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Food and Welfare in India, c. 1900–1950

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In 2001, the People’s Union for Civil Liberties submitted a writ petition to the Supreme Court of India on the “right to food.” The petitioner was a voluntary human rights organization; the initial respondents were the Government of India, the Food Corporation of India, and six state governments. The petition opens with three pointed questions posed to the court:

A. Does the right to life mean that people who are starving and who are too poor to buy food grains ought to be given food grains free of cost by the State from the surplus stock lying with the State, particularly when it is reported that a large part of it is lying unused and rotting?

B. Does not the right to life under Article 21 of the Constitution of India include the right to food?

C. Does not the right to food, which has been upheld by the Honourable Court, imply that the state has a duty to provide food especially in situations of drought, to people who are drought affected and are not in a position to purchase food?¹

The petition went on to invoke the Indian state’s own statistics to claim, “There are more than five crore (fifty million) people who have been victims of starvation.”² There was widespread evidence that, as farmers starved, overflowing government stocks of grains were being “destroyed, exported at throw-away prices, or even allowed to be eaten by rodents instead of distributing them to starving people.”³ Singling out the state government of Rajasthan, the petitioners argued that the state had failed in “the obligation to protect a citizen’s right to life enjoined on them by the Indian Constitution.”⁴

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¹ People’s Union for Civil Liberties [PUCL] v. Union of India [UOI] and Others, Writ Petition (Civil), No. 196 of 2001. The full text is available at: <http://www.righttofoodindia.org/case/case.html>.

² PUCL v. UOI and others, § 3.

³ *Ibid.*, § 11.

⁴ *Ibid.*, § 17.

“Starvation deaths” are acutely sensitive in modern India; the political position of hunger has been more ambivalent and complex.⁵ The Indian State has prided itself, justifiably, on the absence of major famines in India since independence, in stark contrast to the colonial period.⁶ Yet, in the same period, India has also consistently been home to the largest number of malnourished children of any country in the world.⁷ This paper seeks to trace the genealogy of the link between food and welfare in modern India, looking particularly to the late-colonial period, and bringing together intellectual history with the history of government. Why has hunger been linked so closely with discourses of justice and legitimate power in modern India? How have different kinds of hunger been differentiated? What visions of the Indian population, and of the relation between people and state, did the discourse of food generate?

From the late nineteenth century, food was at the heart of secular interventions to improve the welfare of the population of India. Claims and counter-claims surrounding the production, distribution, consumption, and nutritive value of food brought together (and into conflict) diverse initiatives to enhance life and prevent death, by the colonial state, Indian social reformers, nationalist politicians, and British and Indian scientists.⁸ At the same time, the problem of hunger and the persistence of starvation provoked the elaboration and extension of religiously informed notions of compassion, charity, and care, which imagined the population in ways different from those of the colonial state, and which attached different meanings to the discussion of pain.⁹ Thus in Gandhi’s conception, on which this paper focuses, (involuntary)

⁵ Journalist P. Sainath puts it with characteristic eloquence: “An exclusive focus on ‘starvation deaths’—disconnected from the larger canvas—seems to imply this: if they don’t die, everything’s alright. If they lose their land, cannot feed their families, see their children enter bondage, are forced into debt-driven prostitution—all that is okay. They just shouldn’t starve to death. That’s upsetting. It’s bad implementation.” P. Sainath, “It’s the Policy, Stupid, Not Implementation,” <http://www.indiatogether.org/opinions/ps1.htm/>.

⁶ Jean Dreze, *Famine Prevention in India* (London: London School of Economics, 1988); cf. Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London: Verso, 1999).

⁷ Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen, *India: Development and Participation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁸ On the British context for such interventions, see the illuminating work of James Vernon, notably, “The Ethics of Hunger and the Assembly of Society: The Techno-Politics of the School Meal in Britain,” *American Historical Review*, 110, 3 (2005): 693–725.

⁹ As Dipesh Chakrabarty has noted, “The capacity to notice and document suffering (even if it be one’s own suffering) from the position of a generalized and necessarily disembodied observer is what marks the beginnings of the modern self.” He argues that where “social thought” sees pain as “specific and hence open to secular interventions,” in religious thought “suffering is existential. It shadows man in his life.” The discourses of food and hunger in modern India brought these countervailing notions of pain—as necessary or preventable—into contention and dialogue. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Post-Colonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 119–20.

hunger occupied a position in a complex field that also included forms of what Talal Asad calls “agentic pain”: above all, the practice of fasting.¹⁰

The government of food in modern India developed alongside an imagination of hunger; the language of science, and in particular nutritional science, was central to both.¹¹ In making this connection, this paper seeks to restore the history of moral and political thought to the discussion of governmentality in colonial and post-colonial India.

STARVATION AND SOCIAL SOLIDARITY

That agricultural production was of cardinal interest to the East India Company state from the outset hardly needs stating.¹² During famines and subsistence crises, the colonial state stepped in, as its predecessors had done, to forestall social collapse and avert disorder.¹³ Nevertheless, the great famines of the last quarter of the nineteenth century marked a transformation in the nature of government in colonial India.

Recent work on the development of colonial governmentality in India has examined the broader effects of the colonial state’s attempts to understand famine and to represent it statistically.¹⁴ U. Kalpagam has argued that the Famine Code of 1880, the first of its kind in India, represented an important new technology in the state’s quest to know and characterize the population, in particular by distinguishing the deserving from the undeserving poor.¹⁵ In an important contribution to the field, Sarah Hodges has shown that it was in trying to govern the disorder caused by famine that the colonial state in India began to measure on a massive scale, and to envisage a “population” upon which it could act.¹⁶ Even more than epidemics, the famines of the 1870s stimulated the production of what Gyan Prakash describes

¹⁰ Talal Asad, “Thinking about Agency and Pain,” in *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 67–99.

¹¹ This is to suggest that, modifying Gyan Prakash’s argument, it was not only or even primarily by turning to an “inner and uncolonized tradition” that Indian nationalists were able to appropriate and “reinscribe” colonial governmentality. Cf. Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

¹² Ranajit Guha, *A Rule of Property for Bengal: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement* (Paris: Mouton, 1963).

¹³ Ravi Ahuja, “State Formation and ‘Famine Policy’ in Early Colonial South India,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 39, 4 (2002): 351–80.

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, “Governmentality,” in Graham Burchill, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller, eds., *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991). Initiators of the debate on colonial governmentality were David Scott, “Colonial Governmentality,” *Social Text* 43 (Fall 1995): 191–220; and Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

¹⁵ U. Kalpagam, “Colonial Governmentality and the ‘Economy,’” *Economy and Society* 29, 3 (2000): 418–38.

¹⁶ Sarah Hodges, “Governmentality, Population and the Reproductive Family in Modern India,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 39, 11 (13 Mar. 2004): 1157–63; Sarah Hodges, “Looting the Lock Hospital in Colonial Madras during the Famine Years of the 1870s,” *Social History of Medicine* 18 (2005): 379–98.

as an “elaborate grid of knowledges and practices that sought to produce a colonial complex of ‘men and things’”¹⁷: statistics, surveys, and censuses, and the development of an ever-finer mesh of administration.

As importantly, the question of hunger became central to discourses of legitimate power in India at this time. The protection of the population from starvation authorized new forms of political power and political intervention. The 1880 Famine Commission moved beyond any earlier commitments in declaring that in times of famine, “it becomes a paramount duty of the State to give all practicable assistance to the people . . . and to devote all its available resources to this end; and this duty is emphasized by the fact that the Government stands in the place of landlord to agriculturalists.”¹⁸ The Commission devised India’s first Famine Code, the backbone of which was the provision of massive public works. The Code, and its regional variants, set out detailed guidelines for the identification of conditions that threatened to spill over into famine.¹⁹

The manifest failure of the colonial state to prevent the mass starvation of the 1870s and the 1890s, however, left its claim to care for the welfare of the population open to critique and appropriation by Indian political economists, social reformers, and journalists. Using the state’s own statistics, Indian political commentators and political economists challenged the colonial state’s claims in two ways: First, they shifted the definition of welfare by turning attention from the acute crisis of famine to the conditions of everyday life.²⁰ Second, a number of Indians began to claim that they “knew” the population in ways the colonial state could not. Romesh Dutt, in his magnum opus on the economic history of India, claims an intimacy with “the Indian peasant,” resulting from his extensive travels as a colonial official in Bengal. He writes, “The appalling poverty and joylessness of [the peasant’s] life . . . cannot easily be pictured,” suggesting that he could picture it and his intended British audience could not.²¹

For many Indian commentators in the early twentieth century, food signified more than energy for the human body. The power of food within political discourse came from its embeddedness in culture: as Arjun Appadurai has argued, food has long fulfilled two “diametrically opposed” functions in India: “It can serve to indicate and construct social relations characterized by equality, intimacy or solidarity,” or it can “sustain relations characterized by rank, distance

¹⁷ Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason*, 157. This point was also raised in David Arnold’s presentation on “Famine and Ideas of Welfare in India,” at the conference on Welfare, Land and Taxes, Trinity Hall, Cambridge, 3 June 2005.

