

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis assesses the extent to which the reformist ideologies of Britain influenced the scarcity-relief policies of the British Government of Bombay in the 1820s and 1830s. Subsistence crises varied in intensity from scarcities, in which few people died, to colossal famines that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. The subsistence crises of western India in the 1820s and 1830s were scarcities. They were triggered by the droughts of 1823-5, 1831-5, and 1838-9. This periodic failure of the monsoon temporarily parched the land and devastated the crops. The reduced harvests diminished the incomes of both the cultivator and the state. Anxiety in the marketplace increased food prices and excluded a portion of the populace from accessing food. Traditionally, the rulers of western India intervened in the grain, labour and capital markets to provide humanitarian relief and to protect their own fiscal interests. They intervened by restricting the freedom of the grain trade, by offering charity to those who were unable to work, and by offering employment and loans to the able-bodied poor.

Yet these traditional scarcity-relief policies were called into question by the new British rulers of western India in the early years of the nineteenth century. The army of the East India Company had intermittently expanded British interests in western India from its humble possession of Bombay Island in the seventeenth century to uncontested supremacy in the region in 1818. This placed many of the villages of western India under a Government that was susceptible to the new ideas emanating from Britain. The early years of the nineteenth century witnessed increasing calls for reform of British society. One of these calls for change was in favour of free trade. The ideology of *laissez-faire* had become widely accepted in Britain by 1800, and increased in popularity in the first few decades of the nineteenth century. It stipulated that government intervention did more harm than good. In the early years of the nineteenth century officials within the Bombay administration increasingly began to question interventionist scarcity-relief policies. They argued that intervention in the grain trade undermined the business of the grain dealers and often exacerbated the shortage of grain. They argued that offering charity, employment or loans to the poor would encourage state dependence by undermining their self-reliance and industriousness. This would increase poverty and suffering by inviting more

individuals into the deceptively comforting arms of state dependence. They argued that the hardship of drought provided people with an incentive to work hard and be frugal. Shielding people from this hardship with interventionist relief policies therefore only served to create greater suffering in the long run. The officials of the Bombay administration who accepted *laissez-faire* ideology demanded non-interventionist policies as the most enlightened and beneficial long-term response to scarcity.

Yet gauging the influence of reformist ideology on Bombay's scarcity-relief policies is not simply a matter of observing the shift from intervention to non-intervention. The reform movement of Britain in the early nineteenth century was an amalgamation of various groups and interests. *Laissez-faire* ideology galvanised the movement most effectively on the issue of free trade. Yet on other issues, such as poor relief, the policy of non-intervention seemed too extreme and inhumane to some reformers. The moderate reformers of Britain largely accepted the arguments of their more extreme *laissez-faire* cousins against poor relief. But they were unwilling to entirely discard government intervention. Instead they proposed a limited intervention in providing relief to the able-bodied, and an unabated intervention in providing relief to those who were physically unable to work. Thus reformist ideology was not always inherently opposed to the traditional scarcity-relief policies of western India. Bombay officials who were steeped in reformist ideology sometimes recommended only an alteration, or even an unaltered continuation, of the old policies of intervention. In the latter case, the Government's policy had not changed, but the reasoning behind the policy had.

Moreover, two relief policies that were traditionally followed by the rulers of western India were technically non-interventionist. The ruler's income was largely generated from land taxes on the harvest, and to a lesser extent from commercial taxes on the flow of goods. The heavier these taxes the more they interfered in the income of their subjects. To increase their subjects' disposable income during drought, rulers temporarily offered remissions on the cultivators' land revenue obligations. Also, to decrease the high price of grain during drought they temporarily removed the duties on grain. While these technically non-interventionist policies were followed by traditional rulers, it was done free of ideological influence. The reformist officials of the British Government of Bombay naturally championed these traditional relief

measures. But the *extent* to which the taxes were remitted had always been tempered by conservative officials who wanted to protect the state's short-term revenues. In this sense reformist ideology had the capability to augment the implementation of these non-interventionist policies, which were traditionally followed by otherwise interventionist rulers.

The ideologies of the reform movement of Britain had the potential to drive considerable changes in the scarcity-relief policies pursued by the British in Bombay. The policy of intervention lacked ideological backing. To intervene was typically to take action with the intention of having an immediate beneficial effect. Intervention was thus an instinctive response to human suffering and economic crisis. Moreover, it had a long tradition. For these reasons the challenge to interventionism had to come in the form of an idea. Non-interventionism invited pause for thought. It questioned the long run effects of the state's scarcity-relief policies. Its argument, that the seemingly immediate and beneficial effects of intervention would ultimately do more harm than good, had to be believed before it could be seen. But the officials who proposed change were met by opposition from their more conservative colleagues in the administration who preferred the old interventionist ways. Opposition to change varied from one scarcity-relief policy to the next. Moreover, individual officials varied in their ideological standpoints – they could be reformers on one policy and conservatives on another. It is the purpose of this thesis to assess the varying extent to which reformist ideology influenced the scarcity-relief policies pursued by the Bombay Government in the 1820s and 1830s.

An issue of secondary concern here will be whether the scarcity-relief policies of Bombay's officials were primarily motivated by humanitarian sentiment or the need to protect the Government's coffers. Both factors certainly played their part. The officials who favoured intervention, as well as those who favoured non-intervention, both argued in terms of humanitarian and fiscal benefits. The only difference between them was that the interventionists promised immediate and tangible benefits, whereas the non-interventionists promised longer-term and greater benefits. The Government's scarcity-relief policies sometimes achieved both goals, benefiting its subjects and its coffers. On other occasions, however, such goals were mutually exclusive and required officials to choose their preference.

While this thesis will consider the influence of reformist ideologies on several British scarcity-relief policies, it does not discuss in detail the British policy toward irrigation. Later British colonial governments saw irrigation as a means of preventing drought-triggered famines and therefore funded irrigation projects. Yet in the early years of their rule, the British neglected the irrigation works inherited from prior rulers and allowed them to fall into disrepair. Ahuja and Davis have shown that the Madras and Bombay governments of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries largely overlooked the potential of irrigation as a means of mitigating famine.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Divekar has stated that traditional irrigation works in British India were ‘grossly neglected everywhere’.<sup>2</sup> This neglect was not the result of *laissez-faire* influence. As Sharma has argued, irrigation simply did not feature greatly in the Company’s ‘immediate agenda’.<sup>3</sup> It was only after the 1837-8 famine in North India that the British administrations turned seriously to irrigation as the ‘ultimate panacea’ to drought.<sup>4</sup> Official correspondence between Bombay’s officials in the 1820s and 1830s was not entirely devoid of reference to state-funded irrigation projects. However, the relative official disregard for irrigation projects in the early colonial period has precluded any detailed examination into the influence, if any, of British reformist ideologies.

*The reform movement in Britain.*

It is not the intention of this thesis to give a comprehensive picture of the political economic theory and debates of Britain. That is another topic in itself. Rather, the focus here is the effect of British theories and debates on Bombay’s scarcity-relief policies. Each chapter that relates to Bombay policy includes a section on the relevant aspects of the reform movement of Britain. It is merely hoped that these sections will

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<sup>1</sup> Ravi Ahuja, ‘State Formation and “Famine Policy” in Early Colonial South India’, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 39, no. 4, Oct-Dec, 2002, p. 379; and Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Nino famines and the making of the third world*, London, New York: Verso, 2001, p. 336.

<sup>2</sup> V. D. Divekar, ‘Regional Economy 1757-1857, Western India’, Dharma Kumar, (ed.), *Cambridge Economic History of India*, vol. 2, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 335.

