approach to famine management. In response, the British administration established the First Famine Commission in 1867, which represented the colonial government's first formal attempt to investigate famine causes comprehensively and to devise structured relief and preventive measures.⁷ Sir George Campbell, a distinguished British civil servant with extensive experience in Indian governance, was appointed as the chairperson of the commission. The commission was tasked with conducting in-depth inquiries into the socio-economic, agricultural, and climatic factors contributing to famine, as well as evaluating the effectiveness of the government's response mechanisms. The commission's investigation highlighted multiple factors: recurrent droughts, dependency on monoculture crops, lack of local grain reserves, poor transportation infrastructure, and administrative delays in mobilizing aid. Recognizing that timely intervention was critical, the commission proposed several key administrative and logistical reforms. It emphasized the development of transportation networks, including roads, canals, and particularly the expanding railway system, which could facilitate faster distribution of food supplies to famine-affected regions. Another major recommendation was the establishment of grain storage facilities and emergency depots in strategic locations to ensure the availability of food during crises. These stores were envisioned not only as a relief mechanism but also as a preventive measure to stabilize food prices and prevent speculative hoarding.⁸

The commission also recommended decentralizing certain administrative powers, granting local officials greater autonomy to respond quickly to emerging famine situations without waiting for instructions from distant central authorities. This measure aimed to reduce bureaucratic delays that had previously exacerbated the severity of famines. Furthermore, the commission stressed the importance of accurate data collection, including crop assessments, population statistics, and food price monitoring, to inform policy decisions and enable proactive planning. While the recommendations of the First Famine Commission were only partially implemented at the time due to financial and logistical constraints, they had a lasting impact on colonial administrative practices. The commission laid the groundwork for a systematic and institutional approach to famine management, shifting the focus from reactive relief to preventive measures.⁹ Its emphasis on infrastructure development, administrative decentralization, and data-driven decision-making influenced subsequent Famine Commissions and shaped the evolution of colonial governance in India. Moreover, it highlighted the dual nature of British administrative priorities: while the reforms were ostensibly humanitarian, they also reinforced imperial control by stabilizing regions critical to revenue collection and trade. In summary, the First Famine Commission (1867) marked a pivotal moment in the history of colonial administration in India. It represented the first structured attempt to integrate research, planning, and bureaucratic coordination into famine relief efforts. By analyzing causes, recommending reforms, and advocating preventive strategies, the commission not only addressed immediate crises but also established a framework that would guide British famine policy for decades, influencing the formulation of subsequent Famine Commissions and laying the foundation for modern disaster management in India. Its legacy underscores the complex interplay between humanitarian objectives and colonial administrative priorities, reflecting the broader dynamics of governance under British rule.¹⁰

The Second Famine Commission was established in the aftermath of the catastrophic famine of 1876–78, which primarily affected southern India, including the Madras Presidency, Bombay Presidency, and parts of the Central Provinces. This famine, caused by severe droughts coupled with

exploitative colonial revenue policies and inadequate local relief mechanisms, resulted in the death of an estimated 5–10 million people, making it one of the deadliest famines in Indian history. The sheer scale of mortality and the widespread socio-economic disruption exposed the critical weaknesses in the colonial administration's ability to respond to large-scale disasters, prompting the British government to take more structured and comprehensive action.¹¹ To investigate the causes, assess the response, and recommend preventive and relief measures, the colonial government appointed the Second Famine Commission in 1880, chaired by Sir Richard Strachey, a senior British civil servant with extensive experience in Indian administration and public works. The commission undertook detailed inquiries into agricultural conditions, rainfall patterns, crop failures, transportation bottlenecks, and administrative lapses that had contributed to the famine's devastating impact. It also examined the effectiveness of relief measures employed during the crisis, including public works programs, grain distribution, and employment schemes, identifying gaps and inefficiencies in their implementation.¹²

One of the most significant outcomes of the commission was the creation of the Famine Code, which became a landmark document in colonial administrative history. The Famine Code laid down comprehensive guidelines for famine prevention, preparedness, and relief, standardizing procedures across provinces. It included detailed instructions on early warning mechanisms, drought monitoring, food stock management, relief distribution, employment generation during famines, and coordination among different administrative levels. The code emphasized timely intervention, specifying thresholds for initiating relief based on rainfall deficits, crop failures, and market conditions, thereby introducing a systematic, data-driven approach to famine management.¹³

The commission also recommended the introduction of financial measures and employment programs to support affected populations. These included public works projects that provided wages in exchange for labor, helping famine-stricken communities earn sustenance while contributing to local infrastructure development. Additionally, the commission stressed the need for better coordination between central and provincial authorities, highlighting the importance of clear communication, unified policies, and the allocation of resources to ensure that relief efforts were timely, equitable, and effective. The significance of the Second Famine Commission lies in its institutional impact. By formalizing the Famine Code, it ensured that future famines were managed more systematically, reducing ad hoc decision-making and creating accountability mechanisms for officials at every administrative level.¹⁴ The guidelines also influenced subsequent commissions and shaped the British approach to famine management well into the twentieth century, reflecting a shift from reactive relief to preventive and planned interventions. While the policies still operated within the broader framework of colonial priorities, particularly revenue protection and social control, the commission represented a notable evolution toward structured governance and administrative responsibility.¹⁵

