

## Introduction

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In February 1947, a Punjabi farmer stood in a packed room in California, a newly issued ticket in his hand.<sup>1</sup> Ram Nath Puri was 7000 miles and four decades removed from his birthplace in Lahore. But growing up in colonial Punjab, Puri had been a nationalist firebrand. Outraged by tales of famines that had ravaged India in the decades before his birth, and antagonized by the plunder of the nation's produce by rapacious colonial officers, Puri had been moved to publish a seditious cartoon, "Photo of India," in an Urdu-language magazine.

His scathing drawing, with a fulminating poem attached, depicted the country as an emaciated prisoner, wasting away from hunger as British officials tucked into a sumptuous feast. The caricature, published in 1905, was met with censure from a nervous provincial government. And after a brief detour through Japan to meet with other exiled radicals, Puri had escaped to northern California to join a growing number of Punjabi expatriates there.

Far from home, Puri had begun work as a hospital watchman, then as a fruit-picker and manager of a boarding house for fellow exiles. His radical instincts never abated: for many years, Puri underwrote the publication of an Urdu newsletter, the *Circular-i-Azadi*, which was smuggled to Europe and back to India, where it riled the colonial censors again.<sup>2</sup> Yet as the decades passed, Puri wrote less and planted more, enrolling in agricultural courses and establishing a successful farm. Its abundant harvest reminded him of the meager ones he had left behind: news of the Bengal famine, which had claimed 3.5 million lives, vexed Puri. And when word arrived of India's imminent independence, the exiled farmer knew what he had to do.

<sup>1</sup> Ram Nath Puri, *How to Conquer Poverty and Famine in India by American Methods* (Baroda: Padmaja Publications, 1947).

<sup>2</sup> Maia Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia: How the Ghadar Movement Charted Global Radicalism and Attempted to Overthrow the British Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 25–26.

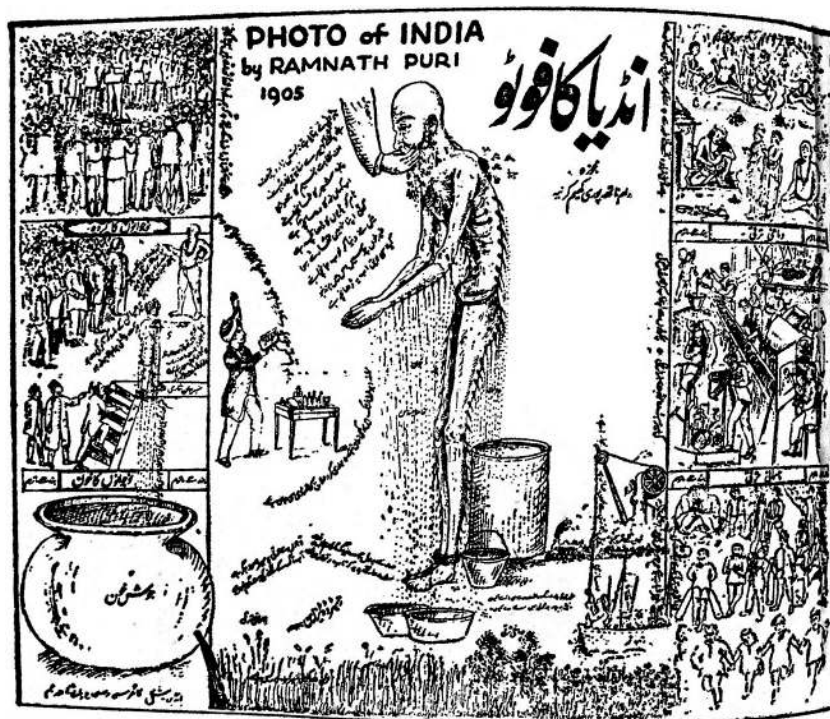


Figure 1 Ram Nath Puri's "Photo of India" was printed in an Urdu-language magazine in 1905. Next to a fulminating poem and scenes of various colonial deprivations, it depicts the country as an emaciated prisoner, wasting away from hunger as British officials tuck into a sumptuous feast; it was this drawing that led to Puri's long exile in California.