<sup>3</sup> Sanjay Sharma, *Famine, Philanthropy and the Colonial State; North India in the Early Nineteenth Century*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 47.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 222-3; and Elizabeth Whitcombe, ‘Irrigation’, Dharma Kumar (ed.), *Cambridge Economic History of India*, Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982, p. 689.

provide sufficient insight into the ideological climate of Britain to explain the changes in Bombay policy. The following section will briefly introduce the four most prominent figures of the reform movement in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. A more detailed description of these figures, and the individuals of less prominent standing, will be saved for the chapters.

Adam Smith was not a member of the reform movement. Yet the publication of his *Wealth of Nations* in 1776 popularised the concept of *laissez-faire* in Britain.<sup>5</sup> He argued that government intervention in commerce, through tariff barriers and price fixing, etc., inhibited the flow of goods. This raised an obstacle to national prosperity by checking demand and production.<sup>6</sup> He also argued that the state should tax its population lightly to promote industry.<sup>7</sup> The *laissez-faire* argument for free trade and light taxation was a point of consensus for the different branches of the reform movement, as Stokes has noted.<sup>8</sup> The renewals of the Company's trading charter in 1813 and 1833 provided convenient pressure points for the reformers to exert their *laissez-faire* influence over policy in India, with notable effect.

James Mill was an influential member of the reform movement. In 1819 he took a position in the Company as the Assistant Examiner. In 1830 he rose to the office of Chief Examiner. Stokes and Ambirajan have argued that this gave Mill considerable influence over the despatches from the Company's Court of Directors in London to the British governments of India.<sup>9</sup> One year prior to joining the Company, he had published his *History of British India*, which labelled Indian society as uncivilised and depraved. He argued that India's depravity was due to its poverty. Metcalf has observed that Mill, like Smith, believed that light taxation was a necessary condition

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<sup>5</sup> S. Ambirajan, 'Laissez-faire in Madras', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1965, p. 238; and Srinivasa Ambirajan, 'Economic Ideas and Economic Policy in British India', *Indian Economic Journal*, vol. 15, no. 2, Oct-Dec, 1967, p. 191.

<sup>6</sup> Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, London, 1776, Book V, Chapter II, Part II, 'Of Taxes', Article IV, 'Taxes which it is intended should fall indifferently upon every different Species of Revenue'.

<sup>7</sup> Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, E. Cannan (ed.), 2 vols., London: Methuen, 1904, Vol. II, Book V, Chapter II, Part II, 'Of Taxes'.

<sup>8</sup> Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959, p. 52.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 48-50; and S. Ambirajan, 'Political Economy and Indian Famines', *South Asia*, vol. 1, 1971, p. 22.

of economic progress.<sup>10</sup> Mill was able to use his position in the Company to prescribe light taxation in India, which he believed would lift India out of its uncivilised state. In addition to this *laissez-faire* recommendation, Mill promoted the application of utilitarian economic rent theory to India's land revenue system. This reformist theory stipulated that all cultivated lands of superior quality to the least productive soil under the plough would enjoy extra returns to labour and capital. This surplus was defined as economic rent. Utilitarians like Mill believed that accurate ryotwari surveys of the productive capacity of the land would enable the state to take as much of this economic rent as it wished without impoverishing the peasantry and inhibiting economic progress. Mill's influence within the Company encouraged Mackenzie in the Western Provinces and Pringle in Bombay Presidency to apply this reformist theory to land revenue settlement.<sup>11</sup>

Thomas Robert Malthus was another prominent reformer. In 1798 he published his *Essay on the Principle of Population*, which was the first of several editions. Malthus is best known for his population theory, in which he stipulated that population growth would always outstrip growth in agricultural output. A corollary was that any government attempt to improve the living conditions of the poor, which was not also accompanied by an increase in food supply, would increase fertility rates and state dependence, and consequently exacerbate the poverty and hardship that such measures were intended to reduce. This was the basis for his attack on the Poor Law in Britain, which provided for the indigent.<sup>12</sup> He argued that the state should not provide employment for the able-bodied, or charity for those who were unable to work. He proposed that in the long run such handouts from the state did more harm than good. Private employment and private charity were preferable remedies for the problem of indigence.<sup>13</sup> Yet he considered that ultimately the poor themselves were responsible for their welfare. He argued that moral restraint from a financially premature marriage, hard work, and a sturdy self-reliance were the best means of

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<sup>10</sup> James Mill, *The History of British India*, reprinted Chicago, 1975, no page number given, cited in Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*, New Cambridge History of India, vol. 3, no. 4, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 30.

<sup>11</sup> Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India*, pp. 92-5.

<sup>12</sup> B. Stapleton, 'Malthus: The Origins of the Principle of Population?', Michael Turner, (ed.), *Malthus and His Time*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986, p. 23.

<sup>13</sup> James P. Huzel, 'Malthus, the Poor Law, and Population in Early Nineteenth-Century England', *The Economic History Review*, New Series, vol. 22, no. 3, Dec, 1969, p. 432.

averting hardship.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, Malthus led the abolitionists who campaigned in Britain to entirely remove the Poor Law.<sup>15</sup> As Huzel has noted, this was a stance of ‘extreme *laissez-faire*’.<sup>16</sup>

Jeremy Bentham was another reformer of influence, albeit more through his disciples than directly. He heeded the concerns raised by Malthus and the abolitionists that state relief could engender state dependence and poverty. Yet he considered their solution of abolishing the Poor Law to be too extreme and inhumane. For those who were unable to work, he recommended that they be supported by the state. For the able-bodied poor, he recommended providing state relief through a limited intervention. Bentham argued in the late 1790s that state support could be limited to the truly needy through the application of his ‘less eligibility principle’. This dictated that the conditions of the state dependant should intentionally be made less comfortable than that of the independent labourer.<sup>17</sup> This self-regulating principle would ensure that only those who were suffering from the most desperate need would seek state support. This was the position of the revisers who wished to alter rather than abolish the Poor Law. They were the more moderate half of the drive to reform poor relief. They were the authors of the 1834 Amendment Act, which instituted Bentham’s ‘less eligibility principle’ as a fundamental addition to the Poor Law.<sup>18</sup>

### *The British rise to power in western India.*

Prior to the British conquest of western India in 1818, the region had been in the hands of the Peshwa, who ruled the Maratha Confederacy. This was a loose association of otherwise independent chiefs.<sup>19</sup> The Peshwa rulers had wrested control of the Confederacy from the weak descendants of its founder, Shivaji, by slowly cementing their position as hereditary rulers and relegating the superfluous monarchs

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<sup>14</sup> Thomas R. Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, London, 1798, pp. 84-5.

<sup>15</sup> J. R. Poynter, *Society and Pauperism: English Ideas on Poor Relief, 1795-1834*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969, pp. 39-43, 106, 326.

<sup>16</sup> Huzel, p. 433.

<sup>17</sup> Jeremy Bentham, ‘Farming Defended’, in Michael Quinn, (ed.), *Writings on the Poor Laws*, vol. 1, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001, p. 287.

<sup>18</sup> Poynter, p. 327.

<sup>19</sup> Ravinder Kumar, *Western India in the nineteenth century: a study in the social history of Maharashtra*, London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1968, pp. 5-6.

into a ‘ceremonious seclusion’.<sup>20</sup> The British had been a tolerated trading presence in western India since the mid-seventeenth century. From the mid-eighteenth century they gradually began to expand their territorial domain by periodically capitalising on the squabbling between the Peshwa and the Maratha chiefs.<sup>21</sup>

*The economic and administrative geography of western India.*

By 1818 the British possessions in western India were extensive, and were interspersed in some regions with small subordinate Indian states. The name ‘Bombay Presidency’ described the British possessions in western India. This included the divisions of Gujarat to the north, the Konkan at the centre, the Bombay Deccan to the east, and the Karnatak, or Southern Maratha Country, to the south. Choksey has described the characteristics of these regions in great detail.<sup>22</sup> Here, a brief outline will suffice. Choksey has noted that Gujarat was the most prosperous division of the Presidency.<sup>23</sup> In 1818 it was divided into the districts of Ahmedabad, Kaira, Broach and Surat. The Konkan was not so fortunate. It had been devastated by revenue mismanagement under Baji Rao II, the last ruler of western India before the British came to power.<sup>24</sup> It did, however, enjoy regular and abundant rainfall and was almost immune to severe drought.<sup>25</sup> This region was divided into the districts of the Northern Konkan and the Southern Konkan. The Bombay Deccan was the most drought-prone region of the Presidency. As Catanach has noted, the eastern districts in particular were referred to as the ‘famine belt’. They enjoyed prosperous good seasons but also frequently devastating droughts.<sup>26</sup> In 1818 the Deccan was divided into the districts of

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<sup>20</sup> S. Varma, *Mountstuart Elphinstone in Maharashtra, 1801-1827. A Study of the Territories Conquered from the Peshwas*, Calcutta: K P Bagchi, 1981, pp. 12-13.