¹⁸ *Report of the Indian Famine Commission, 1880* (Calcutta: Government of India), 31–32.

¹⁹ See, for example: *Famine Code: Madras Presidency* (Madras: Government of Madras, 1883); *Bengal Famine Code*, rev. ed. (Calcutta: Government of Bengal, 1892).

²⁰ Dadabhai Naoroji, *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* (London: Swan, Sonnenschein and Co., 1901), 24.

²¹ R. C. Dutt, *The Economic History of India in the Victorian Age: From the Accession of Queen Victoria in 1837 to the Commencement of the Twentieth Century*, vol. 2 (London: Kegan, Paul and Co., 1904).

or segmentation.”²² Food—particular kinds of food, access to it, the threat of going without it—reflected the kinds of social divisions that preoccupied increasing numbers of Indians around the turn of the twentieth century: divisions between castes, between Hindu and Muslim, and between different regions of British India.

At the same time, perhaps more powerfully, the politics of food could stand at the heart of new ideas of social solidarity that underpinned the efflorescence of voluntary activity in the early twentieth century.²³ Recognizing the suffering of distant others could serve to bind community. This embodiment of sympathy was evident, from the start, in Gandhi’s mode of responding to starvation. In response to news of famine in India, Gandhi stated, “To be one nation means believing that, when a single Indian dies of starvation, all of us are dying of it and acting accordingly.”²⁴ Writing, as he was, from South Africa, the question of identification with distant others raised itself particularly strongly in his imagination. “If Indians here [in South Africa] observe the truth in word and deed and behave with courage,” he wrote, “that cannot but have some effect in India.” Gandhi believed that the pain of others could literally be “felt by the mind” of an observer.²⁵ His perspective here exemplifies the “complex exchange and circulation of sins and merits” that Foucault saw operating within “pastoral power”: “the force and complexity of the moral ties binding the shepherd to each member of his flock.”²⁶

Many regional literary traditions in India used hunger and starvation as metaphors both for the condition of India, and for the imagination of new regional, national, and even transnational collectivities.²⁷ The songs and poems of the Tamil patriot Subramania Bharati, to take one powerful example, abound with references to hunger. Bharati’s 1921 paean to the “Indian commonwealth” invokes the need for solidarity in the face of hunger:

Today we make a law and shall
For ever enforce it:

²² Arjun Appadurai, “Gastro-Politics in Hindu South Asia,” *American Ethnologist* 8, 3 (1981): 494–511, quote p. 496.

²³ Carey Watt, *Serving the Nation: Cultures of Service, Association and Citizenship* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²⁴ M. K. Gandhi, “Non-Cooperation Means Self Purification,” *Navajivan*, 27 Jan. 1921, in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* [henceforth *CWMG*], vol. 19 (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1958–1983, 90 vols.), 285.

²⁵ Gandhi, “Five Crores Starving,” *Indian Opinion*, 28 Mar. 1908, *CWMG*, vol. 8, 156–57.

²⁶ Michel Foucault, “Omnes et Singulatim: Towards a Critique of Political Reason,” in James Faubion, ed., *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–84*, vol. 3, Robert Hurley et al., trans. (London: Penguin, 2001), 298–325, quote p. 308; see also “The Subject and Power,” in the same volume, 326–48, quote pp. 334–35.

²⁷ Sugata Bose, “Nation as Mother: Representations and Contestations of ‘India’ in Bengali Literature and Culture,” in S. Bose and A. Jalal, eds., *Nationalism, Democracy and Development: State and Politics in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 50–75; Tanika Sarkar, “Nationalist Iconography: Images of Women in 19th-Century Bengali Literature,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 21 Nov. (1987): 2011–15.

If a single mouth goes without food
The world we will destroy!²⁸

Underlying this concern of all with the hunger of any one was a vision of the nation, once again communicated in the language of family and kinship, articulating a vision of social solidarity that transcended the divisions of caste and community:

We are all one clan, we are all one people,
All, all are India's children;
Of equal status, equal weight,
Of equal value, all of us
are kings in this land!

“All of us are kings in this land,” suggested a new kind of popular sovereignty, a power that resided in the population itself.

To juxtapose the concerns of the colonial state with those of a small but vocal Indian elite is to see two rather different discourses circulating within Indian political circles by the early decades of the twentieth century: one largely concerned with food, the other focusing more on hunger—the bodily experience, the *pain*, of lacking food. Each entailed different political possibilities.²⁹ The focus on food authorized new kinds of state intervention in the agrarian economy, new systems to monitor and prevent the generalized lack of food that threatened famine. To focus on hunger was to emphasize, rather, the development of a greater sense of social consciousness and social solidarity, even willingness towards sacrifice, on the part of those with food (that is, the wealthy and powerful), with respect to those that were hungry (the poor).

The intersection of discourses of food and hunger in the broader struggle for hegemony between the colonial state and the nationalist elite would shape, in the inter-war years, the content of “welfare” in late-colonial India, with lasting consequences. In the process, the fractures as well as the expanse of the pastoral power which nationalist elites, welfare workers, and social reformers exercised over the population became clear.

ENHANCING LIFE

The full scale and impact of agrarian commercialization on the consumption of food did not become apparent until the inter-war years, and this had a significant effect on the development of “pastoral power” in India. It appeared by this time that famine no longer threatened in India as once it had; the existence of

²⁸ Subramania Bharati, “Bharata Samudayam,” Tamil original available at: http://www.tamilnation.org/literature/bharathy/kavithaikal/thesiya1.htm#17.???_????????. I have slightly modified the translation, “Bharat Commonwealth,” in *Poems of Subramania Bharathy—A Selection*, P. S. Sundaram, trans. (Madras: Vikas Publishing House, 1982).

²⁹ I owe this formulation of the point to an anonymous *CSSH* reviewer.

the Famine Code and improvements in transportation led many to believe there would never again be mass mortality from famine.³⁰ There was no major famine in the country between 1908 and 1943.³¹ However, the new science of nutrition introduced new ways of thinking about the value of food, and the importance of particular foods not only in preventing death but also in enhancing life. Proteins, vitamins, and “protective” foods entered common vocabulary in India, spreading rapidly beyond the confines of laboratory science. Just as the threat of famine appeared to recede in India, the extent of malnutrition became clear.³²

The global economic depression of the 1930s placed in sharp relief the workings of world markets in food, and their failings.³³ Was food in the process of becoming a pure commodity, with no value beyond that given to it by the market?³⁴ Should the value of food be determined by the application of nutritional science, and according to the capacity of different foods to enrich life? Or did food retain its status as a “bio-moral” substance, constitutive of the body of the nation and capable of effecting moral transformation through its consumption? The notion of “protective” food gained new layers of meaning.

Nutritional analysis could reveal the population in both its diversity and its singularity. On an aggregate level, it revealed that the Indian population’s condition of life was dire. In the words of N. Gangulee, a member of the Royal Commission on Indian Agriculture (1926–1928) and a retired professor at the University of Calcutta, “No matter where one looks in India one sees chronic starvation, ill-health and premature death.” He argued, “Local surveys of dietaries show that the Indian communities have not been able to adjust their food requirements to the circumstances of their life and labour,” with the result that “the majority of the labouring class is starved, nervous, weakly and morose.”³⁵ By developing and lending greater scientific authority to the observations of the likes of Dadabhai Naoroji a generation earlier, nutritional analysis could provide a snapshot of the Indian population and its lack of vitality.

³⁰ Alexander Loveday, *History and Economics of Indian Famines* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1914).

³¹ For the demographic evidence, see T. Dyson, ed., *India’s Historical Demography: Studies in Famine, Disease and Society* (London: Curzon, 1989).

³² On the broader colonial context, see M. Worboys, “The Discovery of Colonial Malnutrition,” in D. Arnold, ed., *Imperial Medicine and Indigenous Societies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 208–25. The best discussion of India is David Arnold’s “Discovery of Malnutrition and Diet in Colonial India,” *Indian Economic and Social Review* 31, 1 (1994): 1–26.

³³ Here the early interest taken by the League of Nations in the question of nutrition helped to “globalize” it. The League’s work on the impact of poverty and unemployment on industrial workers’ diets in Europe lent itself to global replication. On this process, see Sunil Amrith, *Decolonizing International Health: India and Southeast Asia, 1930–65* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), ch. 1.

