

# The British Maladministration & The Great Bengal Famine of 1770: A Study

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## **Abstract:**

Robert Clive by virtue of military talents and administrative wisdom founded the British Empire in India. He was appointed as the Governor of Bengal and founded a new history of British Empire in India. During his second term as Governor of Bengal, he concluded a treaty of Allahabad in 1765 with Mughal Emperor Shaha Alam II and the Company got the Diwani of Bengal, Bihar & Orissa. By this treaty of Allahabad the Company became politically powerful and got the right of collecting revenue of Bengal, Bihar & Orissa. But the company was not prepared to administer such a large territory. So, they introduced Dual Government policy. During the Dual Government, the Company undertook the defence and left the civil administrations in the hands of the Nawab. Nawab was paid Rs. 53 lakhs rupees annually for administration. but after two years it was reduced to 32 lakh rupees. Mir Jafar's son Najm-ud-daula remained the Nawab of Bengal and the British appointed two Deputy Nawabs to collect land revenue. The administration of Bengal was divided between the British and the Nawab of Bengal so it was known as Dual system. The dual system proved very unsatisfactory while the Nawab was burdened with all responsibilities, the company retained all the power. The grant of 'diwani' for Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in 1765 was a kind of supreme power. The East India Company used this weapon to exploit the people. Soon their major concern in India was to collect as much revenue as possible. During this period agriculture was the basis of economy of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and it was the main source of income of the people. The East India Company introduced several land revenue in haste in order to maximise extraction of revenue. The greed of the company led to complete disorganisation of the agrarian economy and society in the diwani provinces within a few years. The devastating famine of 1769-70, in which about one-third of the Bengal population was wiped off, was one tragic outcome of these experiments. The primary causes of this famine included epidemic, failure of the monsoon rains and the subsequent failure of crops. The economic policies of the British East India Company including high taxation and the disruption of traditional agricultural practices significantly worked to exacerbate the crisis. The famine affected state economy and caused a massive decline in agricultural productivity and weakened local economic structures. Many villages were significantly depopulated. People migrated in search of food, medicine and work. Some historians remark that the Great Bengal Famine of 1770 highlighted the consequences of colonial economic policies on local populations.

**Keywords:** British Empire, Diwani, Dual Government, revenue, responsibilities, Agriculture, Famine, tragic outcome.

## **Introduction:**

The Great Bengal Famine of 1770 holds profound historical significance: The Great Bengal Famine of

1770 is the impact of the British colonial rules in India. It shows the brutal, undistinguished exploitative nature of the British colonial rules. The right of the Diwani of Bengal, Bihar & Orissa helped to transform the merchant –based exploitation of the East India Company to a systematic, state – sponsored exploitation of resources. Besides British exploitation, crops failure in autumn 1768 and summer 1769 and an accompanying smallpox epidemic made the situation more complex and devastating. Due to smallpox in summer of 1770 witnessed the death of people in every single place. In 1770, the monsoon season brought rains, along with a huge number of widespread diseases to which many people fell victim. There were thousands of villages that were overgrown. North Bengal severely impacted while we noticed a lesser effect of this pandemic on central and eastern Bengal. People in group left their villages. The eastern Bengal area showed signs of quicker recovery. The Famine in a bad way disturbed daily life of the people that caused disruption of social systems. There is massive migration all around. Inadequate sanitation and water disposal facilities made the pandemic worst. This had a direct correlation between the increases of infectious illnesses. More over the grain merchants stopped offering the due as access to the farmers and peasants that added extra pressure to the farmers’ lives. The export-import mechanism for grains to the other areas was intact. The company also kept buying huge portions of the produce for the purpose of feeding the army and their servants. The Indian Gomasthas considering it an opportunity formed a monopoly on the production of grains locally.

### **Research Methodology & Data Collection:**

In this paper I have used historical method of study. The methodology involves a close reading of the British maladministration & The Great Bengal Famine of 1770. In this research, I want to explore the impact of the diwani, Dual Government policy and epidemic on the people of Bengal during the British Rule in India. This historical study is based on the secondary information and data are collected from research article, research papers, and academic publications in fields of history. I have also used various data sources available in media, online platform & websites. I have used descriptive method in this study so that the readers can easily assess the validity and reliability of the study. The paper focuses on the causes and far – reaching impacts of the Great Bengal famine of 1770, and the accountability of the British East India Company. Despite natural calamity, the revenue policy of the British East India Company collapsed the rural lives and forced the people to starvation. In such situation, the Company’s inaction and incapacity extended human suffering in a new level. It was very pathetic that the Company administration focused on maintaining revenue collection and remitting profits to their homeland Britain rather than alleviating human suffering in Bengal, Bihar & Orissa. No measure has been initiated to save people from the famine.