<sup>21</sup> R. D. Choksey, *Economic Life in the Bombay Konkan, 1818-1939*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1960, pp. 10-12; and Kumar, pp. 5-6; and Neil Rabinoy, ‘System v. Expediency: The Reality of Land Revenue Administration in the Bombay Presidency, 1812-20’, *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 9, no. 4, 1975, p. 531; and Kenneth Ballhatchet, *Social policy and social change in Western India, 1817-1830*, London: Oxford University Press, 1957, p. 141.

<sup>22</sup> Choksey, *Economic Life in the Bombay Konkan*; and R. D. Choksey, *Economic History of the Bombay Deccan and Karnatak, 1818-1868*, Poona, 1945; and R. D. Choksey, *Economic Life in the Bombay Gujarat, 1800-1939*, London: Asia Publishing House, 1969.

<sup>23</sup> Choksey, *Economic Life in the Bombay Konkan*, pp. 12-13; and K. N. Chaudhuri, ‘Review: Economic Life in the Bombay Gujarat, 1800-1939 by R. D. Choksey’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, vol. 33, no. 3, 1970, p. 697.

<sup>24</sup> Choksey, *Economic Life in the Bombay Konkan*, pp. 12-13, 48, 54.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>26</sup> I. J. Catanach, *Rural credit in western India, 1875-1930: rural credit and the co-operative movement in the Bombay Presidency*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970, p. 6.



Ahmednagar, Khandesh, and Poona. The ‘famine belt’ of the Deccan extended south into the Karnatak. As Charlesworth has noted, the eastern region of this division was particularly prone to drought.<sup>27</sup> In 1818 the Karnatak had only one district, viz. Dharwar. The term ‘Deccan’ sometimes included the Karnatak.

A brief word is necessary on the Presidency’s administrative structure. The Council was the executive office of the Bombay Government. It comprised the Governor and two to four Council members. Directly below the Council was the office of the Deccan Commissioner. This individual was responsible for the districts of the Deccan until the office was dissolved in 1827. It was replaced with the office of the Revenue Commissioner, who oversaw the revenue affairs of every district in the Presidency. The Commissioner relieved the Council of some of its workload, and also provided it with useful advice. Directly beneath the Commissioner were the Collectors. Each of the Presidency’s ten districts was managed by one Collector, who was assisted by two or three Assistant Collectors. All the officials from the Assistant Collector up the chain of command were British. The Collectors and Assistant Collectors were aided by numerous Indian karkuns, or clerks. But each district comprised hundreds of villages and could not be managed by these officials alone. Each district was subdivided into roughly six to ten talukas. Each taluka comprised several dozen villages and was the responsibility of the mamlatdar, who was an Indian sub-official.<sup>28</sup> Below him were the village officers, the patel and the kulkarni, who ran the village’s affairs.<sup>29</sup>

The variety of conditions in the many districts that made up Bombay Presidency forced the Council to defer on many occasions to the opinions of its Collectors. To some extent power was, by necessity, devolved further down to Indian district and village officials. Bayly has argued that the colonial authorities relied heavily on Indian informants to gather the intelligence they required to effectively rule India.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Neil Charlesworth, *Peasants and Imperial Rule : agriculture and agrarian society in the Bombay Presidency, 1850-1935*, Cambridge South Asian Studies, vol. 32, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 14; see also Catanach, *Rural credit in western India*, p. 7.

<sup>28</sup> Mamlatdar: ‘The title of a native chief civil officer in Bombay in charge of a Taluk’. Ivor Lewis, *Sahibs, Nabobs and Boxwallahs*, Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 160.

<sup>29</sup> Kulkarni: ‘Village accountant’. Charlesworth, p. 301.

<sup>30</sup> C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: intelligence gathering and social communication in India, 1780-1870*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 1-2, 7-8.

Moreover, Yang has argued that the execution of British policies in North India at the village level required the help of local Indian elites.<sup>31</sup> Thus Indian subordinates within the administration had some means of influencing the formation and execution of British colonial policies. While these influences go beyond the purview of this thesis, the point is that power and influence were not fully centralised in the hands of the Bombay Council. It was rather necessarily diffused down through the ranks of the colonial administration.

Thus, using the term ‘policy’ to describe the decisions made by the British Government of Bombay is somewhat misleading. As Rabitoy has very ably argued, the Bombay Council did not enforce a uniformity of policy amongst its British officials.<sup>32</sup> There was a variety of ‘policy’ throughout the districts of the Presidency on many issues. Furthermore, individual British officials sometimes changed their mind on previous decisions, which added to the variety of ‘policy’. It is true that when the Council had a strong opinion on certain scarcity-relief policies it did not hesitate to disparage the opinions of wayward officials and strictly enforce its will. Yet at other times the Council gave its Collectors considerable leeway and listened to their opinions. Thus, as will be demonstrated throughout this thesis, ideological debate and policy formation in western India was a complex process that engaged various levels of the colonial administration.

*The variety of revenue settlements.*

When the British conquered western India they found a wide range of settlement types. The settlement defined how the land revenue was collected by the Government from its cultivating subjects. The relationship between the Government and its cultivators was administratively closer under some settlements and more remote under others. This depended on the number of layers of revenue middlemen between the ryots, or cultivators,<sup>33</sup> and the Government, and the proportion that these middlemen were entitled to take of the harvest. During drought the Government generally accepted a degree of financial responsibility for relieving the suffering of all its

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<sup>31</sup> Anand Yang, *The Limited Raj: agrarian relations in colonial India, Saran District, 1793-1920*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989, pp. 3-4, 225.

<sup>32</sup> Rabitoy, ‘System v. Expediency’, p. 530.

<sup>33</sup> Lewis, p. 204.

cultivators, regardless of their settlement type. Scarcity-relief enabled the ryots to continue cultivating, which protected the long-term productivity of the village. This protected the income of the Government and the revenue intermediaries. Yet a recurring theme of this thesis is that the Government was forced to accept greater financial responsibility for the welfare of its subjects who cultivated under the closer settlements, such as the ryotwari system. The risk of a bad season was somewhat borne by the revenue middlemen in proportion to their vested interest in maintaining the village's long-term productivity. The settlements of western India were complex in nature, and have been explored in considerable detail by a number of authors. The following is a brief introduction as it relates to scarcity-relief, and it holds no pretence to being a comprehensive survey.

The Maratha Government that ruled prior to the British had typically collected its revenues through the maujewar system, as Varma has noted.<sup>34</sup> Under this system, the Government settled its revenue demand with the village headman, or patel. The patel was then free to distribute the Government's revenue demand amongst the ryots of his village as he saw fit.<sup>35</sup> This system was particularly common in the Deccan.<sup>36</sup> The maujewar settlement provided the patels with an incentive to foster the agricultural productivity of their villages – any output that was surplus to the Government's demand could be enjoyed by the patels. Gilbert More, the Collector of Kaira, argued in favour of the maujewar system in 1823. He stated that under this system the patels had a vested interest in promoting the productive capacity of their villages.<sup>37</sup> During drought the patels of maujewar villages therefore had a vested interest in providing at least a degree of relief to their subtenants. Otherwise many of the poorer ryots would go bankrupt or migrate elsewhere, which would reduce the villages' productivity and the patels' long-term income.