³⁴ The proliferation of family budget studies suggested, implicitly, that this was the case.

³⁵ N. Gangulee, *Health and Nutrition in India* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939), 26–27.

At the same time, new understandings of nutrition, and the technologies associated with them—consisting primarily of diet surveys—allowed for a much finer-grained analysis of hunger in India, and its distribution within and across different sections of the population and even within families. This was a first step toward more targeted interventions to redress imbalances in the availability and consumption of food. The broadest contrast was drawn in terms of India's agrarian and cultural regions, between the relatively better-nourished "wheat-eaters" and the malnourished "rice-eaters."³⁶ Yet, even this familiar distinction in colonial medical thinking was destabilized, lending greater fluidity to the idea of population.³⁷ Rather than reflecting inherent racial aptitudes, diet preferences now appeared as a socio-cultural phenomenon open to influence and even transformation. A new sense of agency and constraint entered discussions of hunger, with a focus not just on what people chose to eat, but also on what they could *afford* to eat.³⁸

Beyond these broad contrasts, successive dietary surveys showed that certain sections of the population were more vulnerable. Studies showed that industrial workers in India's towns—in general a fairly well-surveyed population, closely under the gaze of employers and the state—suffered from widespread nutritional deficiency, in both quantity and quality.³⁹ Perhaps more serious, and central to the discourse of Indian nationalism, was the nutritional status of the "mothers of 'Mother India,'" and the finding that "nutrition is at the bottom of the problem of maternal mortality."⁴⁰ Studies undertaken on the tea plantations of Assam and elsewhere showed that anemia was a key factor in India's high levels of maternal mortality.⁴¹ W. R. Aykroyd's extensive

³⁶ See Robert McCarrison and Roland Norris, "The Relationship of Rice to Beri-Beri in India," *Indian Medical Research Memoirs* 2 (1924); Gangulee, *Nutrition*; W. R. Aykroyd, "Nutrition in India," in League of Nations, Health Organization, *Intergovernmental Conference of Far Eastern Countries on Rural Hygiene*, C.H. 1235b, Geneva, Apr. 1937; W. R. Aykroyd, *Note on the Results of Diet Surveys in India* (Simla: India Research Fund, 1940). For further discussion of this distinction between rice and wheat, see Arnold, "Discovery of Malnutrition."

³⁷ For a sense of the older tradition of colonial writing on diet and race, see John Wilson Johnston, *A Contribution to the Dynamics of Racial Diet in India* (Edinburgh: Mclachlan and Stewart, 1876). For an early contrast between "ordinary" diets and those under conditions of captivity, see W. R. Cornish, *Reports on the Nature of the Food of the Inhabitants of the Madras Presidency and on the Diets of Prisoners in Zillah Jails* (Madras: United Scottish Press, 1863). For a more detailed discussion of these themes, see Arnold, "Discovery of Malnutrition."

³⁸ Aykroyd, "Nutrition in India."

³⁹ See, for example, A. C. Roy Choudhury, *Report of an Enquiry into the Standard of Living of Jute Mill Workers in Bengal* (Calcutta: Government of Bengal, 1930); N. K. Adyanthaya, *Report of an Enquiry into the Family Budgets of Industrial Workers in Madras City* (Madras: Government of Madras, 1938).

⁴⁰ Gangulee, *Nutrition*, 128.

⁴¹ L. Wills and M. M. Mehta, "Studies in Pernicious Anaemia of Pregnancy," *Indian Journal of Medical Research* 17 (1930): 777–92; Margaret Balfour, "Maternity Conditions and Anaemia in the Assam Tea-Gardens," *Journal of the Association of Medical Women in India* 21 (1933): 28–38; and Balfour brings together concerns with childbearing women, and industrial workers, in, "Diseases of Pregnancy and Labour in India, with Special Reference to Community,"

surveys of South Indian schoolchildren revealed this was another key population “at risk.”⁴² Harijans (*dalits*), too, suffered disproportionately from nutritional deficiencies.⁴³

Yet, precisely because of the powerful semiotic valence of food, the clinical language of malnutrition lent itself to appropriation and translation in support of other visions of the Indian population. The use of science to develop and enhance a national “moral economy”—emphasizing not the distinctions between different sections of the population as targets for government intervention, but commensality and solidarity—is particularly clear in Gandhi’s enthusiastic deployment of the international language of nutritional science in the 1930s.

Food was central to Gandhi’s life and to his politics.⁴⁴ Drawing on indigenous traditions, particularly on Jainism, and on a range of influences from abroad including the example of Trappist monks, the practice of fasting was central to Gandhi’s life: it served as a form of bodily purification, as penitential self-abnegation, and a form of political protest. Gandhi prided himself on, and his followers admired, his bodily discipline. Gandhi’s secretary Pyarelal wrote in the midst of the Mahatma’s fast unto death in 1931 in protest against the proposal for separate electorates for Dalits, “One could not help being struck by the way in which he economized his strength. He had reduced it to a science.”⁴⁵

Gandhi’s “science” of the body emerged from his ceaseless “experiments” going back to his time spent in London and South Africa.⁴⁶ However, Gandhi was able to harness some of his ethical and dietary prescriptions for others to the new authority of nutritional science, including his fervent vegetarianism, and his belief in the importance of simple, un-spiced food as the key to continence and bodily discipline.⁴⁷ His reading of nutritional tracts did not transform, so much as reinforce Gandhi’s fundamental conceptions of “diet and diet reform.” In his correspondence with noted nutritionists

Proceedings of the Seventh Congress of the Far Eastern Association of Tropical Medicine (Calcutta: Far Eastern Association of Tropical Medicine, 1927), 318–28.

⁴² W. R. Aykroyd and K. Rajagopal, “The State of Nutrition in Schoolchildren in South India,” *Indian Journal of Medical Research* 24, 2 (1936): 419–38; W. R. Aykroyd and S. Krishnan, “The State of Nutrition of Schoolchildren in Three Towns of South India,” *Indian Journal of Medical Research* 24, 3 (1937): 707–26.

⁴³ Gangulee, *Nutrition*, 119.

⁴⁴ Joseph Alter, “Gandhi’s Body, Gandhi’s Truth: Nonviolence and the Biomoral Imperative of Public Health,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 55, 2 (1996): 301–22; David Arnold, *Gandhi: Profiles in Power* (London: Longman, 2001).

⁴⁵ Pyarelal, *Epic Fast* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1932), 44.

⁴⁶ Alter, “Gandhi’s Body.”

⁴⁷ See, *inter alia*, “Dietetic Changes,” *Harijan*, 27 July 1935, in M. K. Gandhi, *Diet and Diet Reform* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1948), 86–87; “Minimum Diet,” *Harijan*, 31 Aug. 1935, in *ibid.*, 30; “Polished v. Unpolished,” *Harijan*, 26 Oct. 1934, in *ibid.*, 44–46.

(and successive directors of the Coonoor Nutrition Research Laboratories), published in *Harijan* and *Young India*, Gandhi made the case for the nutritional virtues of a vegetarian diet.⁴⁸ Nutritionists with long experience of India did not discount these views, though they tended to emphasize more than Gandhi the value of milk. “I am glad you are interesting yourself in the matter of food and I agree with much that you say,” Robert McCarrison wrote to Gandhi, “but let me assure you that a little more *fortissimo* on the “milk and milk-products theme” will do great good when you are leading the orchestra of Truth.”⁴⁹

As well as drawing on nutritional knowledge to enhance discipline and vitality on an individual basis, Gandhi turned his attention toward the ability of food to enhance life on a more aggregated level. Healthy and nutritive food was but the beginning of the transformation Gandhi envisaged. In his vision, a transformation in bodily practice would herald a growth in national consciousness and an improvement and unification of the Indian “race.” Gandhi insisted, “If we would be national instead of provincial we would have to have an interchange of habits as to food, simplify our tastes and produce healthy dishes all can take with impunity. . . . Volunteers will have to learn the art of cooking and for this purpose they will have also to study the values of different foods and evolve common dishes easily and cheaply prepared.”⁵⁰

Here, “national food” is something that will come about through active creation, transcending the divisions and distinctions implied by the myriad of “provincial habits” governing diets and eating habits across India. For Gandhi, “national food” would have three main components. The first was vegetarianism, arguably thus excluding a large proportion of India’s population. “The unlimited capacity of the plant world to sustain man at his highest,” Gandhi wrote, was “yet unexplored by modern medical science,” and it stood to be explored by Indian medical men in particular, “whose tradition is vegetarian.”⁵¹ The second component of “national food” involved a kind of social leveling, contrasting “common food for common people”⁵² with the lavish and indulgent foods used by the upper castes as a marker of distinction. Repeatedly, Gandhi linked the consumption of simple, nutritive food with the act of home spinning and the wearing of *khadi*.⁵³ Finally, Gandhi associated the

⁴⁸ Gandhi, *Diet and Diet Reform*.

