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Q3

Why was there a sudden spurt in famines in colonial India since the mid-eighteenth century? Give reasons.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2022 · GS I · 10 marks · Modern Indian History

Modern Indian history from about the middle of the eighteenth century until the present - significant events, personalities, issues.

Core demand of the question

- Why was there a sudden spurt in famines in colonial India since the mid-eighteenth century?
- Give reasons of revenue, market, and the end of older relief, with named famines as illustration
- Keep the explanation within a 10-mark length

Revision summary

Company rule after the mid-eighteenth century raised cash revenue just as drought hit Bengal in 1770.

Settlements and cash crops left peasants paying rupees after a failed harvest.

Older tax remission and local stores weakened, while grain followed price to the port.

Nineteenth-century famines and Bengal 1943 showed policy and entitlement failure, not climate alone.

Railways moved grain; they did not create a right to eat.

Introduction

Famine was not new to India, but from the Bengal famine of 1770 onward dearth became more frequent and more commercial under Company and Crown rule. Climate still failed; colonial revenue and grain export decided who starved.

Body**Revenue and the market**

- After Plassey the Company squeezed Bengal's land revenue, which left peasants with no grain reserve when the 1769-70 drought came.
- Permanent Settlement, ryotwari, and mahalwari treated the peasant as a cash payer, so a bad year still owed rupees, and land passed to moneylenders.
- Cash crops such as indigo, opium, cotton, and later oilseeds took acreage from food in some belts, which raised market risk when rains failed.
- Grain moved by river and later by rail toward ports and deficit towns that could pay, so high prices in a famine district did not keep food at home.

Collapse of older buffers

- Pre-colonial states, temples, and village granaries had uneven relief, but they often remitted tax or opened stores; colonial collectors still demanded revenue in many famine years.

- Deindustrialisation of textiles threw weavers onto a crowded agrarian labour market, which made wage earners the first to starve when grain spiked.
- Forest and common-grazing closures cut wild foods and cattle fodder that poor households had used as a last store.

Policy and the great famines

- Laissez-faire dogma in the nineteenth century delayed public grain, as in the 1876-78 and 1896-97 famines, until mortality had already soared.
- The 1943 Bengal famine showed that war demand, boat denial, and a failed entitlement to buy rice could kill even when the calendar was not a simple all-India drought.
- Railways could import grain, yet they also exported it; transport without a right to food did not end famine.

Flow diagram

High cash revenue -> Peasant without store
Cash crops exports -> Peasant without store
Grain to paying markets -> Peasant without store
Late or harsh relief -> Mass mortality
Peasant without store -> Mass mortality

Conclusion

The mid-eighteenth-century spurt in famines followed Company revenue, cash cropping, and a market that moved grain to money, not to need. Drought remained the trigger; colonial political economy made the death roll modern and large.

Facts & figures

Bengal famine, 1770

Early Company-period famine after heavy revenue demand on a drought year.

Permanent Settlement, 1793

Cornwallis settlement in Bengal that locked a cash zamindari demand on the land.

1876-78 famine

Deccan and south Indian famine in the high noon of laissez-faire relief debate.

1896-97 famine

Wide late-Victorian famine that again showed price, rail, and delayed public works.

Bengal famine, 1943

Wartime famine of entitlement, boat denial, and distribution failure under the Crown.

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