The Peshwa had also collected revenues through the bhagdari system, though this was considerably less common. Ballhatchet has observed that this system was predominant in Broach district. Under this system the village land was divided into several shares, or bhags. Each sharer, or bhagdar, was expected to pay his share of the

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<sup>34</sup> Varma, p. 142.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 142.

<sup>36</sup> Charlesworth, p. 30.

<sup>37</sup> G. More, Kaira Cltr, to Sec to Govt, 13 Aug 1823, BRP, 3 Sep 1823, p. 7175, APAC.

Government's revenue demand. This was similar to the maujewar settlement, in that the individual or individuals who were responsible for paying the Government its revenues had a number of subtenants beneath them. The bhagdars decided how best to distribute the Government's revenue demand amongst their subtenants.<sup>38</sup> Like the patels, the bhagdars had some degree of interest in relieving the suffering of their subtenants during drought.

Charlesworth has found that the villages of the Konkan were organised in a similar manner to those of the Deccan. But superimposed above the patels were the khots. The khots were a class of revenue collectors in the Konkan who, under the confusion of Peshwa rule, had asserted hereditary proprietary rights to their villages.<sup>39</sup> Choksey has found that the khots' mastery over the revenue records completely 'baffled' the British Collectors' attempts to understand the khots' rights in relation to the Government and the ryots.<sup>40</sup> The khots were most prevalent in the Southern Konkan, but were also in the Northern Konkan.<sup>41</sup> Each khot could have a number of villages under him. The khots therefore represented another layer of revenue management above that of the patels that existed between the ryots and the Government. They were also an alternative source of financial support for the cultivator during drought.

The ryots who cultivated under inam settlement were even more administratively remote from the Government. Lands under inam settlement paid only a minimal rent to the Government. The remainder of the rent was absorbed by the inamdar, to whom the inam was granted. The Peshwa had granted entire villages to key officials such as the deshmukh and deshpande.<sup>42</sup> Inamdars had a considerable degree of autonomy over the management of their villages and the affairs of their ryots. Fukazawa has found that one third of villages in the Deccan and one quarter of villages in the Karnatak were inam villages.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, even within government villages, about 10 per cent of the land was inam to support those serving the village community. The proceeds of

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<sup>38</sup> Ballhatchet, pp. 159-61.

<sup>39</sup> Charlesworth, pp. 30, 33; and Choksey, *Economic Life in the Bombay Konkan*, p. 57.

<sup>40</sup> Choksey, *Economic Life in the Bombay Konkan*, p. 21.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 20-1.

<sup>42</sup> Deshmukh: the 'administrative head' of a taluka or district. Deshpande: the 'head accountant' of a taluka. H. Fukazawa, 'Agrarian Relations, Western India', Dharna Kumar, (ed.), *Cambridge Economic History of India*, vol. 2, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 178.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 181-2.

inam lands funded temples, and the services of village artisans, servants and officials.<sup>44</sup> Thus the surplus harvest of the ryots who cultivated under inam settlement was taken by a range of individuals as recompense for certain services. This constituted an authorised alienation of the Government's revenues from these ryots. During drought the inamdar, and not the Government, had the largest vested interest in relieving his cultivators and maintaining their productivity. Pringle found that the productivity of villages held by deshmukhs and deshpandes in Poona district was fostered through drought with a longer-term perspective than villages under Government control.<sup>45</sup>

*The introduction of the ryotwari system.*

The British inherited from the last Peshwa ruler a chaotic revenue management system in which the revenue intermediaries had gained a considerable degree of autonomy and control. Information pertaining to the revenue-paying capability of the ryots was firmly in the hands of the district officers such as the mamlatdars and the deshmukhs, and village officers such as the patels and kulkarnis. This increased their opportunities for corruption, which reduced the Government's share of the harvest. The new Governor of Bombay, Mountstuart Elphinstone, ordered his Collectors to conduct detailed surveys to determine the typical harvests of each ryot. These ryotwari surveys were not an entirely novel introduction to western India. They were similar to the kamal surveys, which the Peshwa ruler Madhav Rao had unsuccessfully tried to introduce.<sup>46</sup> Yet the British ultimately succeeded in implementing the ryotwari surveys throughout much of the Presidency.

As Fukazawa and Charlesworth have noted, the ryotwari system weakened the position of the village and district officers.<sup>47</sup> Being of Romantic ilk, Elphinstone preferred to introduce only gradual social change. Kumar, Ballhatchet and Varma have argued that Elphinstone had not intended the ryotwari surveys to undermine the

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p. 179.

<sup>45</sup> R. K. Pringle, to Sec to Govt, (n.d. 1829?) para. 101, British Museum Library 793.m.18(9), cited in Sumit Guha, 'Society and Economy in the Deccan, 1818-50', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1983, p. 401.

<sup>46</sup> Kumar, pp. 18-9, 59.

<sup>47</sup> Fukazawa, pp. 183-4; and Charlesworth, p. 62.

standing of the village and district officers.<sup>48</sup> Yet Kumar has argued that Elphinstone's desire for a rational and efficient administration led him to propose a ryotwari survey.<sup>49</sup> The power of the district and village officers had rested on the confusion of the Maratha revenue system, which the new ryotwari surveys inadvertently diminished.<sup>50</sup> Rabitoy, on the other hand, has argued that many officials in the Bombay administration had introduced the ryotwari system with the explicit intention of reducing the influence of the village and district officers and thereby enhancing the land revenues.<sup>51</sup> On this point Guha has concurred.<sup>52</sup>

The ryotwari settlement was never implemented in every village of Bombay Presidency. Moreover, its introduction was gradual and piecemeal. Rabitoy has argued that between 1812 and 1820 the ryotwari system was not introduced uniformly throughout Bombay Presidency, but rather only 'haphazardly' with 'no pattern or deliberateness'.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, in the opening years of the new administration the Commissioner William Chaplin and the Collector Henry Pottinger settled some villages on ryotwari terms, whereas the Collectors Grant, Robertson and Briggs settled maujewar after ryotwari enquiries.<sup>54</sup> In 1821, a Bombay Council member commented to Elphinstone that the ryotwari system had 'been introduced more in appearance than in reality'.<sup>55</sup> The 1828 surveys of the Revenue Surveyor of the Deccan, Robert Pringle, marked the beginnings of a more deliberate attempt to institute the ryotwari system. Pringle's settlements were discarded due to over-assessment. But the more successful replacement of the Revenue Surveyors Wingate and Goldsmid, the Bombay Revenue System of 1835, continued the formal implementation of the ryotwari settlement.<sup>56</sup> Thus, throughout the 1820s and 1830s the Bombay Government was in the early stages of extending the new system.

Bombay's officials had initially implemented the ryotwari system with the intention of gaining greater control over the flow of revenues by disempowering the district and

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<sup>48</sup> Ballhatchet, pp. 115-6; and Varma, pp. 140, 146.

<sup>49</sup> Kumar, p. 59.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 58-9, 323.

<sup>51</sup> Rabitoy, 'System v. Expediency', p. 532.

<sup>52</sup> Guha, 'Society and Economy in the Deccan', p. 397.

<sup>53</sup> Rabitoy, 'System v. Expediency', p. 532.

<sup>54</sup> Varma, p. 174; and Kumar, pp. 57-8; and Fukazawa, pp. 183-4.

<sup>55</sup> Rabitoy, 'System v. Expediency', p. 536.

