

The Great Famine of Bengal of 1770 (British)

The Great Famine of Bengal took place from 1769 to 1773 in Bengal. Assam, Orissa, Bihar, and Jharkhand were also affected. Famine means extreme scarcity of food due to a lack of food supply.

The British East India Company came here to take control. They exploited the natural resources of the country for their commercial gain. During the reign, Bengal experienced several calamities. The British East India Company never bothered about the country's condition; they were only focused on collecting taxes as they did before.

Natural Causes: Drought

In 1769, there was a drought; for 7 months, there was no rain, which led to poor harvests. In 1770, there was heavy rainfall, so heavy that it overflowed the banks of the rivers, destroying standing crops, existing irrigation systems, and the activities of middlemen in the grain trade market, making the situation worse.

Administrative Causes

The British East India Company is blamed for the disaster, although they blamed it on the vagaries of nature. But the data shows a different picture. They collected 15-12 million rupees from Bengal as tax in 1768. In 1772, this amount increased to 15,520,000 rupees. About 10 million people died, agricultural production reduced, and revenue collection subsequently declined.

Mughal Administrative System

The Mughal administration was divided into two parts:

1. **Nizamat** (military and civil administration)
2. **Diwani** (revenue collection)

Both were appointed directly by the Mughal Emperor. The Diwan had the power and responsibility to send the revenue money to Delhi without consulting the Subedar.

This is because the system was not designed to have checks and balances. Murshid Quli Khan broke this custom by appointing his grandson as Subedar. Delhi was too weak to restore its power. The Diwan became a paid employee of the Nawab, and the Nawab ruled Bengal independently. Alivardi Khan sent money to Delhi from the treasury, but

after his death, the practice of sending money to Delhi stopped altogether. After the Battle of Plassey, the East India Company became a major political player in India.

After the Battle of Buxar, Robert Clive returned to India for the second time and met with the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II. He offered him a deal to make the company the Diwan of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa for 26 lakh rupees. This sounded very lucrative, and he accepted and signed the deal in 1765. Robert Clive then went to Bengal and met with the Nawab, Mir Qasim, and signed another treaty for 53 lakh rupees to maintain the Nawab's army and household.

All these dues were to be collected from the taxes of the country. The rest was to be the profit of the East India Company. Since the Nawab was a minor, the company appointed a responsible Diwan, Reza Khan, who collected taxes on behalf of the company. This system, where the Nawab had all the responsibility but no power, and the company had all the power but no responsibility, was called the **Dual Government System**.

Consequences of the Famine:

1. An estimated 10 million people died. Warren Hastings mentioned this, but research shows that 1/3 of the population was wiped out.
2. Dacca, Chittagong, and Mymensingh were less affected, so people started migrating to these areas from famine-affected regions. Later, we see agricultural expansion and increased population in these areas.
3. The silk and handloom industries were completely destroyed. Labor and production were reduced to half. In Rajshahi, silk production and labor force were reduced by 55%.
4. Law and order declined. People quit their jobs and became dacoits and robbers. Rich people hired them for the protection of their property and lives.

Indirect Consequences:

1. The British East India Company accepted that the Dual Government System was responsible for this disaster, so they committed to abolishing the Dual Government System and taking direct control.
2. They replaced all local people in the administration with British officials. Except for some lower and mid-level positions, all positions were given to the British.