The Empire of Disasters

‘To mitigate evil’

In 1873, just over a century after the worst famine in Bengal’s recorded history, a rural poet of that province composed a song-cycle about the disaster where around 10 million people, or nearly a third of the population, had died of hunger. The songs, which became immensely popular, spoke not of droughts or divine wrath (conventionally understood as the causes of famine). Instead, they took as their subject the legendary figure of Majnu Shah, a Muslim fakir or religious mendicant, who had organised a widespread insurgency against the British East India Company in the aftermath of the disaster:

There was a mazar of Darvish Hamid/In the domain of Asaduzzaman/There in the Khanaq of the old Pir Khadim/Came Majnu Fakir to offer his salam/Khadim urged Majnu in despair/‘Lakhs of people are dying in famine,/Try to Save their lives!/The Company’s agents and paiks/torture artisans and ryots/For exorbitant revenue and/people are deserting villages [...]／Take up arms [...] distribute all provisions among the starved,/And drive out the English/As no alternative is left’. (Dasgupta, 1992, pp. 62–3)

There was little doubt in the mind of Jamiruddin Dafadar, the poet of Majnu Shahe Hakikat, that the famine that visited his land a century ago was not primarily ‘natural’, but engineered by the political and economic imperatives of British colonial rule.

A little over two decades after Dafadar wrote his popular songs, a young English writer composed, in a sustained burst of creativity over several years, a cycle of short stories that thrust him into global
spotlight as the pre-eminent voice of British empire. And in several of these stories, such as ‘William the Conqueror’, Rudyard Kipling would imagine the same disaster event that had haunted the relatively obscure (in global terms) Bengali poet – famine:

They clamoured for rice – [...] and, when they found that there was none, broke away weeping from the sides of the cart [...] The starving crept away to their bark and weeds, grubs, leaves, and clay, and left the open sacks untouched. But sometimes the women laid their phantoms of children at Scott’s feet, looking back as they staggered away. (1898, p. 189)

Yet, in this and other Kipling short stories, famine is often both a natural disaster and a necessary one. Thus, in ‘Without Benefit of Clergy’, famine is a ‘red and heavy audit’, but it arrives as a relief to the land that was ‘very sick indeed and needed a little breathing-space ere the torrent of cheap life should flood it anew’. And this flood of ‘cheap life’ was the consequence of the benevolence of the British government that had ‘allowed thirty million people four years of plenty, wherein men fed well and the crops were certain, and the birth-rate rose year by year’ (Kipling, 1891, p. 149). Amidst this havoc, that iconic Kipling character, the imperial administrator, can be found in a story like ‘On the City Wall’, toiling silently and selflessly to mitigate in whatever modest way he can, the sufferings of the subjects:

These die, or kill themselves by overwork, or are worried to death, or broken in health and hope in order that the land may be protected from death and sickness, famine and war, and eventually become capable of standing alone. It will never stand alone, but the idea is a pretty one [...] If an advance is made all credit is given to the native, while the Englishmen stand back and wipe their foreheads. If a failure occurs the Englishmen step forward and take the blame. (Lycett, 2005, vol. i, p. 428)

If famine is ‘natural’ here, then empire is the palliative agent that eases the pains of those who are afflicted by it.

It is tempting to suppose that these contrasting views of famine – one suggesting it was nature’s red audit, and the other, that it was produced by the enforcement of British governance, corresponded to positions on the opposite sides of the colonial or imperial divide – for the rulers, famine appeared to be a part of the ‘disaster environment’ of their