Six months before independence, Ram Nath Puri made a plea to the other members of the California Hindu Farmers' Association. After four decades in exile, Puri announced that he would be returning home to free India. There was work to be done on countless barren fields, and California's Indian farmers, he contended, had the knowledge to make them bloom. If they would join him, he announced, India might free itself permanently from the disgrace of food imports, and the horrors of recurrent famine. He brandished his ticket, and asked who among them would return home to feed a hungry nation.

If Puri had managed to arrive by August 15, he would have seen the Union Jacks as they were lowered across the length and breadth of

British India, and the independent nation's saffron, green, and white tri-color flags hoisted triumphantly in their place. He would have heard India's new Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, declaim India's "tryst with destiny" on tinny transistor speakers. In cities and towns across the nation, he would have seen food stalls doling out sweets in celebration, and bands blaring fusillades of patriotic tunes. And perhaps, considering the mission which had called him back, he might have seen a solemn and germane flag-raising in Delhi.

Early in the morning, Congress statesman Rajendra Prasad had arrived at the leafy campus of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research, his motorcade rolling past a blur of horses' legs and bulls' horns painted in the national colors.<sup>3</sup> A year earlier, Prasad had been appointed Minister of Food and Agriculture in the interim national government; soon, he would become the nation's first president. For now, he stood beside the rows of millet and maize inching skywards, which hinted at the promise of the autumn crop. And as the new flag was raised, Prasad declared that India's most pressing task would be "to conquer that dread evil – hunger."<sup>4</sup> *Indian Farming* reported on Prasad's speech with approval, decrying the "nationwide surge of hunger which is sapping the energy and vitality of our people," and lauding the future president for realizing that sustenance would be the chief measure of free India's success. Yet there was deepening doubt, in homes and offices and on fields, that this goal would be met. India's food stocks were dwindling, its foreign reserves were sapped, and its most productive lands were suddenly across the border, in Pakistan. A few days before independence, India's government would ask members of the press to help quash an outbreak of food riots, declaring "that India's political freedom must not be allowed to prove illusory by a complete collapse on her food front."<sup>5</sup>

Yet no press directives were needed for new citizens across India to sense the challenges ahead. While Rajendra Prasad spoke, a more modest flag-raising was taking place near Madras, 1300 miles away. The *tiranga*, an Indian journalist reported, had been raised proudly in the center of a small village. But the moment's "idealistic delight was mellowed considerably when the villagers pointed to the flag and asked: 'There is the flag, but where is the food?'"<sup>6</sup> Independence, these villagers knew, would

<sup>3</sup> "Oh Lovely Dawn," *Time* 50, no. 8 (August 25, 1947): 30–31.

<sup>4</sup> "Flag Hoisting Ceremony at the Indian Council of Agricultural Research," *Indian Farming* 8, no. 8 (August 1947): 380–381.

<sup>5</sup> Department of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, "Guidance for Food Publicity," August 8, 1947, IOR/L/I/11104.x.

<sup>6</sup> George Kuttickal Chacko, *India: Toward an Understanding (A de Novo Inquiry into the Mind of India in Search of an Answer to the Question: "Will India Go Communist?")* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1959).

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mean little if free Indians remained as hungry as they had been through two centuries of foreign rule.

In the weeks and months that followed, millions of hungry refugees would stream across new borders in Punjab and Bengal. Shrewd hoarders would bump up the prices of wheat and rice, aware that India's food stores had dwindled dramatically over years of uncertainty. Indian bureaucrats would travel to countless world capitals to petition for food assistance, worried about a fragile rationing system strained to the breaking point. Communists and radicals would issue secret memoranda calling for the forcible seizure of food at gunpoint, while prosperous farmers would pen angry petitions to New Delhi to protest the commandeering of their crops. Agronomists would struggle to make sense of a nation bereft of much of its arable land, and bureaucrats would debate the tradeoffs between encouraging agricultural growth and promoting rural equity. The leaders who had midwived India's independence would fret as their promises of abundance foundered on the hard realities of a failing food system. And India's citizens would ask themselves what it meant to be participants in a democratic experiment that had offered a solemn promise of sustenance in place of want, but struggled to realize it.

This is a book about independent India's efforts to feed itself. It considers politicians' and planners' schemes and plans oriented towards that end, and the hopes and fears of new citizens struggling with want. It asserts that the goal of sustenance was central to the structure and language of postcolonial nation-building itself. In the decades after independence, India's national leadership would work to actualize the vows of sustenance made during the struggle for self-rule. They would debate the role that land reform and technological change had in the search for more food, and what obligations citizens would need to undertake to be worthy of that promise. Bureaucrats and planners would argue over the role that food rationing and regulation had in a free economy, and dispute what exactly it would mean for India to become "self-sufficient" in food.