⁴⁹ Robert McCarrison, letter to Gandhi in *Young India*, 15 Aug. 1929, in *ibid.*, 24–25.

⁵⁰ Gandhi, “National Food,” *Harijan*, 5 Jan. 1934, in *Diet and Diet Reform* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1949), 29–30.

⁵¹ Gandhi, “Unfired Food Experiment,” *Young India*, 18 July 1929, in *ibid.*, 18.

⁵² Gandhi, “National Food.”

⁵³ See, for example, Gandhi’s notion of a “cloth famine”: Speech to Students of Gujarat Mahavidyalaya, Ahmedabad, 13 Jan. 1921, *CWMG*, vol. 22. For further discussion, see C. A. Bayly, “The Origins of Swadeshi (Home Industry): Cloth and Indian Society, 1700–1930,” in *Origins of Nationality in South Asia: Patriotism and Ethical Government in the Making of Modern India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 172–209; and Emma Tarlo, *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India* (London: Hurst, 1996).

evolution of nutritive “national food” with the actual practice of preparing and sharing food, using his *ashram* as a field of experiment in training volunteers to cook and eat together as a gesture of solidarity, aiming to transcend, through practice, distinctions of caste and status.⁵⁴ That is to say, “national food,” which lay always in the future, would both provide for minimum bodily needs, and foster bonds of solidarity and reciprocity within the body of the nation.

In bridging the function of food in creating community with the pressing imperative of improving the welfare of all, the science of nutrition played a crucial role.⁵⁵ Nutritional science provided a new language, a new measure of the “value” of food, juxtaposed against the value given to food by the market. Gandhi’s writings on nutrition are full of references to the latest research on the subject: he referred, for example, to Robert McCarrison’s experiments with rats,⁵⁶ to *The Newer Knowledge of Nutrition* by E. V. McCollum, and to homegrown texts such as *Balanced Diets*, by H. V. Tilak of the Bombay Presidency Baby and Health Week Association. He carried on a public correspondence with both McCarrison and Aykroyd.⁵⁷ Above all, Gandhi gave pride of place—because of its authority and its universality—to the League of Nations Health Committee’s seminal findings on the physiological bases of human nutrition in 1936; a summary of the report immediately appeared in the pages of *Harijan*, one of Gandhi’s main outlets of publication.⁵⁸ In his search for a diet that would bring national vigor and vitality, Gandhi turned to the scientific authority of the League of Nations, and its claim to have discovered universal minimum standards.

For Gandhi, being able to invoke nutritional “values” to supplement his conception of food as a bio-moral substance enabled him to amplify his critique of the market as the arbiter of value, and elevate the household and the village community as the sites of virtuous, ethical production and consumption. Not only did polished rice weaken the vitality of the population, it was an example of the economic and moral impoverishment of India’s villages through mechanization and commoditization. “If rice can be pounded in the

⁵⁴ Gandhi, “A Talk to Village Workers,” extract from a talk given on 22 Oct. 1935, in *Diet and Diet Reform*, 31–33. On this occasion, Gandhi had invited almost one hundred village workers to his *ashram* and had prepared for them a special meal that reflected his vision for “national food”: cheap, wholesome, vegetarian, and distinctively Indian.

⁵⁵ Indeed, the language of nutrition was at least as crucial in this regard as was the resort to indigenous medical and scientific practices that Gyan Prakash emphasizes in *Another Reason*.

⁵⁶ Wellcome Contemporary Medical Archive Centre, London, papers of R. McCarrison, GC 205: R. McCarrison, *Nutrition and Health, Being the Cantor Lectures Delivered before the Royal Society of Arts, 1936* (London: The McCarrison Society, n.d.).

⁵⁷ Gandhi, “Unfired Foods,” *Young India*, 15 Aug. 1929, in *Diet and Diet Reform*, 26–27.

⁵⁸ “Findings of the International Commission of Experts Appointed by the Health Committee of the League of Nations,” *Harijan*, 25 Apr. 1936, in *Diet and Diet Reform*, 101. The original report was: League of Nations, *Report on the Physiological Bases of Nutrition*, League of Nations Document A.12(a), 1936.

villages after the old fashion,” he argued, “the wages will fill the pockets of the rice pounding sisters and the rice eating millions will get some sustenance from the unpolished rice instead of pure starch which the polished rice provides.” In this vision, the link between virtue, justice, and nutrition is intimate. “Human greed,” he concluded “which takes no count of the health or the wealth of the people who come under its heels, is responsible for the hideous rice-mills one sees in all the rice-producing tracts.”⁵⁹

For Gandhi, the notion of minimum standards served as a form of social leveling, part of his critique of luxury and excess. “Common food for common people,” as he put it, could begin to foster a new, national sense of social solidarity rather than division. For other observers, however, the science of nutrition promised to detach food from culture and custom altogether, by turning it into quantifiable units of energy. As Nick Cullather has put it, nutritional measurement could suggest, “Food has a uniform meaning . . . and a standard value that can be tabulated as easily as currency or petroleum.”⁶⁰ Food, disembedded from its cultural meanings, could thus acquire the “character of calculability” and enter into an economy of equivalences.⁶¹

Such a conception was attractive to a small but eloquent group of left-leaning Indian nationalists, committed to using science and technology to transform India (I call them, as shorthand, India’s “modernists”), who had begun to look toward experiments in state-building and planning elsewhere in the world, and not only in the Soviet Union, as the answer to India’s chronic poverty.⁶²

In the modernist imagination, nutrition thus came to be something useful to the state. The National Planning Committee—the Congress party’s state-in-waiting, led by Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose—was unequivocal. “The prevalent under-nutrition and malnutrition should be tackled by systematic crop planning,” they declared, “stressing the production of heavy-yielding, energy-producing and also protective foodstuffs.”⁶³ It was no bad thing, for the planners, if food were to become a pure commodity, devoid of spirit and deeper

⁵⁹ Gandhi, “Polished v. Unpolished.”

⁶⁰ Nick Cullather, “Foreign Policy of the Calorie,” *American Historical Review* 112, 2 (2007): 337–64.

⁶¹ Following, here, the usage of Timothy Mitchell, *The Rule of Experts: Egypt, Technopolitics, Modernity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002). I am grateful to an anonymous *CSSH* reviewer for clarifying this point.

⁶² For a recent perspective on the intellectual history of planning in India, see Benjamin Zachariah, *Developing India: An Intellectual and Social History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁶³ National Planning Committee, *Population: Report of the Sub-Committee*, Chair: Dr Radhakamal Mukherjee, K. T. Shah, ed. (Bombay: Vohra and Co, 1947), 144–45. The Planning Committee’s reports were published after 1947, but their discussions took place between 1938 and 1940, and should therefore be read in the context of the debates of the 1930s.

moral significance, so long as the state regulated and controlled the production and distribution of the commodity. Gripped by an awareness of the powerful semiotics of food in Indian society, and the potential such deeper meanings had to derail the plans, the Planning Committee demanded, “all social customs, religious taboos and injunctions which now stand in the way of the husbandry of soil resources and efficient utilisation of available food resources have now to be abjured to mitigate the effects of chronic food shortage and poverty.”⁶⁴ It would be difficult to find a clearer statement of the modernist conception that nutritional values, vital values, were the highest values.

The end that the Planning Committee had in mind was the efficiency of the population, which meant, in effect, the efficiency of labor. As the late Raj Chandavarkar reminded us, by the 1930s the struggle to control and subdue labor was at the forefront of both colonial and elite Indian strategies of government.⁶⁵ This quest for efficiency expressed itself through a fervent belief in eugenics, of course, as much as through a desire for “national food planning.”⁶⁶

The values of nutritional science reinforced the modernists’ conception of labor in India in terms of what Marx called “abstract labour”: the notion that “all labour is an expenditure of human labour-power, in the physiological sense,” a “productive expenditure of human brains, muscles, nerves. . . .”⁶⁷ Thus the Planning Committee suggested an interchangeable equivalence between the components of nutrition and the living, working human being, thinking of them collectively as “Energy Units, or some such equally effective and truly representative medium of measurement.”⁶⁸ This was a vision of life in terms of its stripped-down, biological essence.

The Congress Planning Committee was particularly concerned with India’s growing population; if they did not share Malthusian pessimism, they nevertheless regarded the challenge of feeding India’s “teeming millions” as a fundamental one.⁶⁹ In his widely read book, *Food Planning for Four Hundred Millions*, Radhakamal Mukherjee—head of the Planning Committee’s group on population—suggested, “In order to facilitate calculations of total food requirements the population is reduced to a common consumption unit by

⁶⁴ National Planning Committee, *Population*, 127.