In summary, the Second Famine Commission (1880) marked a pivotal step in the colonial administration's attempt to institutionalize famine management in India. By creating the Famine Code, recommending employment and financial measures, and emphasizing coordination between central and provincial authorities, the commission laid the foundation for more organized and accountable famine relief efforts. Its legacy highlights both the administrative foresight in formalizing disaster management and the limitations inherent in a system primarily oriented toward imperial objectives, balancing humanitarian intervention with colonial governance priorities.¹⁶

The Third Famine Commission was constituted in the wake of the severe famines of 1899–1900, which primarily affected the Bombay and Madras Presidencies, leaving millions of people vulnerable to starvation and economic hardship. These famines highlighted persistent deficiencies in the colonial administration's approach to disaster management, particularly the lack of sustainable financial mechanisms, insufficient preventive infrastructure, and limited involvement of local authorities in relief operations. The widespread distress and high mortality underscored the need for a more proactive and structured approach to famine management, prompting the establishment of the Third Famine Commission in 1901.¹⁷ The commission was chaired by Sir Anthony MacDonnell, a senior British civil servant renowned for his administrative acumen and prior experience in famine and irrigation management in India. The primary task of the commission was to evaluate past responses, identify systemic weaknesses, and recommend measures to prevent or mitigate future famines. Its investigations were extensive, covering agricultural conditions, irrigation facilities, administrative preparedness, transportation networks, and financial arrangements for relief. The commission also examined the efficacy of prior policies, including the Famine Code instituted after the Second Famine Commission, and assessed the responsiveness of provincial administrations to early warnings.¹⁸

One of the most important recommendations of the Third Famine Commission was the establishment of a Permanent Famine Fund, ensuring the availability of timely financial resources dedicated exclusively to famine relief. This fund aimed to reduce delays in mobilizing aid during crises and to provide a reliable source of capital for emergency food distribution, public works programs, and other relief measures. The commission also advocated for the promotion of irrigation projects and agricultural reforms, recognizing that enhancing water management and improving crop resilience were essential for reducing vulnerability to droughts and food shortages. Large-scale initiatives, including canals, reservoirs, and water conservation systems, were recommended to stabilize agricultural productivity and prevent recurrent famines.¹⁹ A notable feature of the Third Famine Commission was its emphasis on village-level administration and local participation. Unlike previous commissions, which largely focused on centralized bureaucratic interventions, this commission encouraged active involvement of panchayats, village officials, and local leaders in identifying affected populations, implementing relief measures, and monitoring local needs. This approach reflected a shift toward more participatory governance in famine management, acknowledging that local knowledge and community engagement were critical to effective disaster response.²⁰

The commission also recommended improvements in transportation and storage infrastructure to facilitate faster food distribution and better management of grain reserves. Combined with preventive policies and financial preparedness, these measures aimed to transform famine management from a reactive, crisis-driven response into a systematic, proactive, and locally integrated framework. In essence, the Third Famine Commission (1901) represented a significant evolution in colonial famine policy. By advocating for the Permanent Famine Fund, promoting irrigation and agricultural reforms, and emphasizing village-level participation, the commission marked a transition from merely reactive relief to preventive and locally participatory measures. While still operating within the broader context of imperial priorities, its recommendations laid the groundwork for more structured and sustainable famine management in India, influencing both colonial administration and the future development of disaster management policies in the subcontinent.²¹

The Fourth Famine Commission was established in the aftermath of the Bengal famine of 1943, one of the most devastating famines in Indian history, which resulted in the deaths of over three million

people. The catastrophe revealed glaring deficiencies in the colonial administration's ability to manage food crises, including inefficiencies in food procurement, distribution failures, and inadequate coordination between central and provincial authorities. The scale of human suffering, coupled with public criticism and political unrest, underscored the urgent need for a comprehensive review of famine policies and administrative mechanisms. The commission was chaired by Sir John Woodhead, a senior British official with experience in administration and economic planning.²² Its primary mandate was to investigate the causes of the Bengal famine, evaluate the effectiveness of existing relief measures, and recommend policies to prevent future food crises. The commission conducted detailed inquiries into agricultural production, food storage and distribution, price controls, transportation logistics, and the administrative capacity of provincial governments to respond to emergencies. Among its key recommendations, the commission emphasized the reform of food distribution systems to ensure both efficiency and equity. It suggested improvements in transportation, storage, and rationing mechanisms to prevent hoarding and speculation, thereby guaranteeing that food reached the most vulnerable populations. Recognizing that famine prevention required more than just emergency relief, the commission also advocated measures to increase agricultural productivity, including expansion of irrigation facilities, improved crop management, and support for small and marginal farmers. These initiatives aimed to stabilize food supply and reduce susceptibility to future droughts or crop failures.²³