Yet these were not debates for planners and politicians alone. As this book traces India's struggle to feed its citizens, it asks how and to what extent those citizens, across divisions of class, caste, gender, and region, could become participants in those debates. Within the confines of archival restraints, it interrogates how Indian citizens used India's "food question" to explore more abstract questions about the meaning of rights, citizenship, and welfare. And it suggests that participating in those debates helped Indian citizens imagine that state, and nationhood itself, in ways that other subjects did not so readily invite.

To contend that food was a primary locus for Indian citizens to understand nation-building is not to deemphasize other major debates that enjoyed primacy in public life. Indians, in the mid twentieth century as today, wrestled with questions of caste and religion. They worried about broader standards of living, fought for access to infrastructure, courts, and consumer goods, pondered India's role in the world, and negotiated the tensions between country and city, group, and nation. Yet they often touched upon these questions through the problem of food, whose severity hit them viscerally as they stood in ration lines, worked in fields, or bought grains in the marketplace.

Even in a predominantly agrarian nation, it was not a given that India's food question would assume such a major role in postcolonial public life. Rather, this overriding concern with food sprung from colonial experiences of hunger and malnutrition, and the lamentably late administrative responses to them. For nearly two centuries, India's British administrators had presided over innumerable famines, each dismissed in turn as a Malthusian inevitability. Hunger had begun to emerge as a site of political contestation in the decades before independence, but it was in the wake of the Bengal famine of 1943 that Indian nationalists tied the promise of independence to the guarantee of food for all, drawing upon novel critiques of India's political economy. Assuming power, these nationalists found themselves struggling with the staggering difficulty of that promise. Faced with stagnant agriculture, global food shortages, a dearth of foreign reserves for food imports, and a population growing with alarming speed, free India's politicians and bureaucrats began to examine and qualify their earlier assurances, even as they, and citizens, explored radically divergent models for ensuring sustenance.

For two decades after independence, India's politicians, planners, and citizens debated these models with urgency, collectively advancing the premise of a political solution to India's food crisis. A complex rationing system, borne of wartime experience, sought to determine how Indians procured and sold their food, and in a larger sense, engage with their fledgling economy. Through a network of interlinked schemes, the state sought to harness agricultural expertise and authority over the food problem. Seeking to conserve rice and wheat, and the scarce foreign reserves needed to purchase them from abroad, India's leadership appealed to Indians to change their diets, replacing these cereals with tubers, bananas, alternate grains, and *ersatz* foodstuffs. And as they sought to redistribute land on more equitable lines, India's planners debated whether the nation should follow Chinese and Soviet models or Gandhian ones, or whether equity might be sacrificed in the name of abundance. Debating and experimenting, and imagining the functioning and the limits of their



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economy, Indian planners and citizens came to see the nation with new cohesiveness.<sup>7</sup>

By the mid 1960s, a transformation was taking place. India's efforts to grow more food and preserve the value of social equity had faltered. After decades of imports, a precarious food situation was of increasing interest to planners overseas. "There is no nation on earth far enough from India," the American Secretary of Agriculture contended in 1966, "to be immune from hunger there."<sup>8</sup> As the work of agricultural scientists on maize, wheat, and rice began to yield results, and India faced a new moment of crisis, the nation's planners resuscitated the marginalized notion that the concentrated application of resources could yield far larger harvests than schemes which sought to preserve equity at all costs. These Green Revolution paradigms were not new, and drew upon available models and Indian expertise. Yet Indian planners' belated embrace of these paradigms served to decouple questions of sustenance and good governance, rendering productivity an overriding goal. The unequal gains that followed did not cause the Green Revolution to "go red," as commentators had initially predicted. Yet they did engender the ascendance of a new class of wealthy farmers whose lobbying would reshape Indian politics, and ended an era when the food problem was inextricably tied to larger questions of governance and citizenship.