⁶⁵ Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, “Customs of Governance: Colonialism and Democracy in Twentieth Century India,” *Modern Asian Studies* 41, 3 (2007): 441–70.

⁶⁶ On the Planning Committee’s obsession with eugenics, see my “Political Culture of Health in India: A Historical Perspective,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 13 Jan. (2007): 114–21; and Benjamin Zachariah, “Uses of Scientific Argument: The Case of Development in India, c. 1930–1950,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 29 Sept. (2001): 3689–702.

⁶⁷ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Ben Fowkes, trans. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 130, 134. For an elaboration in the Indian context, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁶⁸ National Planning Committee, *Population*, 14.

⁶⁹ Gyan Chand, *India’s Teeming Millions* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1939).

assigning proper weights for sex and age differences.” He accorded to the Indian population a “man value” per head: children from birth to fifteen years of age: 0.7; males over fifteen years old: 1.0; women over fifteen: 0.83.⁷⁰

The modernists in the Congress were as interested as Gandhi was in forging bonds of national solidarity, and indeed many were deeply preoccupied with the social and communal divisions that seemed to intensify in the 1930s. However, precisely because they saw the welfare of the population as their highest end, the modernists voiced deep suspicion of India’s “moral economy” and traditional patterns of obligation and reciprocity. At the heart of the Planning Committee’s vision was a stinging critique of charity, which had provided the moral and ethical basis for the elite imagination of hunger since the later nineteenth century. They presented the principle of sympathy, the nation as family, as both outmoded and inefficient.

The Planning Committee was sure that “when planned society comes fully into being, occasions for individual unorganized or sporadic charity will have no place,” even if this charity was motivated by an ethic of “service” (*seva*) or self-sacrifice. Love for one’s fellow Indians as brothers and sisters, this seemed to suggest, was simply not enough. An ethic of sharing was too unreliable to form the basis of a new national community. The modernist leaders of the Congress were convinced that “misfortunes for which such charity is at present provided will be far rarer then, and such as occur will be guarded against by the collective obligation of the state.”⁷¹

However, two challenges faced the Congress Planning Committee’s vision of National Food Planning, both of which would have lasting implications. The first was that India’s leading nutritionists never made simple claims that nutritional science could somehow detach food from culture; they were keenly aware that cultural preferences and hierarchies as well as religious beliefs and taboos would shape people’s food choices. N. Gangulee wrote that Hindus “have a tenacious preference for diets determined by religious bias and are usually averse to any change.” Highlighting a phenomenon that the grammar of planning could not accommodate, he noted that the “influence of communal groups and their pressure often functions as a deterrent to new or tabooed foods.”⁷² India’s Muslims were “comparatively free” from food restrictions, yet had to “draw upon the common supply of foodstuffs,” so that the main marker of Muslim distinctiveness lay in “methods of food preparation.”⁷³ Gangulee did not appear to believe, like the Congress Planning Committee, that “all social customs, religious taboos and injunctions”

⁷⁰ Radhakamal Mukherjee, *Food Planning for Four Hundred Millions* (London: MacMillan, 1938).

⁷¹ National Planning Committee, *Population*, 145.

⁷² Gangulee, *Nutrition*, 199.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 200–1.

governing diet could be “abjured.” Where they might have agreed was in concluding, “the only real solution for the problem of malnutrition . . . is an appreciable rise in the income of the workers and peasants.”⁷⁴

Thus, the second, and perhaps the greater challenge to the regulation of food by wise planners lay in the deepening and expansion of food markets in India. To take one striking illustration, by 1939 there were over three hundred commodity exchanges in India, dealing in rice, turmeric, sugar and pepper, and oilseeds and cotton; they traded in both options and futures.⁷⁵ In their extensive investigations into the food economy of South India, W. R. Aykroyd and his Indian colleagues became convinced that the value given to food by the market did not accord with the optimization of nutritional value.⁷⁶

As he traveled the length and breadth of South India conducting diet surveys in the later 1930s, Aykroyd became aware of the tendency of colonial “development” to mitigate the risk of absolute starvation but to worsen chronic malnutrition. Aykroyd’s pioneering research had shown that the preponderance of highly milled rice in the South Indian diet led to a range of nutritional deficiencies, a result of the lack of proteins and “protective foods,” and particularly leafy vegetables.⁷⁷ He and his colleagues concluded that paddy was becoming “*an article of commerce*,” and lamented that with the proceeds of paddy sales villagers would buy less nutritious machine-milled rice, often imported from Burma or Siam.⁷⁸

With the increasing role of markets in determining the availability and the distribution of food, India’s future policymakers tended to emphasize the need to govern food production, supply, and distribution within a protected national economy. The tension between agrarian commercialization and the aim of governing to ensure the population’s welfare was a key point of friction in Indian political culture from this point onward.

THE RETURN OF STARVATION

Traditionally, the clash between the nationalist movement and the colonial state appears as a struggle over sovereignty—the right to rule. However, already by the 1920s both sides claimed that their ends were higher than sovereignty; both argued that they could best care for the welfare and improvement of the

⁷⁴ Ibid., 234.

⁷⁵ V. Venkatesan, “Hoarder’s Delight,” *Frontline*, 25 Apr. (2008): 22.

⁷⁶ W. R. Aykroyd, “The Economic Aspects of the Problem of Nutrition in India,” *Indian Journal of Social Work* 2, 3 (1941): 269–82.

⁷⁷ A synthesis of Aykroyd’s many studies can be found in W. R. Aykroyd, B. G. Krishnan, R. Passmore, and A. R. Sundararajan (Coonoor Nutrition Research Laboratory), *Indian Medical Research Memoirs*, No. 32, *The Rice Problem in India* (Jan. 1940), British Library; Asia, Pacific and Africa Collection; India Office Records [henceforth IOR], V/25/850/92.

⁷⁸ Aykroyd et al., *The Rice Problem in India*.

population.⁷⁹ Nehru put this starkly in a letter to a British charity worker in 1929: “If the government at present functioning in India were really desirous of attacking and eradicating poverty, they would realize that the responsibility for this poverty is theirs and therefore the speediest way of ending it is to remove themselves from the scene of action, liquidate their government and make room for others who can tackle the problem with greater disinterestedness and competence than they have shown.”⁸⁰ The key was that Indian nationalists held the initiative in expanding the notion of welfare, goading the colonial state into trying to match their claims. The enrichment of life became the ultimate end of government.⁸¹ Under the pressures of the Second World War, however, this loose consensus crumbled.

The return of mass starvation to India, in Bengal in 1943, came as a traumatic shock. Certainly, Malthusians of all stripes had maintained a degree of pessimism regarding the inevitability of another famine. Nevertheless, the 1930s had witnessed a shift toward a view of food as enhancing life, rather than simply sustaining it, and small-scale experiments, surveys, and reforms abounded. “The days when we could cast the blame on the gods for all our ills are past,” Nehru had written in 1929; “Modern science claims to have curbed to a large extent the tyranny and the vagaries of nature.”⁸²

But neither science nor the modern state could protect the three million Bengalis who died in the famine of 1943–1944. Indeed, it was clear even at the time that the colonial state did much to create the conditions for famine. Trying to shape the finer details of people’s diets appeared a luxury, when the prospect of absolute scarcity seemed so near. A generation of writing decrying the nutritional evils of white rice gave way to desperate attempts to increase and regulate rice production, in India and in Southeast Asia as a whole.⁸³

Indian nationalists, many of them imprisoned during the famine after the Quit India movement of 1942, as well as social welfare workers, nutritionists and communists, observed the famine with horror, and began to draw lessons from the experience. Few were more eloquent on this point than Nehru, writing his *Discovery of India* from Ahmadnagar jail, and it was

⁷⁹ As Michel Foucault put it in his lectures on sovereignty and biopolitics, “One might say this: It is as though power, which used to have sovereignty as its modality or organising schema, found itself unable to govern the economic and political body of a society that was undergoing both a demographic explosion and industrialization.” M. Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*, David Macey, trans. (London: Penguin, 2003), 249.

⁸⁰ Jawaharlal Nehru to B. J. K. Hallows (Deputy Commissioner, Allahabad and President of the Famine Relief Fund of Gonda), 26 June 1929, in, S. Gopal and Uma Iyengar, eds., *The Essential Writings of Jawaharlal Nehru* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 12.

⁸¹ Cf. Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*.

⁸² Nehru to B. J. K. Hallows, 26 June 1929.

