

Syllabus

MA Course

2 Credits

Fall 2022/23

CEU, Department of History

Famine in Colonial India. A Social and Economic History of South Asia.

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Course Description

In 1983 the Indian scholar Amartya Sen published *Poverty and Famines*, a book that was about to change our understanding of the root causes of hunger and starvation. In 1993 Sen was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences for 'his contributions to welfare economics.' Sen grew up in West Bengal, a region that experienced a devastating famine in 1943, when millions died due to hunger and starvation. He personally experienced this famine as a child – an experience that certainly shaped his academic interests.

Colonial rule, one could say, not only ended with a terrible famine, but it also started with one: the famine of 1769–70, also of Bengal, which killed an estimated third of this province's total population. And there were of course numerous other severe famines throughout the duration of British rule. Since independence in 1947, however, there has been no famine in India. Furthermore, there is little archival evidence for large-scale famines in pre-colonial India. This suggests that famine was not simply a 'naturally' recurring event on the subcontinent, as some colonial administrators suggested, but closely related to colonialism and its impact on South Asia's economy and society.

The first major aim of this course is to familiarize students with famine analysis, using India's past as a laboratory to test hypotheses of relevance to the present. Historical records enable us to reconstruct the long-term social and economic effects of famines. We discuss ecological triggers, e.g. extreme weather events, and other factors that have the potential to turn a food crisis into a famine, including failing markets or erroneous public responses. We pay special attention to the pre-existing societal vulnerability which explains why in one case a severe drought lead to the loss of human life and in the other case it did not.

The second major aim is to use past famines as a window into the economic and social history of India. Crises like famines often reveal features of a society that are difficult to see in 'normal' times. 'An episode such as a famine', writes David Arnold in his seminal monograph of 1988, 'can provide a rare glimpse of the lives of the "common people", shed a light on matters of everyday significance about which historical source materials are all too often silent.'

While our focus clearly lies on the colonial period, we will take a glimpse into the Mughal period and famine prevention under Aurangzeb, and discuss issues like food security versus food sovereignty in post-colonial India. Prior knowledge of neither South Asian history nor famine analysis is necessary, since the course provides introductions to both fields.

Schedule

	Topic	Reading
Week 1	Introduction	
Week 2	A History of Colonial India I	Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, <i>Modern South Asia. History, Culture, Political Economy</i> . New York and London: Routledge, 2004.
Week 3	A History of Colonial India II	Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, <i>Modern South Asia. History, Culture, Political Economy</i> . New York and London: Routledge, 2004.
Week 4	A History of Colonial India III	Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, <i>Modern South Asia. History, Culture, Political Economy</i> . New York and London: Routledge, 2004.
Week 5	A Global History of Famines, ca, 1850–2000.	Alex de Waal, "The End of Famine? Prospects for the Elimination of Mass Starvation by Political Action." <i>Political Geography</i> 62 (2018): 184–195.
Week 6	Famine Analysis I	Bas van Bavel et al., <i>Disasters and History. The Vulnerability and Resilience of Past Societies</i> . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.
Week 7	Famine Analysis II	Bas van Bavel et al., <i>Disasters and History. The Vulnerability and Resilience of Past Societies</i> . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.
Week 8	Famine Analysis III	Bas van Bavel et al., <i>Disasters and History. The Vulnerability and Resilience of Past Societies</i> . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.
Week 9	The Bengal Famine of 1770	David Arnold, "Hunger in the Garden of Plenty." In <i>Dreadful Visitations. Confronting Natural Catastrophe in the Age of Enlightenment</i> , edited by Alessa Johns, 81–112. London and New York: Routledge, 1999.
Week 10	The Great Famine of 1876–1878	Mike Davis, <i>Late Victorian Holocausts. El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World</i> . London and New York: Verso, 2001.
Week 11	The Bengal Famine of 1943	Amartya Sen, <i>Poverty and Famines. An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation</i> . Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981.
Week 12	Conclusion	

