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Asia in 2023: Navigating the US-China rivalry

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano

viella



CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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THE POLITICS OF FAMINE AND RELIEF IN INDIA, CA. 1880-1950:
AN INTEGRATED APPROACH

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Joanna Simonow, *Ending Famine in India: A Transnational History of Food Aid and Development, ca. 1890-1950*, Leiden: Leiden University Press 2023, 286 pp. (ISBN 9789087284046).

According to the World Food Programme (WFP), nearly up to 783 million people do not have enough to eat and 47 million people suffer from hunger. Natural and manmade disasters, warfare, political unrest, and socio-economical iniquities, further exacerbated by the consequences of Covid 19, concur to create food insecurities which dramatically impact vulnerable communities.¹ One fourth of the undernourished world population lives in India only, despite the country's growing economy and steady food production.² The WFP has implemented food and nutrition programs in India since 1963, when food aid became a vector of development, modernization, and political stability, alongside similar programs put in place in the Middle East.³ More specifically, since 2015 the WFP has worked towards "improving access to food, reducing malnutrition, increasing incomes and livelihoods and building resilient food systems" in order to meet the 2030 sustainable development goals to end hunger.⁴

The WFP's policies on food distribution, on fortified meals for vulnerable categories, or on the scientific indicators by which the Indian territory is closely monitored, not only open a window into current trends of humanitarian and development policies, but they can also illuminate the past. Joanna Simonow's book – *Ending famine in India. A Transnational history of food aid and development, ca. 1980-1950* – offers a deeply researched, highly original, carefully situated in the literature(s), and engaging analysis of the web of institutions and actors including "medical practitioners, nutritional scientists, social reformers, agricultural experts, missionaries, politicians, and colonial administrators" who designed and implemented solutions to

1. "Ending hunger", <https://www.wfp.org/ending-hunger> (accessed 8 February 2024).

2. "India", <https://www.wfp.org/countries/india> (accessed 8 February 2024).

3. Lola Wilhelm, "Local Histories of International Food Aid Policies from the Interwar Period to the 1960s: The World Food Programme in the Middle East", in Kirill Dmitriev, Julia Hauser and Bilal Orfali (eds.) *Insatiable Appetite. Food as Cultural Signifier in the Middle East and Beyond*, Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill 2019, pp. 340–58.

4. "India country strategic plan (2023-2027)", <https://www.wfp.org/operations/in03-india-country-strategic-plan-2023-2027> (accessed 8 February 2024).

end famine (13). The main contribution of the book is to go beyond the familiar equation of British institutions and Indian nationalists in the fight against famine from the late colonial period to the first years of independence. Simonow not only adds a third actor, American missionaries who got involved in famine relief in late 19th century Bombay, but she also expands the geopolitics of hunger to North America where missionary and philanthropist groups showed interest for India and where Indian social and political movements created anti-British networks. In doing so, Simonow joins a group of scholars of South-Asia – including Michael Philipp Brunner, Maria Framke, Harald Fischer-Tiné, Eleonor Marcussen, Corinna Unger, and Elena Valdameri – who have complicated Western narratives of care and modernization in India's colonial and independent period.

Through the juxtaposition of famines which had only been studied singly, from the late 19th century to the Bengal famine in the 1940s, the book's main argument lies in the continuities of ideas and policies regarding famine aid and development across the large, diversified spectrum of the actors studied. By means of intertwined scales, Simonow bridges provincial, national, regional, and global perspectives, thanks to which one can follow where ideas emerged, how they circulated and how they were (re)appropriated in different contexts. The book has the merit to introduce a large number of actors and interrogates the peculiar meanings each gave to famine relief: colonial authorities, who based the famine codes on the "average working man" (p. 46), addressed special programs to children as the future productive colonial subjects; American missionaries engaged in social services as an alternative way towards projects of gradual conversion (p. 73); Indian nationalists who targeted groups excluded from the relief politics of British rule, while those who were in North America increasingly "capitalized on famine to draw attention to the exploitative nature of colonial governance" (p. 131).