⁸³ IOR/M/4/936, Food: Rice Study Group, Feb.–Jun. 1947; IOR/M/4/809, Food: International Emergency Food Council; Singapore Sub-Committee on Rice, Oct. 1946–Oct. 1947.

already clear as the war drew to a close that Nehru's views would be of great consequence for India's future.

The first lesson was perhaps the obvious one: that any claim the colonial state could make of caring for the welfare of the Indian population was now bankrupt. "In any democratic or semi-democratic country," Nehru stressed, "such a calamity would have swept away all the governments concerned with it," particularly when it was clear, as in Bengal, that "it was a man-made famine which could have been foreseen and avoided."⁸⁴ The root of the problem was that the government, "constituted as it is" was "completely occupied in its primary task of ensuring its own continuance."⁸⁵

Perhaps more shocking was what the famine had revealed about the "moral sentiments" of India. Contemporary commentary abounds with references to the complete breakdown of relations of moral obligation in the midst of the famine, something Paul Greenough showed with great force and clarity in his classic work on the event.⁸⁶ The Bengali communist Bhowani Sen, whose account of the famine is one of the best known, wrote, "Women sell themselves literally in hordes, and young boys act as pimps for the military. After having tolerated theft, bribery and deception we have come to a stage where we fail to stand up even to this barbarism."⁸⁷ Patrons abandoned clients, fathers abandoned women and children.⁸⁸ Greenough argues that these were conscious choices, designed to perpetuate the male descent line.⁸⁹

Nehru, who must have read accounts like these in prison, noted with revulsion that as "the streets of Calcutta were strewn with corpses," the elites continued with their "dancing and feasting and a flaunting of luxury." The horse races went on, and though transport was lacking to provide food to the starving, "racehorses came in special boxes by rail from other parts of the country."⁹⁰ Nehru argued that such behavior was to be expected of the British, "for they had lived their life apart, caste-bound as they were"; the real horror lay in the spectacle of "those Indians who functioned in this way." A "wide gulf"

⁸⁴ Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund/Oxford University Press, 2003 [1946]), 496.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 498.

⁸⁶ Paul Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943–4* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982). This remains the best English language history of the famine.

⁸⁷ Bhowani Sen, *Rural Bengal in Ruins*, N. Chakravarty, trans. (Bombay: People's Publishing House, 1945).

⁸⁸ P. C. Mahalanobis, Ramakrishna Mukerjee, Ambika Ghosh, *A Sample Survey of the After-Effects of the Bengal Famine of 1943* (Calcutta: Statistical Publishing Society, 1946); T. G. Narayan, *Famine over Bengal* (Calcutta: Book Company, Ltd., 1944). See also the classic analysis in Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay in Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

⁸⁹ Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery*. See also Paul Greenough, "Indian Famines and Peasant Victims: The Case of Bengal in 1943–4," *Modern Asian Studies* 14, 2 (1980): 205–35.

⁹⁰ Nehru, *Discovery of India*, 497.

separated these Indian elites from “their own people,” and “no considerations even of decency and humanity” could bridge this gulf.⁹¹ Only a thoroughgoing transformation of the state could stand in the stead of “decency” and “humanity”. As Appadurai has pointed out, many observers of the famine witnessed the “moral opposite of Bengali ideas of reciprocity and nurture.”⁹²

The Bengal famine underscored the intimate connection between food and political justice. It was the colonial state’s refusal to provide rice to the starving that so dramatically represented the bankruptcy of its legitimacy. But the starvation also highlighted that there were “enemies of the people” within the national body. Writing in 1944, Gandhi returned to and amplified a theme from his earlier writings on food: the pernicious role of hoarders in causing people to starve. “Today our own people are depriving the public of food grains,” he wrote, “I cannot tolerate our people behaving thus, and collecting vast fortunes at the cost of people’s starvation.” Corruption “is already there in the Government,” he declared, “but it has increased to a very great extent amongst those middlemen who live on brokerage.”⁹³

Communist commentators were even more forthright on this point. They blamed the famine on government inaction in the face of hoarders and speculators. Writing of the food situation in the United Provinces in 1944, S. G. Sardesai observed the behavior of local grain merchants, and concluded, “A more bare-faced demand for absolute and unbridled profiteering could not be made. . . . A more frank confession that the usual rise in prices and vanishing of goods that follow control measures are . . . deliberately manipulated by the trader-hoarders, to blow up price-control, procurement and rationing, could not be given.”⁹⁴ He argued, in support of the government’s war effort, “Total mobilization means vigorous and just procurement of the genuine surplus from rural areas, vigorous price controls, and total rationing in cities.”⁹⁵ The Kerala communist leader E. M. S. Namboodiripad put it succinctly: “Government proposes, black marketeer disposes.”⁹⁶

The sight of starvation and the failure of reciprocity and social solidarity now furnished an imagination of disaster that scarred the psyche of Nehru’s generation of Indian leaders. Having asserted that national sovereignty would alleviate the problem of starvation, Nehru and his contemporaries were haunted by the prospect of failure. “We live continually on the verge of disaster in India, and indeed disaster sometimes overwhelms us,” Nehru wrote.⁹⁷ Writing

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 497.

⁹² Arjun Appadurai, “How Moral is South Asia’s Economy?—A Review Article,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 43, 3 (1984): 481–97, quote p. 485.

⁹³ Gandhi, Talk with Mridula Sarabhai, Sevagram, 26 Oct. 1944, *CWMG*, vol. 78, 234.

⁹⁴ S. G. Sardesai, *Food in the United Provinces* (Bombay: People’s Publishing House, 1944), 19.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 36–37.

⁹⁶ E. M. S. Namboodiripad, *Food in Kerala* (Bombay: People’s Publishing House, 1944), 16.

⁹⁷ Nehru, *Discovery of India*, 535.

in 1944, the Patna University economist and demographer Gyan Chand put it starkly: “Ours is a death-ridden country. We might very well adopt the human skull as our national emblem.”⁹⁸

In this context, deaths from starvation represented a double indictment: they signaled both the enduring power of nature over the planned society of science and rationality and the failure of government to fulfill its minimum obligations. The very real fears of another “breakdown”—in food supplies, social order, or civilization itself—help to explain the language of crisis and emergency that continued to be used in connection with the “food problem” in independent India, throughout Nehru’s premiership and beyond.

FOOD, SOVEREIGNTY, AND WELFARE

The Second World War wrecked the regional food economies of South and Southeast Asia that had developed over the previous half-century and teetered on the brink of collapse as a result of the Great Depression.⁹⁹ Moreover, it had become clear that the operation of regional and local food markets optimized neither nutrition nor security, and in the crisis of war, failed to prevent and perhaps even hastened starvation.¹⁰⁰ In this context, two countervailing but related tendencies set in. The first was an assertion of the state’s sovereignty over the economy and in particular over the production and distribution of food. The second, paradoxically, consisted of a range of moves to institute a new, global order of international charity (“food aid”), a set of compromises with sovereignty in order to secure the greater end of food security, now the cornerstone of state strategies to care for the welfare of the population. Neither of these tendencies went uncontested in the years running up to India’s Partition and independence.

The Government of India instituted a comprehensive system of food rationing in 1946, adapting and extending the rationing scheme the colonial state had instituted during the war.¹⁰¹ One American observer, economist T. W. Schultz, remarked, “No country in the world, with perhaps the exception of Russia, has gone so far in controlling basic food distribution.” By 1946, the rationing scheme covered almost eight hundred cities and towns.¹⁰² In order to prevent starvation, thought to be stalking the land, the official ration

⁹⁸ Gyan Chand, *Problem of Population* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1944), 10.

⁹⁹ V. D. Wickizer and M. K. Bennett, *The Rice Economy of Monsoon Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Food Research Institute, 1941); see C. J. Baker, “Economic Reorganization and the Slump in Southeast Asia,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23, 3 (1981): 325–39.

¹⁰⁰ See Sugata Bose, “Starvation amidst Plenty: The Making of Famine in Bengal, Honan and Tonkin, 1942–45,” *Modern Asian Studies* 24, 4 (1990): 699–727.

¹⁰¹ Government of India, Foodgrains Policy Committee, *Interim Report* (New Delhi, 1948); Government of India, Foodgrains Policy Committee, *Final Report* (New Delhi, 1948).