<sup>56</sup> Fukazawa, pp. 184-5.

village officers. But the new system inadvertently also removed the vested interest of those officers in fostering the long-term productivity of their villages. Guha has argued that while the hereditary officials had a long-term interest in maintaining the cultivation and population of their areas, the stipendiary officials under the ryotwari system had ‘recklessly short time horizons’.<sup>57</sup> Instead of investing in the long-term productivity of their villages, they maximised their profits by stripping them of their resources. Similarly, Choksey has argued that the implementation of the ryotwari system in the Konkan removed the perquisites previously held by the district and village officers, and consequently their obligations to the ryots.<sup>58</sup> Mosse has argued that in South India the British rulers had removed the interest held by influential Indians to invest in local agriculture.<sup>59</sup> Kaiwar has also noted that the British failed to encourage western Indian capital to invest in agriculture, which was partially due to the implementation of the ryotwari system.<sup>60</sup> Thus when the monsoon periodically failed in western India the disempowered district and village officers no longer had a vested interest in shielding the cultivator from the effects of drought. The cultivators of villages under ryotwari settlement were therefore more reliant on the Government for support.

While the ryotwari system was not their brainchild, the reformers in Britain and western India were very quick to recognise its potential as a means of driving social change in the subcontinent. The British were initially reluctant to force radical social change for fear of the political consequences. Choksey perhaps had Elphinstone’s policies in mind when he argued that the British committed to a ‘policy of gradual innovations’ after 1818.<sup>61</sup> Yet Stokes has asserted that reformers such as James Mill and Jeremy Bentham put their faith in a ryotwari survey. They hoped that a detailed definition of the individual’s rights to the land would dissolve what they considered to be India’s primitive communal ownership structures.<sup>62</sup> Kumar has argued that by the

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<sup>57</sup> Guha, ‘Society and Economy in the Deccan’, p. 401.

<sup>58</sup> Choksey, *Economic Life in the Bombay Konkan*, p. 116.

<sup>59</sup> David Mosse, ‘Colonial and Contemporary Ideologies of “Community Management”: The Case of Tank Irrigation Development in South India’, *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 33, no.2, 1999, p. 315, cited in Davis, p. 339.

<sup>60</sup> Vasant Kaiwar, ‘The Colonial State, Capital and the Peasantry in Bombay Presidency’, *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 28, no. 4, 1994, pp. 831-2.

<sup>61</sup> Choksey, *Economic Life in the Bombay Konkan*, p. 49; and Choksey, *Economic History of the Bombay Deccan and Karnatak*, p. 258.

<sup>62</sup> Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India*, pp. 69-70, 76.

1870s the ryotwari system of settling the rent with individual cultivators had completely succeeded in breaking down the communality of the western Indian village.<sup>63</sup>

*The historiography of nineteenth century Indian famines.*

Nineteenth century India bore witness to numerous scarcities and famines. A subsistence crisis struck some part of India every five to ten years. Yet the famines of the last quarter of the century were particularly catastrophic. Davis has claimed the death tolls of the 1876-8, 1896-9, and 1899-1902 pan-Indian famines were 10 million, 16 million, and around 20 million respectively.<sup>64</sup> These figures are probably too high. Lal has divided the nineteenth century famine statistics into quarters. The first quarter of the century witnessed roughly one million deaths, the second 0.4 million, and the third five million. In the final quarter of the nineteenth century Lal has calculated that 26 million starved to death under British rule.<sup>65</sup>

The mortality statistics must be considered as estimates only. Currie has observed that the statistics were methodologically flawed because village officers were reluctant to report famine deaths to their superiors. They often reported the deaths as disease-related to avoid reprimands for failing in their responsibilities to avert starvation within the village. Moreover, diagnosing whether starvation or disease was the final cause of death was difficult as often the victim suffered from both before death.<sup>66</sup> Regardless of the exact figures, as Klein has noted the fact remains that from 1860 to 1920 India experienced tens of millions of deaths from both famines and disease.<sup>67</sup> Thus, the last quarter of the nineteenth century certainly represented a spike in famine mortality. Lal has noted that the number of deaths dropped in the first quarter of the twentieth century to 4 million, and between 1925 and 1950 to 1.5 million.<sup>68</sup> On this

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<sup>63</sup> Kumar, pp. 323-5.

<sup>64</sup> Davis, p. 158.

<sup>65</sup> Deepak Lal, *The Hindu Equilibrium, Vol. 1 (Cultural Stability and Economic Stagnation)*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 123, Table 6.2(A), cited in Ajit K. Dasgupta, *The Economics of Famine in Nineteenth Century India*, Dunedin: University of Otago, 1990, p. 3.

<sup>66</sup> Kate Currie, 'British Colonial Policy and Famines: Some Effects and Implications of "Free Trade" in the Bombay, Bengal and Madras Presidencies, 1860-1900', *South Asia*, vol. xiv, no. 2, 1991, p. 45.

<sup>67</sup> Ira Klein, 'When the Rains Failed: Famine, Relief, and Mortality in British India', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 21, no. 2, Apr-Jun, 1984, pp. 185-6.

<sup>68</sup> Lal, p. 123, cited in Dasgupta, p. 3.



last figure Lal was incorrect. He neglected the Bengal famine of 1943-4, which several historians have estimated claimed between 2.1 and 3.8 million lives.<sup>69</sup> Yet despite this loss of life, India's mortality rates had certainly peaked in the late nineteenth century. Klein has referred to the first half of the twentieth century as a 'mortality revolution', in which mortality rates plummeted and population growth climbed rapidly.<sup>70</sup>

Most historians of Indian famines under British rule have focused on the catastrophic loss of life that occurred in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. McAlpin has observed that the debate on this issue pivots on whether the famines were caused by unusually little rainfall or because the economic and social policies of the various British governments of India had impoverished their subjects and left them vulnerable to the effects of drought.<sup>71</sup> McAlpin, herself, has argued that the famines of the late nineteenth century were primarily caused by unusually severe crop failures.<sup>72</sup>

Yet Guha has preferred the alternate interpretation. He has argued that the crop failures of the late nineteenth century were of similar magnitude to that of the 1824-5 and 1832-3 Bombay droughts. These early nineteenth century droughts, he has argued, affected a comparable area and number of people, and raised grain prices to similar levels as the droughts of the late nineteenth century. The absence of famine in the early nineteenth century, he has argued, was because the Government's economic policies had not yet created a large number of landless labourers. This occupational group was particularly vulnerable to starvation during crop failures, and they starved in their millions during the droughts that took place at the end of the century.<sup>73</sup> Currie has attacked McAlpin's 'ecological reductionism' and proposed a similar argument to that of Guha. To support her claim she has demonstrated that the number of landless labourers under British rule increased from statistical insignificance in 1842 to one-

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<sup>69</sup> Tim Dyson and Arup Maharatna, 'Excess Mortality during the Bengal Famine: A re-evaluation', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 28, no. 3, 1991, p. 297; and Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: an essay on entitlement and deprivation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981, p. 52; and Paul Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943-44*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1982, p. 309.

<sup>70</sup> Klein, pp. 185-6.

<sup>71</sup> Michelle Burge McAlpin, 'Deearth, Famine and Risk: The Changing Impact of Crop Failures in Western India, 1870-1920', *Journal of Economic History*, vol. 39, no. 1, 1979, pp. 143-4.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 143.