Another significant outcome of the Fourth Famine Commission was its influence on the development of the Public Distribution System (PDS), which became a cornerstone of India's post-independence food security strategy. The commission's recommendations laid the groundwork for establishing organized procurement, storage, and distribution networks that could function efficiently during times of scarcity. By institutionalizing such mechanisms, the colonial administration inadvertently contributed to the creation of a framework that independent India would later adopt to ensure food access for its population. In conclusion, the Fourth Famine Commission (1943–44) highlighted the structural and operational weaknesses of colonial famine management during a period of extreme crisis. Its focus on reforming food distribution, increasing agricultural productivity, and laying the foundation for systematic food security policies represented a critical shift toward preventive, organized, and equitable famine management. The commission's findings and recommendations had a lasting impact, informing both the final years of colonial administration and the early approaches to disaster and food security management in independent India.²⁴

The Famine Commissions of colonial India offered several significant advantages in addressing recurring food crises and shaping administrative responses. Firstly, they introduced structured policy-making, moving famine management from ad hoc relief efforts to a systematic and organized framework, with clearly defined objectives and procedures. Secondly, the commissions promoted administrative standardization, providing provincial and district authorities with detailed guidelines for assessing, reporting, and responding to famine conditions, thereby reducing inconsistencies in implementation across regions. Thirdly, they emphasized preventive measures, advocating for investments in infrastructure such as irrigation systems, improved transportation networks, and grain storage facilities, all designed to mitigate the impact of future droughts and crop failures. In addition, the commissions contributed to documentation and knowledge-building, systematically collecting data on crop yields, population distribution, and food security, which became invaluable for both contemporary governance and future planning. Finally, the work of these commissions laid the foundation for modern disaster management in India, influencing post-independence policies on famine relief, the Public Distribution System, and broader food security strategies. Collectively, these

advantages reflect how colonial administrative inquiries, despite their limitations, introduced principles of planning, coordination, and institutional preparedness that had a lasting impact on India's approach to managing food crises.²⁵

Despite their contributions, the Famine Commissions of colonial India faced several notable limitations and criticisms. Implementation of their recommendations was often delayed or partial, which significantly reduced the effectiveness of relief measures during critical periods. The administration's imperial priorities meant that policies frequently served British fiscal and political interests rather than the welfare of the affected populations, resulting in insufficient and uneven aid distribution. Furthermore, there was inadequate local participation, as the commissions largely overlooked indigenous knowledge, village-level governance structures, and traditional coping mechanisms, thereby limiting the relevance and appropriateness of proposed interventions. Colonial economic policies, including high taxation and the promotion of cash crops, often exacerbated vulnerability, intensifying food insecurity and mortality during famines. Finally, despite the commissions' recommendations for preventive planning, famine management remained largely reactive rather than proactive, with systemic failures and bureaucratic inefficiencies allowing crises to recur, demonstrating that institutional reforms alone were insufficient to address the structural causes of famine.²⁶

Despite their limitations, the Famine Commissions left a lasting impact on India's administrative and governance practices. They institutionalized famine management, moving from ad hoc relief to systematic, policy-driven approaches. The Famine Code provided clear guidelines for provincial and district authorities, ensuring coordination and accountability in relief operations. Commissions emphasized data collection on population, crops, and resources, creating a foundation for evidence-based decision-making. They promoted preventive measures, including irrigation, infrastructure, and grain storage, to reduce future vulnerabilities. Relief frameworks highlighted the tension between colonial priorities and public welfare, offering lessons in governance ethics. The commissions also introduced administrative standardization, enabling consistent policy implementation across regions. By focusing on coordination between central and local authorities, they improved efficiency in crisis management. Their recommendations influenced post-independence disaster management and food security policies, including the Public Distribution System. They fostered a culture of documentation, planning, and bureaucratic oversight. Although often limited by delayed implementation, they provided models for proactive governance. The commissions demonstrated how crises could catalyze institutional reform. Overall, their legacy shaped both colonial and modern administrative structures in India.²⁷

The Famine Commissions in colonial India embody a dual legacy of administrative innovation and systemic limitation. On one hand, they introduced structured approaches to famine relief, codified policies, and standardized administrative procedures, laying the groundwork for modern disaster management and governance frameworks. They emphasized data collection, coordination between central and local authorities, and preventive measures such as irrigation and grain storage, reflecting the potential of organized bureaucracy to address large-scale crises. On the other hand, their effectiveness was often constrained by the overarching priorities of the British colonial state, which placed fiscal and political interests above local welfare, delayed implementation of recommendations, and overlooked indigenous knowledge and participation. This top-down, centralized approach sometimes exacerbated vulnerabilities and limited responsiveness to the actual needs of affected

populations. Despite these shortcomings, the commissions' work has had a lasting influence on post-independence India, informing food security strategies, the Public Distribution System, and contemporary disaster management policies. They serve as a historical lesson on the intersection of governance, administration, and humanitarian responsibility, illustrating both the possibilities and pitfalls of bureaucratic intervention in times of crisis.

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