¹⁰² Report of American Famine Mission to India, led by T. W. Schultz, cited in Henry Knight, *Food Administration in India, 1939–47* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1954), 253.

approached, paradoxically, starvation levels.¹⁰³ The interim government in 1947 launched a revised version of the government's wartime "Grow More Food Campaign," and in 1949, the Government of India set the campaign's goal as national self-sufficiency by 1952.¹⁰⁴ Underlying the quest to increase food production was a growing, and increasingly global fear that without such an expansion, population growth would produce a Malthusian catastrophe in India; the war had merely strengthened this conviction held by many population theorists during the 1930s.¹⁰⁵

As Uday Mehta has written, with great insight, the "immediate ambit" of political power in post-colonial India was "dictated by the intensity of 'mere life'"—mass poverty and destitution put most Indians "under the pressing dictates of their bodies." "And this ambit," Mehta observes, "can have no limiting bounds. This simple logic transforms power from a traditional concern with freedom to a concern with life and its necessities."¹⁰⁶ Ironically, the absence of "limiting bounds" meant that the concern with national self-sufficiency in food was always tempered by an awareness of the need for food from outside, and even a willingness to compromise with sovereignty in order to obtain it, in the form of charity from abroad.

The possibility of gift exchange based on sovereign equality and anti-colonial solidarity was raised by a little-remarked-upon episode on the eve of independence. In the midst of a bloody war of independence against the Dutch, Indonesia's socialist Prime Minister Soetan Sjahrir made a dramatic offer to ship five hundred thousand tons of rice to India as a gesture of post-colonial solidarity. Sjahrir's many opponents accused him of giving rice away while Indonesia itself starved.¹⁰⁷ He made the offer directly to Nehru, as interim Prime Minister, from one nationalist leader to another. Sjahrir's offer was deeply symbolic: no longer were India and Indonesia linked in the language of colonial geography, as the "Monsoon Asia" of wet rice cultivation, or through the nutritional discourse of the dietary deficiencies of rice eaters.¹⁰⁸ Now rice was a symbol of international reciprocity, between two sovereign nations free from European domination.

The colonial administration in India, on its last legs, recognized the significance of Sjahrir's offer, and its deeper implications. British military authorities refused to provide the Indonesian government with the essential transport they

¹⁰³ Knight, *Food Administration*.

¹⁰⁴ *Report of the Foodgrains Enquiry Committee, 1957* (New Delhi: Ministry of Food and Agriculture, 1957), 26–27.

¹⁰⁵ On this point, see Hodges, "Governmentality."

¹⁰⁶ Uday S. Mehta, "Indian Constitutionalism: The Articulation of a Political Vision," in, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Rochona Majumdar, and Andrew Sartori, eds., *From the Colonial to the Postcolonial: India and Pakistan in Transition* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 13–30, 26–27.

¹⁰⁷ Rudolf Mrazek, *Sjahrir* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 333.

¹⁰⁸ See, for example, Pierre Gourou, *The Tropical World: Its Social and Economic Conditions and Its Future Status*, S. H. Beaver and E. D. Laborde, trans. (London: Longman, 1973).

needed to make good on the offer (claiming these facilities would be diverted toward the war against Britain's Dutch allies), and this led to a sharp exchange between the Government of India and the military command in Southeast Asia.¹⁰⁹ The government warned of "serious repercussions in India" if they were prevented from "taking full advantage of the Indonesian offer." The public was well aware, they insisted, that "we have been offered half a million tons from Java as a direct offer from Indonesians to the Indian people."¹¹⁰ The government was clear in its correspondence with British military commanders that "we cannot ignore the political aspect of a decision which prefers to risk starvation of large numbers in India to chances of Indonesians, who are on friendliest terms with India, going back on their pledges and making a misuse of trucks given to them. . . ."¹¹¹

What the colonial state reluctantly realized was that this post-colonial offer of rice might signal a new kind of reciprocity, between nation-states (or nation-states in the making), surer and more reliable than the charity based on natural feelings of sympathy amongst countrymen, of which Nehru was so skeptical. The Indonesian offer stood in pointed contrast to the failure of both the British administration and Indian elites to react to the Bengal famine during the war. Furthermore, food aid from Indonesia was a "gift" between equals, at a time when the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) continued to be dominated by the great powers, which monopolized and tried to control Asia's rice supplies.¹¹²

In the end, very little Indonesian rice reached India; the logistical difficulties proved insurmountable.¹¹³ The offer was, ultimately, an unrealistic one, but its failure reveals much about the unequal relations of power, the unequal reciprocity, which the international economy of food aid would signify during the Cold War.¹¹⁴ In 1946, Herbert Hoover led a mission to India to explore the possibility of large-scale food aid to the country. By the mid-1950s, with the institution of Public Law 480, India became the recipient of—indeed, utterly dependent upon—American food aid on a massive scale.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁹ IOR, M/4/745, "Indonesia: Rice from Indonesia to India": Viceroy to Secretary of State for India, 30 Aug. 1946.

¹¹⁰ IOR, M/4/745, "Indonesia: Rice from Indonesia to India": Special (Food—Southeast Asia), 18 Sept. 1946.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² For a consideration of the parallel developments concerning the United Nations and its organizations in the field of public health, see Amrith, *Decolonizing International Health*, ch. 2.

¹¹³ IOR, M/4/745, "Indonesia: Rice from Indonesia to India," Government of India—Food Department to Indian Agent General, Washington, D.C., 17 Sept. 1946.

¹¹⁴ Space constraints prevent my delving into the origins of food aid from the United States to India, but see the excellent account in Dennis Merrill, *Bread and the Ballot: The United States and India's Economic Development, 1947–1963* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

¹¹⁵ *Foodgrains Enquiry Committee, 1957*.

None of these discursive and political shifts in the government of food immediately after the war went unchallenged. Gandhi's plaintive critique of the new order of things indicated that an older conception of the link between food and national community retained some persuasive power in India. In 1946 and 1947, he repeatedly attacked the two foundations of the post-colonial politics of food: dependence on international assistance, and the state's attempt to control internal food distribution through rationing.

Gandhi's critique of the prevailing order functioned by returning to the semiotics of food and its deeper bio-moral significance, its capacity to effect transformation through the acts of producing, exchanging, and consuming it. More fundamentally, underlying the tensions over food in this period were differing visions of the centralization or dispersion of power in post-colonial India; the relationship of people (*lok*) and state (*rajya*); and the location and the character of the social. Against the impersonal calculus of planning, Gandhi sought to reemphasize the moral sentiments of sympathy and solidarity, rather than citizenship of a sovereign state, as the binding force of national community.

First, Gandhi launched a scathing attack on the system of food rationing the government had introduced. Centralized control over food, Gandhi insisted, "gives rise to fraud, suppression of truth, intensification of the black market and to artificial scarcity."¹¹⁶ Believing in the wisdom (even the economic rationality) of the village producer, Gandhi saw state control over food as a form of oppression. Even worse, however, was the capacity of state centralization to "unman" people: "It undoes the teaching of self-help they have been learning for a generation."¹¹⁷ The transposition of the notion of *atmashakti* from the level of the individual and village community to the nation-state was one that Gandhi refused to accept. At some points, Gandhi took extreme positions on this subject: "If people die because they will not labour or because they will defraud one another," he wrote, "it will be a welcome deliverance."¹¹⁸ And even more starkly, he declared, "If a few Indians die in consequence" of a lifting of food controls, "I will shed no tears."¹¹⁹

Gandhi had not always seen government intervention in India's food economy as necessarily pernicious. A year earlier he had declared, "In regard to the food shortage I admit that Government alone has the resources to cope with it."¹²⁰ Gandhi's great objection to rationing, and the reason why the tenor of his opposition to it was increasingly unyielding by the second half of 1947, was he saw state control over the value of food as detrimental to

¹¹⁶ Gandhi, "Speech at Prayer Meeting," 3 Nov. 1947, *CWMG*, vol. 89, 467–68.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Gandhi, "A Letter," 13 July 1947, *Bihar Pachhi Dilhi*, *CWMG*, vol. 88, 328.