This separation helps explain some of the most vexing paradoxes of contemporary India. The independent nation has repeatedly defied gloomy predictions of outright famine. Yet India has remained in the thrall of pervasive malnutrition since independence, its citizens less food secure than those of any sub-Saharan African state.<sup>9</sup> In spite of quantitative surplus and grain exported overseas, India's nutritional indicators are among the worst in the world. Alongside a national grain store that would reach to the moon and back, and the "dual burden" posed by its mounting obesity epidemic, India is still home to a quarter of the world's acutely malnourished population – around 230 million people.<sup>10</sup> This book locates the origins of India's contemporary food crisis in

<sup>7</sup> See Manu Goswami, *Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Orville L. Freeman's statement before US House Committee on Agriculture, United States Congress, Secretary of Agriculture, March 31, 1966, in *Emergency Food for India* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1966).

<sup>9</sup> Peter Svedberg, *Poverty and Undernutrition: Theory, Measurement, and Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 13.

<sup>10</sup> Revati Laul, "The Politics of Hunger," *Tehelka*, July 3, 2013; Arvind Virmani and Charan Singh, "Malnutrition, Not Hunger, Ails India," *Livemint*, September 22, 2013.

the contestations of the recent past, and in the foreclosure of the many solutions which officials and citizens explored in an era of postcolonial nation-building.

The centrality of food to Indian political life is a product of very modern political transformations, and this book takes as its starting point the Bengal famine of 1943. Yet the transformations wrought by this late colonial famine owe much to earlier colonial failures in the realm of food management. Famines were part of the Indian ecological and social landscape prior to British rule, though scarcity was accelerated by its onset: the “Great Bengal Famine” of 1770 saw somewhere between a fifth and a third of the region’s people felled by hunger, their food entitlements disrupted by massive political transformation.<sup>11</sup> Yet famine and hunger did not take on broader political salience until these deprivations were adopted by economic nationalists at the dawn of the twentieth century.

The provision of adequate sustenance had long been seen as the purview of sovereigns and privileged intermediaries across the subcontinent. Premodern ethical texts routinely exhorted potentates to see to the food needs of the governed. The Jain philosopher Somadeva Suri related the imperative poetically in the *Nītivakyaṃrtam*, an influential medieval treatise on good governance. “Of what use is the barren cow, which gives no milk?” he asked. “Of what use is the king’s grace, if he does not fulfill the hopes of suppliants?”<sup>12</sup> The sixteenth-century *Amuktamalyada*, a Telugu epic poem proffering ethical wisdom, advised rulers to invest in agriculture for the prosperity of the realm and the *dharma* borne of good wardship.<sup>13</sup> India’s Mughal emperors were exhorted to dig wells, procure and distribute grains, and open *langars* during times of famine.<sup>14</sup>

Folk literature across the subcontinent alternately praised and pilloried the *baniya* and the *mahajan*, the creditor and intermittent usurer who held the Indian peasantry in bonds of debt and obligation, yet also saw to their sustenance with acts of munificence during moments of scarcity. Legends circulated in thirteenth-century Gujarat about a *baniya*, Jagdusha, who imported grain from distant countries upon hearing

<sup>11</sup> Sugata Bose, *Peasant Labour and Colonial Capital: Rural Bengal since 1770* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 17–24.

<sup>12</sup> Myron Weiner, *The Politics of Scarcity: Public Pressure and Political Response in India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), vii.

<sup>13</sup> Prasanna Parthasarathi, *The Transition to a Colonial Economy: Weavers, Merchants, and Kings in South India, 1720–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 48.

<sup>14</sup> Prithwis Chandra Ray, *Indian Famines: Their Causes and Remedies* (Calcutta: Cherry Press, 1901), 7–10.

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a prediction of famine; in Western India, the *baniya*'s bazaar taxes were said to pay for famine-time stockpiles.<sup>15</sup>

Late nineteenth and early twentieth-century anthropologists and administrators perceived in Indian villages complex systems of reciprocal obligation centered around food distribution. The colonial Dufferin Enquiry of 1888, an examination into the condition of Indian farmers, detailed codes for the public distribution of grains within villages after threshing.<sup>16</sup> By the 1930s, anthropologists in India had identified the *jajmani* system as the characteristic feature of economic life in the Indian village, with landlords – *jajmans* – paying barbers, potters, washermen, carpenters, and blacksmiths in grain.<sup>17</sup> It is perhaps too much to gird a distinct “moral economy of the peasant” – a purported willingness on the part of peasants to accept rapacious crop taxation in exchange for succor in times of dearth – upon an entire subcontinent.<sup>18</sup> Yet it is clear that across premodern India, sovereigns saw themselves as beholden to diverse codes of conduct that governed food distribution, from the textual Hindu ideal of *annadhan*, or food-giving, to the Bengali practice of *kangali bhojan*, the ritual feeding of the poor.<sup>19</sup>