<sup>73</sup> Sumit Guha, *The Agrarian Economy of the Bombay Deccan, 1818-1941*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985, pp. 185-7.

sixth of the agricultural population in 1872.<sup>74</sup> This impoverishment, she has argued, was caused by British over-assessment.<sup>75</sup> Similarly, Hill has argued that British economic policies were much to blame for the 1873-4 famine in Bengal and Bihar. The British commercialisation of agriculture, he has claimed, forced cultivators to sell their meagre crops during drought to meet their revenue obligations rather than eat their crops and risk eviction.<sup>76</sup> Bhatia's explanation for the severe famines of the late nineteenth century simply ignored the climate factor. He has argued that British rule sparked a 'commercial revolution' in the second half of the nineteenth century, which benefited the commercial classes but impoverished the cultivator, landless labourer and weaver. Thus Bhatia's argument is similar to Guha's and Currie's, in that the impoverishment of these classes was purportedly one cause of the horrific famines of the late nineteenth century.<sup>77</sup>

Guha, Currie and Bhatia's argument that British rule had created an impoverished underclass of agriculturalists who were particularly susceptible to famine is conceptually connected to Sen's 'exchange entitlements' argument. This included market forces and class relations, in addition to a mere shortage of food, as important determinants of famine. Thus Sen argued that the study of famine required an analysis of the distribution of food, and not just its production.<sup>78</sup> Chakrabarti has come to a similar conclusion to that of Guha, Currie and Bhatia. She has found that the famine victims of the 1896-7 Bengal famine were most commonly 'agricultural labourers and marginal farmers' and their dependants. She argued explicitly in Sen's terms that these groups had suffered a reduction in their 'exchange entitlements'.<sup>79</sup>

Davis has argued that the climate was an important factor. He has noted that the 'El Nino famines' were global phenomena, whereby adverse climatic conditions in the late nineteenth century periodically brought famine to numerous countries, including

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<sup>74</sup> Kate Currie, 'Famines in 19th Century Indian History: A Materialist Alternative to Ecological Reductionism', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1986, pp. 481-2.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, p. 475.

<sup>76</sup> Hill, Christopher V., 'Philosophy and Reality in Riparian South Asia: British Famine Policy and Migration in Colonial North India', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1991, p. 268.

<sup>77</sup> B. M. Bhatia, *Famines in India*, New York: Asia Publishing House, 1963, pp. v-vi.

<sup>78</sup> Sen, pp. 3-4, 6, 43-4.

<sup>79</sup> Malabika Chakrabarti, 'The Famine of 1896-97 in the Bengal Presidency: Food Availability Decline or "Exchange" Crisis?', *Calcutta Historical Journal*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1994, pp. 1-2, 31.

India.<sup>80</sup> Klein has argued that the ‘modernisation’ of India, which Bhatia labelled as one of the main causes of the severe famines of the nineteenth century, did not abate in the early twentieth century along with the drastic decline in mortality rates. Klein has preferred the explanation that the spike in mortality in the late nineteenth century was partly caused by failures of the monsoon ‘greater than any previously recorded’. Furthermore, the decline in mortality rates in the early twentieth century, he has argued, was partly due to ‘more benign natural conditions’.<sup>81</sup>

In addition to adverse climatic conditions, Davis and Klein have pointed the finger of blame at the reformist-inspired, non-interventionist relief policies followed by the British. This is distinct from historians’ criticism of British social and economic policies as causes of famine. Davis has argued that the British commitment to a free trade in grain rendered many people vulnerable to ‘rocketing prices’. Millions of the famine victims of the late nineteenth century, he has contended, were ‘murdered ... by the theological application of the sacred principles of Smith, Bentham and Mill’.<sup>82</sup> Klein has argued that ‘modernising policies’, such as the construction of railways, had made it possible for the British governments of India to effectively fight famine ‘before any of the three great famines of the late nineteenth century’. Yet the British administrations had chosen not to because they were taken with social Darwinian and Malthusian concepts that prohibited intervention. Thus non-interventionist policies, according to Klein, were partly to blame for the massive loss of life at the close of the nineteenth century. Moreover, Klein has claimed that the sharp decline in famine deaths in the early twentieth century was partly due to the British abandoning social Darwinian and Malthusian concepts in favour of more interventionist humanitarian famine policies.<sup>83</sup>

Currie has also blamed British non-interventionist policies. Like Davis, she has argued that untamed market forces provided inadequate relief. The British refusal to fix grain prices or prohibit grain exports from famine districts, she has contended, was the cause of much unnecessary starvation.<sup>84</sup> Hall-Matthews has come to a similar

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<sup>80</sup> Davis, pp. 6-7.

<sup>81</sup> Klein, pp. 188-9.

<sup>82</sup> Davis, pp. 9-10.

<sup>83</sup> Klein, p. 189.

<sup>84</sup> Currie, ‘Famines’, pp. 483, 485.

conclusion. He has argued that the areas hit by famine could not afford to pay the inordinate prices required to attract the trade of grain merchants. Instead, the British policy of non-intervention allowed the merchants to continue exporting grain from famine-stricken districts, or exporting to more lucrative markets overseas.<sup>85</sup> Similarly, Hardiman has argued that the British *laissez-faire* famine policies abandoned the ryots to exploitation and starvation at the hands of the moneylenders and grain dealers.<sup>86</sup>

The policy of non-intervention was somewhat motivated by the financial circumstances of the British Indian administrations. Non-intervention was often seen as the cheaper option. Ambirajan has considered the possibility that the Madras Government switched to a policy of non-intervention in the early nineteenth century as a result of a lack of funds, but concluded that ideology ‘must bear some responsibility’.<sup>87</sup> Bhatia has claimed that the financial difficulties of the British governments of India in the late nineteenth century made for an ‘economy in relief expenditure’, and that this non-interventionism was a cause of unnecessary mortality.<sup>88</sup> Hall-Matthews has agreed with Bhatia that *laissez-faire* ideology was something of a ‘façade’ behind which the British shirked the enormous cost of interventionist relief measures in the late nineteenth century.<sup>89</sup> Moreover, he has argued that the British were most committed to a policy of non-intervention when it came to the relief of poorer groups and districts which could offer less in return for the Government’s ‘investment’.<sup>90</sup> The extent to which financial expediency dictated the Bombay Government’s interventionism or non-interventionism is a recurring question of this thesis.

Rashid has attempted a critique of non-interventionist famine policy by comparing the 1783 Bengal scarcity, in which the administration intervened and few lives were lost, to the 1866-7 Bengal and Orissa famine, in which non-interventionist policies were

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<sup>85</sup> David Hall-Matthews, ‘Colonial ideologies of the market and famine policy in Ahmednagar district, Bombay Presidency, c. 1870-1884’, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 39, no. 3, Jul-Sep, 1999, pp. 327-8.

<sup>86</sup> David Hardiman, ‘Usury, dearth and famine in western India’, *Past and Present*, vol. 152, Aug, 1996, *passim*.

<sup>87</sup> Ambirajan, ‘Political Economy and Indian Famines’, p. 26.

<sup>88</sup> Bhatia, p. vi.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, p. 107, cited in Hall-Matthews, ‘Colonial ideologies’, pp. 332-3.

<sup>90</sup> Hall-Matthews, ‘Colonial ideologies’, p. 304.

followed and millions died.<sup>91</sup> But Rashid picked his points of comparison carefully. One could just as easily compare the 1823-5 Bombay scarcity in which few people died under non-interventionist policies with the 1803-4 Bombay famine in which many more died under interventionist rule. There is much validity to the argument posed by numerous historians that British non-interventionist policies contributed to mortality rates during famine. Yet severe famines also took place under interventionist governments well before the introduction of *laissez-faire* ideology to the subcontinent. The Vedas and the Arthashastra illustrate that, in Murton's words, 'famine has an ancient history in India'.<sup>92</sup> More recently, Habib has found that there were several 'great famines' in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries under Mughal rulers who followed interventionist relief policies.<sup>93</sup> Moreover, Datta has questioned the efficacy of state intervention as a means of providing relief. He has conceded that untamed market forces left some people unable to purchase grain at unreachable prices.<sup>94</sup> Yet he has found that in late eighteenth century Bengal, British attempts to intervene in the market were thwarted by merchants who 'bought all the surplus grain available at the first suspicion of state interference'.<sup>95</sup> Although non-intervention may have cost the most lives, it is a very difficult point to prove. It is not simply a matter of adding up, as Rashid has done, the number of deaths that occurred under each policy. Contributing variables such as the severity of the drought must also be entered into the comparison. This is the importance of Guha's approach in attempting to eliminate the variable of climate.<sup>96</sup>

Such a comparative analysis is beyond the purview of this thesis. The factor of climate does feature here, but merely as a means of differentiating between the droughts of the 1820s and 1830s and highlighting the motivations behind the Bombay administration's relief policies. A study of the cataclysmic famines of the late nineteenth century perhaps, more than anything, calls for an analysis of the effects of

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<sup>91</sup> Rashid, 'The Policy of Laissez-Faire', pp. 500-1.