As feminist critique claims, knowledge is plural and situated.⁵ I approach *Ending famine in India* from within and beyond my comfort zone. My interests in the history of American Protestant missionaries and Western humanitarian organizations find echoes in the transnational connections, circulations, and exchanges at the book's core. Post-imperial Central and Eastern Europe and the mandated Middle East, where the actors that I examine operated, offer the opportunity to think comparatively about how colonialism, imperialism, and the geopolitics of care are connected. Nevertheless, I am not a specialist of South Asia, which explains why I might have benefitted from an expanded historical background in support of a complex narrative where a huge array of actors is presented. It would have been also productive for the author to reflect on methodology and to dwell on the rich number of primary sources on which the book builds.

5. Donna Haraway "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–99.

The book is organized in three parts: the first one deals with the role of the British administrators in setting the contour of the politics of famine as an economic problem and of malnutrition as a scientific one; the second one tackles the expansion of American Protestant missionaries in India, arguing that immediate responses to famine turned out to be a pathway to engaging in long-term rural reforms; the third one claims that Indian anti-colonial nationalists rallied around famine relief to meet their political goals, creating transnational allegiances with American groups, including missionaries, civil rights advocates, and labor groups. The choice of a synchronic actor-based structure allows scholars to concentrate on their specific interests, yet, at times, it also leaves the reader to make connections between parallel, interwoven stories. “Writing the history of the global” is indeed an open endeavor, on which historians are still much debating.⁶

The author critically tackles the definition of famine, which comes across as plural, highly debated, and politically contested. Rather than imposing a mold from outside-in, she neatly asks how the actors at the core of the book understood famine and argues that definitions, far from being neutral, contributed to shape “policies, relief measures, and scientific solutions”. For instance, the British colonial authorities conveniently looked at famine as “exceptional periods”, as they lacked the means and the political willingness to address the root causes. Such conceptualization had immediate consequences on relief measures, which ambiguously distinguished between deserving and undeserving recipients, while the emergence of the Indian famine codes in late 19th century failed to scientifically measure when famine relief should be put in place (pp. 14-15). At the same time, discourses around the dangers of famine were catalysts of humanitarian responses, where practices and policies of relief, rehabilitation, and development aimed not only to the stability of India but also of the broader region.

Applying a similar empirical approach to the ideas and politics of humanitarian aid and development could have been useful to understand what institutions and their agents meant by them and how definitions shaped the implementation of programs, or the other way around, as well as the lives of the persons involved.⁷ What does a focus on famine relief in India tell us about continuity and change in the history of humanitarianism where, so far, analyses have generalized out of case-studies in Europe and in the

6. Maxine Berg (ed.), *Writing the History of the Global Challenges for the Twenty-First Century*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013.

7. Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2012.

Middle East?⁸ Does a focus on famine relief in India confirm or revise what we know of Christian internationalism from the late colonial to the early independent era? Last, do the “voices” of recipients of aid emerge from the archival sources which the author mobilizes⁹ and, if so, how? Rather than shortcomings, these questions are a window into the book’s methodological and analytical innovations.

In addition to the histories of humanitarianism, development, science, and anti-colonialism, to which this book contributes, Simonow engages with global labor history and with women’s and gender history, among others. She also shows how “an integrated view” further challenges assumptions of “origin stories”. The scientific knowledge that was gained in responding to starvation circulated from India to post-WWII Europe, carrying mixed results. Experiments in fortified foods in the US after the Great Depression were precedents for the multi-purpose foods that many American organizations distributed in India in the early 1950s. Far from being passive recipient of colonial, missionary, and international projects, in the following decades India became a place for knowledge production in the fields of fortified foods and nutrition. These examples prove that, as any great book, *Ending famine in India* offers answers and open new questions. I do look forward to seeing on which topics Simonow will apply her rigor, creativity, and brave vision.

8. Bruno Cabanes, *The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism, 1918–1924*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2014; Keith David Watenpaugh, *Bread from Stones. The Middle East and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2015; Davide Rodogno, *Night on Earth. A History of International Humanitarianism in the Near East, 1918–1930*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2022.

9. Peter Gatrell, Anindita Ghoshal, Katarzyna Nowak, and Alex Dowdall. “Reckoning with Refugeeedom: Refugee Voices in Modern History.” *Social History* 46, no. 1 (2021): 70–95