Traditional patron–client relationships were decoupled by the onset of colonial rule, severing the bonds of obligation governing these practices. Grain riots predated British domination in India, but grew more frequent in the wake of late nineteenth-century famines.<sup>20</sup> The upheavals

<sup>15</sup> David Hardiman, *Feeding the Baniya: Peasants and Usurers in Western India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 154–162.

<sup>16</sup> P.B. Mayer, “Inventing Village Tradition: The Late 19th Century Origins of the North Indian ‘Jajmani System,’” *Modern Asian Studies* 27, no. 2 (May 1, 1993): 372; R.C. Temple, “Agricultural Folk-Lore Notes,” *The Folk-Lore Record* 5 (January 1, 1882): 35–37.

<sup>17</sup> The existence of the *jajmani* system was first posited by William Henricks Wiser, *The Hindu Jajmani System* (Lucknow: Lucknow Publishing House, 1936). See Mayer, “Inventing Village Tradition.”

<sup>18</sup> James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

<sup>19</sup> R.S. Khare, “Hospitality, Charity, and Rationing: Three Channels of Food Distribution in India,” in *Food, Society, and Culture: Aspects in South Asian Food Systems*, ed. R.S. Khare and M.S.A. Rao (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 1986), 277–296.

<sup>20</sup> On market disruptions and protest, see Ravi Ahuja, “State Formation and ‘Famine Policy’ in Early Colonial South India,” *Indian Economic Social History Review* 39, no. 4 (2002): 351–380; 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* 36, no. 3 (1999): 303–333; Hardiman, *Feeding the Baniya*, 254–271; Sanjay Sharma, “The 1837–38 Famine in U.P.: Some Dimensions of Popular Action,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 30, no. 3 (September 1, 1993): 337–372; and Sanjay Sharma, *Famine, Philanthropy, and the Colonial State: North India in the Early Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). On nineteenth-century famines more generally, see Mohiuddin Alamgir, *Famine in South Asia: Political Economy of Mass Starvation* (Cambridge: Oelgeschlager, Gunn & Hain, 1980); Mike



which erupted across Madras Presidency during the First World War, for example, were fueled by the expansion of colonial meddling in a traditional grain economy, with peasants resorting to insurrectionary protest to defend their continued subsistence.<sup>21</sup> The deeper penetration of market forces into agrarian India further altered the relationships between ideals of good governance and the material provision of foodstuffs, fueling more explicit critiques mounted in the name of hunger.<sup>22</sup>

By the late nineteenth century, Indians and Britons were advancing divergent accounts of India's worsening hunger. India's colonial officials went to pains to situate famines as a natural feature of the Indian ecological landscape, and as evidence of Indian's incapacity for self-rule. As early as the first Bengal famine, British administrators saw millions of deaths as evidence of a weak society too moored in fatalism to lift itself to prosperity.<sup>23</sup> Malthusian hubris underwrote these nineteenth-century beliefs, and imperial administrators conveniently ignored the seven decades of abundance predating their rule.<sup>24</sup> Yet as a new century dawned, Indian economic thinkers, alongside writers, artists, and poets, brought famines from the shadow of ecology and culture into the domain of history and political economy.<sup>25</sup> The Parsi educationist and parliamentarian Dadabhai Naoroji, in his 1901 *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India*, framed India as an economic space drained of its agricultural and monetary wealth by a rapacious foreign regime.<sup>26</sup> India, to Naoroji, had become a space where the "natural laws of economy" had

Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London: Verso, 2001); Michelle Burge McAlpin, *Subject to Famine: Food Crises and Economic Change in Western India, 1860–1920* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); and Hari Shanker Srivastava, *The History of Indian Famines and Development of Famine Policy, 1858–1918* (Agra: Sri Ram Mehra, 1968).

<sup>21</sup> David Arnold, "Looting, Grain Riots and Government Policy in South India 1918," *Past & Present*, no. 84 (August 1, 1979): 114.

<sup>22</sup> See Arjun Appadurai, "How Moral Is South Asia's Economy? A Review Article," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 43, no. 3 (May 1, 1984): 481–497.