<sup>92</sup> Brian J. Murton, 'Sources, scale, and the spatial and temporal patterns of famine in Southern India before the famine codes', A. B. Mukerji and Ahmad Aijazuddin, (eds.), *India: culture, society, and economy: geographical essays in honour of Prof. Asok Mitra*, New Delhi: Inter India Publications, 1985, p. 357.

<sup>93</sup> Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India, 1556-1707*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2nd edn., 1999, pp. 114-20.

<sup>94</sup> Rajat Datta, 'Subsistence Crises, Markets and Merchants in Late Eighteenth Century Bengal', *Studies in History*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1 February, 1994, pp. 81-2.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 83, 89.

<sup>96</sup> Guha, *The Agrarian Economy*, pp. 185-7.

British economic and relief policies. The scarcities of the 1820s and 1830s, on the other hand, claimed far fewer lives. A study of the droughts of the 1820s and 1830s is perhaps best suited to an examination of the origins of non-interventionist relief policies. These were, after all, decades in which the reform movement of Britain was in its heyday. This thesis will not ignore the effects of British relief policies in western India, but the focus will be rather the motivations behind the policies.

*The reformist dawn in India.*

Sharma has argued that the early nineteenth century has been largely neglected by Indian famine historians because the primary material provides fewer official reports and overviews as an easy way into the topic. The study of late nineteenth century famines is facilitated, on the other hand, by famine commissions, famine codes and other government literature.<sup>97</sup> One could add that the attention of most historians has been drawn to the late nineteenth century because of the ferocity of the famines. The scarcities of the early nineteenth century that occurred under British colonial rule, as it will soon be demonstrated, have not been entirely neglected. Yet historians of this time period are certainly less crowded for space than those of the late nineteenth century famines.

The approach of this thesis will be to look for correlations rather than necessarily direct causal connections between the arguments of British political economists and Bombay policy. Bombay's officials seldom, if ever, named specific reformers in support of their policies. They were, however, often explicit about the reasons behind their policies, which often corresponded with contemporary British ideologies. Such correlations are therefore suggestive of a causal connection. The British officials in India retained links with the Mother Country in several ways, and were therefore open to influence from Britain. Ambirajan and Stokes, in particular, have described these reformist connections.<sup>98</sup> The changes that were made in Bombay's policies often quickly followed on the heels of a relevant reformist ideology coming to dominance

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<sup>97</sup> Sharma, *Famine*, pp. 2-4.

<sup>98</sup> Ambirajan, 'Economic Ideas and Economic Policy', pp. 198, 202-3; and Ambirajan, 'Political Economy and Indian Famines', p. 22; and S. Ambirajan, 'Malthusian Population Theory and Indian Famine Policy in the Nineteenth Century', *Population Studies*, vol. 30, no. 1, March, 1976; and Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India*, pp. 48-50.

in Britain. The timing of these changes is indicative, yet not proof, of a causal connection. The alternative explanation that such ideologies developed in Britain and in British India simultaneously and independently is far less convincing.

Numerous historians have agreed that the reformist ideologies of Britain influenced the administrations of British India. There has been debate, however, over when this influence began to take effect. Kumar has argued that reformist ideology began to make its influence felt in western India in the mid to late 1820s, particularly with the implementation of Pringle's utilitarian-inspired revenue settlements.<sup>99</sup> Similarly, Metcalf has highlighted Bentinck's appointment as the Governor-General in 1828 as the beginnings of a 'thorough-going programme of reform' in India.<sup>100</sup> Yet the focus of both Kumar and Metcalf's studies was not scarcity-relief policy, but rather British ideas of rule and their effect on western Indian society. Stokes has focused on the influence of the reformers on general British Indian policy, which, he has argued, began to take effect in 1818. Yet he has also noted that the reformist influence was felt in the 1813 charter renewal, in which the Company lost its monopoly and was forced to allow missionaries access to the subcontinent.<sup>101</sup> However, like Kumar and Metcalf, Stokes had not focused on British Indian scarcity-relief policy.

Bhatia has argued that non-interventionist ideology began to influence the famine policies of the British Indian administrations between 1835 and 1860.<sup>102</sup> But a number of other historians have disagreed. Ambirajan has argued that the Madras administration was inspired by *laissez-faire* ideology to avoid intervention in the grain trade as early as the 1806 famine.<sup>103</sup> Ahuja has agreed that the Madras Government shifted to non-interventionism in the early nineteenth century.<sup>104</sup> Moreover, both Ambirajan and Rabitoy have argued that the Bombay administration began to follow the dictates of non-interventionist ideology during the 1812-3 famine.<sup>105</sup> Sharma has

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<sup>99</sup> Kumar, pp. 85-8.

<sup>100</sup> Metcalf, p. 28.

<sup>101</sup> Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India*, p. xiv.

<sup>102</sup> Bhatia, p. 15, cited in Neil Rabitoy, 'The Control of Fate and Fortune: The Origins of the Market Mentality in British Administrative Thought in South Asia', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 25, no. 4, 1991, p. 752.

<sup>103</sup> Ambirajan, 'Political Economy and Indian Famines', pp. 23-5.

<sup>104</sup> Ahuja, p. 357.

<sup>105</sup> Ambirajan, 'Political Economy and Indian Famines', p. 26; and Rabitoy, 'The Control of Fate and Fortune', pp. 737-8.

found that the North Indian administration continued the policy of intervention in the 1812-14 famine, but committed to non-intervention by the 1817 scarcity.<sup>106</sup>

The above historians have typically assessed whether governments were interventionist or non-interventionist by their policy toward the grain trade, and to a lesser extent by their policy toward charity. The effect of non-interventionist ideology on the other scarcity-relief policies has been relatively neglected. Certainly, the product market was the most obvious battleground for the clash of the two approaches. But issues of taxation and the capital and labour markets were, in both theory and practice, equally fair game for the champions of the non-interventionist cause. It is hoped that a systematic and comprehensive study of the motivations behind each of Bombay's six scarcity-relief policies in the 1820s and 1830s will provide a contribution to the literature on the influence of British reformist ideology on the policies of British Indian administrations during subsistence crises.

*Source material.*

This thesis is largely based on the many letters of official correspondence that were sent between the officials of Bombay Presidency during the droughts of the 1820s and 1830s. As such, this is a study of official discourse, and not what the officials privately thought about the best scarcity-relief policies. Moreover, the study ignores the opinions of the Indian sub-officials, but rather focuses on that of the British. This presents no conceptual issues, however, because the British did not include their Indian subordinates in policy formation.

To a lesser extent, this thesis is based on the official publications of the Governments of British India and of Parliament in Britain. This includes information on the Company's annual budgets, and the numerous parliamentary reports on the workings of the British Poor Law. This thesis is also based on the journals of missionaries who lived and preached in western India in the 1820s and 1830s. It is also based on the writings of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century British political economists and reformers.

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<sup>106</sup> Sharma, *Famine*, pp. 50-1, 53-8.