### **The British maladministration & The Famine of 1770 in Bengal:**

The Great Bengal famine of 1770 was one of the greatest calamities in Bengal's history. The Treaty of Allahabad signed between the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II and the British East India Company in 1765 was the first initiative to ruin the farmers. Under this treaty, the British East India Company got Diwani rights (Right to collect tax on behalf of the emperor) over Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. Previously, the farmers were paying about one-tenth of their produce as tax to the Mughal emperor. With the transfer of ‘Diwani’ rights, the British East India Company increased the tax upto 50% and forced the farmers to provide more tax. This heavy taxation fell Bengal’s agrarian economy under external pressures. In Bengal, the company collected land tax as well as tariffs on trade. Peasants usually stored

excess production in order to meet unfortunate situations such as crop failure due to heavy rain or draught. With the increase in the tax rate, the peasants were unable to maintain these safety nets. In addition to this, the peasants were forced to cultivate cash crops such as indigo and poppy which yielded high profits to the British East India Company. This reduced the production of edible crops such as paddy, white and others to a large extent. Before the end of May 1770, one third of the population was calculated to have disappeared. In June the deaths were returned as six out of sixteen of the whole population and it was estimated that 'one half of the cultivators and payers of revenue will perish with hunger. During the rains in July to October, the depopulation became so evident that the government wrote to the court of directors in alarm about the number of 'industrious peasants and manufacturers destroyed by the famine'. The crop failed over four consecutive harvest seasons from 1769 to 1770. The failure of a single crop, following a year of scarcity, had wiped out an estimated ten million human beings according to some accounts which revealed the exploitative nature of colonial economic policies, where profit was prioritised over people.

The primary cause of the Great Bengal Famine of 1770 was a series of natural disasters that severely affected the agriculture of the region. The region experienced a prolonged drought, followed by a severe flood. This resulted in the failure of crops and a sharp decline in food production that imbalance the natural way of life of the people. The British East India Company was the ruling authority in Bengal at that time. They failed to take adequate measures to prevent or mitigate the impact of the famine. There was a lack of effective relief efforts and policies to address the food shortage and provide assistance to the affected population. The oppressive land revenue policies imposed by the British administration exacerbated the plight of the peasants. High taxes and revenue collection left the agricultural population impoverished. They were unable to cope with the food shortages and rising prices. Hoarding and speculation by merchants and traders further aggravated the food crisis. They stockpiled grain and artificially inflated prices, making food inaccessible for the common people. The famine also resulted in social disruption and breakdown of traditional support systems. The loss of livelihoods, migration, and desperation led to widespread social unrest, looting, and violence.

This transfer of fiscal power from the indigenous ruler to the East India Company, a trading corporation marked a major turning point in Indian history. This foreign Company, primarily concerned with profit, was ill-equipped and largely uninterested in the welfare of the population. The failure of the monsoon rains in 1769 and 1770 led to drought conditions across Bengal and parts of Bihar and Orissa. The drought destroyed the rice crop - the staple food of Bengal - causing severe food shortages. But the East India Company refused to reduce land revenue assessments, even as agricultural output collapsed. Peasants were compelled to pay taxes despite starvation. Therefore, the tragedy was not merely a natural disaster but was exacerbated by exploitative British Colonial Economic policies, administrative negligence, and a lack of effective relief measures. The famine of 1770 left a long lasting cut mark on Bengal's socio-economic structure and exposed the failures of early British rule in India. Historians such as R.C. Dutt and Romesh Chunder Dutt later described this tragic event as a man-made disaster caused by the "drain of wealth" and exploitative colonial governance. The role of the British East India Company was very pathetic. The Company administration had no effective mechanism for famine relief. No significant public works, grain distribution, or tax remissions were introduced in time. The result was widespread destitution. Villages were deserted, agriculture collapsed, and thousands perished daily. Contemporary accounts describe people dying on roadsides and entire tracts of land turning barren, livestock perished, and fields remained uncultivated for years afterward. The horrors

spread everywhere and people see harrowing pictures of the famine's devastation. People were "feeding on the leaves of trees and the carcasses of dead animals," while others sold their children for food. These accounts shocked readers in Britain, revealing the moral bankruptcy of the British East India Company's rule. The Company administration was slow to respond.

### Conclusion:

The Great Bengal Famine of 1770 was the result of a complex interplay of natural calamity and man-made factors. The economic and social impact of the famine was felt long afterwards. The company continued to collect taxes from farmers who could pay by further increasing the tax rate to make up for the loss in agricultural revenue due to the famine. This famine was caused, to a large extent, by the company's tax and revenue policies, and apathy of the company officials to rising starvation. As a result of the Great Bengal Famine in 1770, approximately ten million people died out of starvation. Due to famine, a large number of the population went into jungles in search of food which resulted in depopulation. Most of the cultivated lands were abandoned. Due to the shortfall of income, the British East India Company raised the taxes further. There was a cloth famine in Bengal, where most of the poor people were either naked or barely covered. There was also a scarcity of clean clothes. Bengal and Bihar were the worst affected provinces and it even extended to a large part of Orissa. The Great Bengal famine of 1770 was certainly exceptional in terms of Bengal's experience during the eighteenth century. It is very unlikely, however, that the 1770 crisis involved the deaths of ten million people. Indeed, on Datta's assessment, even a figure of five million may well lie outside the plausible range. However, famine mortality and large-scale out-migration did cause significant depopulation in large parts of Bengal from which it evidently took several years to recover. The Great Bengal Famine of 1770 Collapsed economy of the state. The agriculture-dependent economy was ruined, with massive losses to cotton and mulberry crops. Large-scale depopulation meant farmland was left barren, with many fields turning into jungle for decades.

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