<sup>23</sup> David Arnold, "Hunger in the Garden of Plenty," in *Dreadful Visitations: Confronting Natural Catastrophe in the Age of Enlightenment*, ed. Alessa Johns (London: Routledge, 1999), 82.

<sup>24</sup> S. Ambirajan, *Classical Political Economy and British Policy in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

<sup>25</sup> Sugata Bose, "Pondering Poverty, Fighting Famines: Towards a New History of Economic Ideas," in *Arguments for a Better World: Essays in Honor of Amartya Sen*, ed. Kaushik Basu and Ravi Kanbur, vol. 2: *Society, Institutions, and Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 425–426.

<sup>26</sup> Dadabhai Naoroji, *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* (London: S. Sonnenschein, 1901). See Darren C. Zook, "Famine in the Landscape: Imagining Hunger in South Asian History, 1860–1990," in *India's Environmental History: Colonialism, Modernity, and the Nation*, ed. Mahesh Rangarajan and K. Sivaramakrishnan, vol. 2 (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2012), 412–413.

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been distorted; only recognition of the “un-British” nature of this misrule would lift Indian subjects out of poverty.<sup>27</sup> Naoroji’s contemporary, the economist and civil servant Romesh Chunder Dutt, saw in an emaciated populace the stark consequences of colonial underdevelopment. Indians, he wrote, “attest to semi-starvation by their poor physique; numbers of them suffer from a daily insufficiency of food; and the poorer classes are trained by life-long hunger to live on less food than is needed for proper nourishment.”<sup>28</sup>

Dutt and Naoroji’s analyses sought to turn imperial logic on its head, and vernacular writers were advancing a similar body of critique. The Marathi nationalist Bal Gangadhar Tilak’s paper *Kesari* published a despondent poem in 1896 in the voice of the warrior-king Shivaji, lamenting the desolation of his hungry land; Tilak was promptly charged with sedition.<sup>29</sup> Five years earlier, Calcutta’s *Hitavadi* had lambasted foreign merchants “snatching away the bread from the mouths of the people.”<sup>30</sup> Short famine stories circulated widely across India: Hari Narayan Apte’s popular Marathi famine novel *Kal Tar Motha Kathin Ala* was translated into English as *Ramji: A Tragedy of the Indian Famine* and was circulated widely in India and the United Kingdom.<sup>31</sup> An Urdu pamphlet issued by the Ghadar Party in San Francisco around 1915 decried the colonial government’s military expenses in the face of preventable poverty and famine, calling for insurrection.<sup>32</sup> And images like *Bharat ki Lut* – the “Plunder of India” – circulated widely across India itself, showing a British official in a Union Jack cap pilfering food from an emaciated family. This “plunder” was superimposed over a map of India, damning quotes from British and Indian political figures, and a short poem on the ravages of hunger.<sup>33</sup>

The proliferation of these grim visions came as colonial idioms of governance were themselves being reworked in the name of stability. The

<sup>27</sup> Manu Goswami, “From Swadeshi to Swaraj: Nation, Economy, Territory in Colonial South Asia, 1870 to 1907,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 40, no. 4 (October 1, 1998): 615.

<sup>28</sup> Romesh Chandra Dutt, *The Economic History of India Under Early British Rule*, vol. 1 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1902), xxiii–xxiv. See also Romesh Chandra Dutt, *Famines in India: Their Causes and Possible Prevention* (London: P.S. King & Son, 1876); and Romesh Chandra Dutt, *Open Letters to Lord Curzon on Famines and Land Assessments in India* (London: Trübner, 1900).

<sup>29</sup> Bose, “Pondering Poverty, Fighting Famines,” 425–426.

<sup>30</sup> Bipin Chandra, *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India* (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1996), 162–167.

<sup>31</sup> Hari Narayan Apte, *Ramji: A Tragedy of the Indian Famine* (London: T.F. Unwin, 1897).

<sup>32</sup> *Hindson Ki Gavahi: Angrezi Raj Mein Parja Ke Dukh Ki Kahani [India’s Testimony: The Story of Sorrow Under British Rule]* (San Francisco: Ghadar Press, 1915).

<sup>33</sup> Devanarayan Varma, *Bharat ki Lut [The Plunder of India]* (Calcutta: Deva-Citrilaya, 1930).