Bombay's officials seldom wrote about the plight of women during the droughts of the 1820s and 1830s. To Bombay's officials, the economic unit centred on the male ryot and little attention was paid to other family members. Consequently this thesis also offers no specific insight into the plight of women during drought. Chakrabarti, Frost and Sharma have noted that women, children, and 'old and ailing dependents' were traditionally the first to suffer the effects of drought as the men of the household claimed the lion's share of the family's food.<sup>107</sup> Klein has also found that women and children were more likely than men to be excluded from public works relief.<sup>108</sup>

*Thesis outline.*

The first chapter of this thesis, 'The Political Economy and Spirituality of Drought', explores the behaviours of certain groups during the droughts of the 1820s and 1830s, and the effects of those behaviours on the poorer ryots. It contends that the moneylenders, grain dealers, revenue intermediaries and wealthier ryots exploited their power over the poorer ryot to better their position and protect their interests, often at the latter's expense. It examines the numerous survival strategies pursued by the ryots, such as migration and crime. The chapter also explores the way in which the droughts of the 1820s and 1830s were experienced spiritually. It argues that the Christian missionaries of Bombay Presidency perceived drought as an opportunity to preach their message with good effect, particularly amongst the poor. Thus, before embarking on an analysis of the Government's drought policies, this first chapter hopes to provide an understanding on the effects of drought on society.

The second chapter, '*Laissez-faire* and the Grain Trade', examines the influence of non-interventionist ideology on the Government's policy toward the grain trade during drought. It argues that in each drought of the 1820s and 1830s the Bombay Government steadfastly refused to intervene in the grain trade, as previous rulers had done, by fixing grain prices, prohibiting exports, or buying and reselling grain. It

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<sup>107</sup> Chakrabarti, 'The Famine', p. 31; and Marcia J. Frost, 'Coping With Scarcity: Wild Foods and Common Lands: Kheda District (Gujarat, India), 1824/5', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2000, p. 298; and Sanjay Sharma, 'The 1837-38 Famine in U.P.: Some Dimensions of Popular Action', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 30, no. 3, 1993, p. 361.

<sup>108</sup> Klein, p. 192.

argues that this policy was the product of reformist influence in Britain, which affected Bombay policy via numerous conduits. It argues that resistance from within and without the administration was rejected as uneducated and misguided.

The third chapter, 'Charity, the Military and Malthus: Bombay Policy in the 1820s', examines British reformist ideologies concerning state charity and the 'impotent poor', or those who were unable to work. It argues that by the 1823-5 drought most officials in the Bombay administration had accepted the arguments of the British abolitionists that the relief of the impotent poor was best left to private charity. This was a change in policy from previous Bombay administrations. As with the policy toward the grain trade, dissent against the official orthodoxy was ignored. The financial burden of the Government's military is also examined as a material reason for the state's rejection of the impotent poor. It is concluded that there were both material and ideological motivations behind the Bombay administration's break with the traditional responsibilities of a western Indian ruler.

In the fourth chapter, 'Charity and the Rise of the Revisers: Bombay Policy in the 1830s', it is argued that the shift in Bombay's charity policy back to state intervention was driven by the rise to predominance in British politics of the revisers, who were less extreme reformers than the abolitionists. This shift in favour of supporting the impotent poor took place despite mounting financial pressures on the Government to cut costs. Yet Bombay's benevolence had its financial limits. It is demonstrated that toward certain groups, such as foreign migrants and abandoned children, the Bombay Government of the 1830s once again took a non-interventionist stance.

The fifth chapter, 'Public Works, Bentham and the "Less Eligibility Principle"', explores the perspectives of the British abolitionists and revisers regarding the provision of state employment to the able-bodied poor. It argues that many of Bombay's officials accepted the abolitionists' argument that by guaranteeing subsistence the state was undermining the self-reliance and industriousness of independent labourers. Yet instead of abolishing the scarcity-relief policy of offering the impoverished employment on public works, Bombay discouraged all but the truly needy from state dependence by offering only minimal wages for hard labour. This, it will be argued, was an expression of Bentham's 'less eligibility principle', which was

designed to deter state dependence by making the conditions of state relief less attractive than independent labour.

The sixth chapter, 'Public Works, Crime and Migration', argues that despite the widespread acceptance in the Bombay administration of abolitionist arguments against the state provision of employment to the able-bodied poor, the removal of this policy was considered politically and financially impracticable. Bombay's public works policy was an indispensable means of mitigating crime and migration amongst its subjects. It is argued that crime and migration threatened the Government's revenues and authority, and that state employment was offered to provide potential criminals and migrants with an alternate source of subsistence until the rains returned. Only during the 1831-5 drought when starving foreign migrants entered Bombay Presidency, but remained in the outlying districts away from the Government's main seat of power, did the administration feel secure in taking a position of non-intervention.

In the seventh chapter, 'Agricultural Loans: the Pre-eminence of Interventionism', it is argued that the reformers of Britain paid little attention to the concept of loans relief. Bombay's officials, however, considered the policy of offering loans to agriculturalists during drought essential to ensure that they continued cultivating and contributing to the Government's coffers. It is argued that this 'relief' policy was motivated more by fiscal expedience than humanitarian concern, as it excluded both non-agriculturalists and the most destitute of cultivators who were considered too risky an investment. It is argued that some officials did apply general abolitionist arguments against state relief to this policy, and that this provided some motivation for a restriction of loans. Yet the policy could never be abolished or severely restricted because state intervention in the agricultural capital market was considered essential to maintaining the Government's land revenues.

The eighth chapter, 'Land Revenue Demands: Remissions and Reductions', explores reformist ideologies regarding taxation and the state. It argues that regardless of early British attempts in Bombay Presidency to ensure a light assessment, the land revenue demand was typically too high and was impoverishing the peasantry to the detriment of the Government's long-term income. Moreover, the assessment was augmented by

a grain price depression brought about by British rule. The 1823-5 drought forced the Government to offer many of its cultivators relief in the form of remissions on their revenue obligations. This was a fiscally expedient policy that avoided bankrupting the Government's revenue base. It also fitted with *laissez-faire* demands for light taxation, and some officials offered remissions on this basis. But the revenue demand remained too high throughout the 1820s. Utilitarian ideology influenced Revenue Surveyor Robert Pringle, and his application of the 'net produce' criterion to the revenue settlement of Indapur taluka in the late 1820s. Yet Pringle's experiment failed, and it is argued that only in the early 1830s did the administration commit to widespread *laissez-faire*-inspired reductions in the revenue demand to alleviate the cultivator's burden and drive economic development. This, it is argued, influenced the extent to which officials were willing to offer remissions during the droughts of the 1830s.

The final chapter, 'The Grain Duties and *Laissez-Faire*', argues that prior to 1836 only a minority of Bombay's officials believed that the Government's levying of duties on the trade in grain should be permanently abolished. Official orthodoxy only allowed for a temporary removal of the grain duties during drought as a means of mitigating the rise in grain prices and providing relief to Bombay's subjects. This scarcity-relief policy reduced migration and crime, and protected the Government's main source of income, the land revenues. Yet when the rains returned so too did the grain duties. Most officials considered the grain duties to be too lucrative a source of revenue to permanently relinquish. But by 1836 it had become apparent that the *laissez-faire*-inspired reduction of the land revenue assessments had benefited the economy and thereby the Government's finances. This, it is argued, motivated a similar *laissez-faire*-inspired shift in policy regarding the grain duties, which were permanently abolished throughout most of the Presidency in 1836. Yet once again financial considerations tempered ideology, as the duties remained in force in the most prosperous division of the Presidency, Gujarat.

The thesis concludes that Bombay's scarcity-relief policies were a mixture of intervention and non-intervention, and that this policy mix varied over time. It is argued that humanitarian concern affected the scarcity-relief policies of Bombay, but to a lesser extent than financial concerns. It is concluded that the reformist ideologies

of Britain drove many of Bombay's changes in policy, but these changes were in some cases limited or delayed by the financial realities of rule in western India.