¹²⁰ Gandhi, "Speech at Prayer Meeting," 18 Feb. 1946, *CWMG*, vol. 83, 153.

other measures of value, hence his constant reference to “corruption” and the black market. “Each one thinks only of himself,” Gandhi argued. “We look upon our neighbours as strangers instead of as our kith and kin. What does it matter to us whether they live or die?”¹²¹

The second major target of Gandhi’s criticism was the government’s willingness to accept food aid from other nation-states. Here, too, the fundamental problem he identified was a decline in the value of “self-reliance,” *atmashakti*, which had been so central to the moral economy of food in the early twentieth century. “The first lesson we must learn is self-help and self-reliance,” he admonished, through which “we shall at once free ourselves from disastrous dependence upon foreign countries and ultimate bankruptcy.” Returning to a familiar theme of earlier nationalist discourse, the virtuous bounty of India’s soils, Gandhi spoke of “a country of mighty rivers, and a rich variety of agricultural land with inexhaustible cattle wealth.”¹²² Provisioning the nation was a moral act, and India should “declare with one voice our resolve that we shall grow our eatables for ourselves and perish bravely in the attempt if we must.”¹²³

Finally, Gandhi attempted to restore the connection between the individual body and the body of the nation. In his view, hunger had to be felt and shared in order to be conquered. His solution, as so often, lay in the practice of fasting. With unimpeachable, if idiosyncratic logic, Gandhi argued that the “three per cent” of India’s food supplies that currently came from abroad could be made up through voluntary fasting. After all, “Hindus observe a fast or semi-fast every eleventh day each fortnight,” and “Muslims and others are not prohibited from denying themselves, especially when it is for the sake of the starving millions.” If all of India “realized the beauty of this partial self-denial,” he concluded, “India would more than cover the deficit caused by the voluntary deprivation of foreign aid.”¹²⁴ Gandhi saw in personal sacrifice and willed hunger a partial solution to starvation. Returning to the theme of minimum standards as a form of social leveling, he argued, “One should eat no more than necessary to keep the body in health and fitness when millions are faced with the prospect of death through starvation.”¹²⁵

In Gandhi’s view, the bio-moral properties of food shared within the Indian national community could heal the vicious communal divide manifested in the violence of 1946 and 1947.¹²⁶ Hindus and Muslims were “like blood brothers,”

¹²¹ Gandhi, “Question Box,” *Harijan*, 24 March 1946, *CWMG*, vol. 83, 240.

¹²² Gandhi, “Speech at Prayer Meeting,” 6 Oct. 1947, *CWMG*, vol. 89, 294–95.

¹²³ Gandhi, “Mass Murder,” *Harijan*, 25 Aug. 1946, *CWMG*, vol. 85, 165–66.

¹²⁴ Gandhi, “Speech at Prayer Meeting,” 6 Oct. 1947.

¹²⁵ Gandhi, “Speech at Prayer Meeting,” 18 Feb. 1946.

¹²⁶ One of the moving testimonies in Urvashi Butalia’s collection of oral histories of Partition makes this connection explicit: “Such good relations we had that if there was any function that we had, then we used to call Musalmaans to our homes, they would eat in our houses, but we

he repeatedly declared. “They were nourished by food grown from the same soil, quenched their thirst by water of the same river and finally laid themselves to rest in the same earth.”¹²⁷ Food carried with it the properties of the soil in which it was grown. For Gandhi, human community was what mattered most; food was a reflection of an ethic of obligation and interdependency that could truly be felt only within the national community. “We are to earn bread,” Gandhi declared, “by the sweat of our brow—what one Russian savant has called ‘bread labour.’” The problem with food aid was that it came devoid of deeper bio-moral worth.¹²⁸

In the years immediately following India’s independence, it was precisely this articulation of bodily self-government with the meanings of food that the post-colonial state so distrusted. The bodily techniques of anti-colonial struggle, India’s leaders repeatedly told the people, were not appropriate to politics in a free, sovereign nation.¹²⁹ Individual sacrifice was illegitimate after freedom’s dawning, because the state would care for the welfare of each and all.

CONCLUSION

Food, and discourses about food, have remained at the center of Indian political culture since independence. If the promise of “development” has stood at the core of the post-colonial state’s claim to legitimacy, it is through the state’s control of food that this promise of welfare has often taken concrete form.¹³⁰ The Public Distribution System—with its network of Fair Price Shops, and other outlets for distribution—together with a complex system of price controls, signified the state’s commitment to stand between the market and the consuming population.¹³¹ The acute sensitivity of “starvation deaths” in Indian political discourse, as indicated at the outset, highlights the enshrining in the post-colonial state of the notion that to avert starvation is amongst the highest responsibilities of government. As this essay has sought to demonstrate, that notion has its roots in the intersection of a number of discourses of food and

would not eat in theirs and this is a bad thing, which I realize now. If they would come to our houses we would have two utensils in one corner of the house, and we would tell them, pick these up and eat in them; they would then wash them and keep them aside and this was such a terrible thing. This was the reason Pakistan was created.” In, Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (London: Hurst, 2000), 31.

¹²⁷ Gandhi, “Speech at Prayer Meeting,” Srirampur, 10 Dec. 1946, *CWMG*, vol. 86, 214.

¹²⁸ Gandhi, “Speech at Prayer Meeting,” New Delhi, 23 Sept. 1946, *CWMG*, vol. 85, 362.

¹²⁹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “‘In the Name of Politics’: Sovereignty, Democracy and the Multitude in India,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 23 July (2005): 3293–301.

¹³⁰ Partha Chatterjee, “Development Planning and the Indian State,” in, P. Chatterjee, ed., *State and Politics in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 271–97.

¹³¹ K. R. Venugopal, *Deliverance from Hunger: The Public Distribution System in India* (New Delhi: Sage, 1992); Francine Frankel, *India’s Political Economy: The Gradual Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

population in the early twentieth century. Feeding the population has been, and remains, central to the legitimization of political power in India.

Yet many of the fractures and weaknesses that nutritionists and many others identified in the 1930s—the effects of agrarian commercialization upon the poor, the difficulty of effecting cultural change in an area as intimate as the consumption of food—have continued to weaken “state capacity” in post-colonial India. Nevertheless, the question of food emerges repeatedly as a theme in populist politics and political mobilization there.¹³² That is to say, the discursive power of food as a metaphor for justice, for the state’s “pastoral power,” remains strong, even as the continued existence of widespread hunger and malnutrition often goes unnoticed and unreported in the media.¹³³

The political and emotional force of the language of “hunger” has not disappeared. At particular moments, it has reemerged at the heart of political discourse in order to legitimize new forms of state action, and to associate the distribution of food with care and solidarity. Launching a state-wide scheme in 1982 to universalize the provision of mid-day meals to all children in Tamil Nadu’s government schools, the charismatic actor-turned-Chief-Minister of Tamil Nadu, M. G. Ramachandran, turned to the language of hunger and suffering, of compassion for the poor, as a rationale for one of the most ambitious nutritional interventions in post-colonial India.

This scheme is an outcome of my experience of extreme starvation at an age when I knew only to cry when I was hungry. But for the munificence of a woman next door who extended a bowl of rice gruel to us and saved us from the cruel hand of death, we would have departed this world long ago. Such merciful women folk, having great faith in me, elected me as Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. To wipe the tears of these women I have taken up this project . . . To picture lakhs and lakhs of poor children who gather to partake of nutritious meals in the thousands of hamlets and villages all over Tamil Nadu . . . will be a glorious event.¹³⁴

The tropes that Ramachandran invokes are familiar from the perspective of the 1930s: the idea of children gathering to eat together as a marker of social solidarity; the appeal to the physical sensation, the pain, of lacking food; and the invocation of love and charity as reflected in giving food to those without it. What had changed was the nature of the state, and its relationship to the people. Ramachandran’s initiative resulted in a highly technical nutritional intervention that depended upon precisely the bureaucratic categories,

¹³² For an illuminating discussion of how populist political discourse in India draws on earlier political languages of legitimacy, see Subir Sinha, “Lineages of the Developmentalist State: Transnationality and Village India, 1900–1965,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50, 1 (2008): 57–90.

¹³³ Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen, *Hunger and Public Action* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989); Dan Banik, *Starvation and India’s Democracy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007).

¹³⁴ Barbara Harriss, *Child Nutrition and Poverty in South India: Noon Meals in Tamil Nadu* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing), 10.

the crosscutting subdivisions of population, that Partha Chatterjee as seen as the terrain of Indian “political society.”¹³⁵

It is by treating the population in all of its multiplicity and diversity that both the state and activists for social justice see the possibility of justice and solidarity. Responding to the PUCL’s petition, the Supreme Court of India stated in July 2001, “In our opinion, what is of utmost importance is to see that food is provided to the aged, infirm, disabled, destitute women, destitute men who are in danger of starvation, pregnant and lactating women and destitute children, especially in cases where they or members of their family do not have sufficient funds to provide food for them.” The court directed states to identify families below the official poverty line as a matter of urgency, so that those families could be provided with food assistance.¹³⁶ Activists are equally adept at deploying the categories of the developmental state—of “APL” (above poverty line) and “BPL” (below poverty line) families, for instance—even while making moral arguments about the state’s responsibility to protect all life, or to protect the population from the depredations of traders and hoarders. What is striking here is that underlying the development of secular interventions to secure the welfare of the population is the persistence of older, often religiously informed ideas about community and charity, and about suffering.

The argument throughout this paper has been that struggles over food, and discourses of food and hunger, go to the very heart of competing conceptions of justice, responsibility, and the value of human life. With a deepening “food crisis” at the time of this writing, it seems safe to predict that food will remain central to the exercise of governmental power in India, and its legitimization.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Partha Chatterjee, *Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

¹³⁶ At <http://www.righttofoodindia.org/case/case.html/>.

¹³⁷ See *Frontline*, 25 Apr. 2008.