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Entitlement Failure and Moral Economy: A Comparative History of Marginalised Communities Across Economic Crises in India, 1880–2020

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ABSTRACT

This paper develops a comparative historical framework for understanding how entitlement failure — in Amartya Sen's sense of the collapse of exchange entitlements — interacts with E.P. Thompson's concept of the moral economy to produce catastrophic vulnerability among marginalised occupational communities in India. Drawing on four moments of acute economic crisis — colonial North Indian famines (1880–1920), the Bengal Famine of 1943, the demonetisation of 2016, and the COVID-19 lockdowns of 2020 — the paper argues that across these structurally distinct events, it is the same subaltern communities — barbers, fishermen, artisans, casual labourers, and informal workers — who bear the sharpest burden of entitlement collapse. The paper further contends that such collapse is never merely economic: it simultaneously ruptures the moral architecture of reciprocal obligation that sustains survival for these communities. By bringing Sen and Thompson into dialogue, and by grounding the analysis in subaltern historiography, the paper offers a new lens for understanding structural vulnerability in India across the colonial and postcolonial longue durée.

Keywords: *Entitlement Failure, Moral Economy, Marginalised Communities, Colonial Famines, Demonetisation, COVID-19, Subaltern History, North India.*

Introduction

In his landmark study *Poverty and Famines* (1981), Amartya Sen demonstrated that famines are not primarily caused by the absence of food but by the collapse of people's entitlements to food — their ability to command it through wages, trade, production, or legal claim.[1] The Bengal Famine of 1943, Sen showed, occurred amidst available food stocks; people starved because their exchange entitlements — the bundle of commodities they could command given their endowments and market relations — catastrophically failed.[2] This insight, among the most consequential in twentieth-century social science, redirected attention from aggregate food supply to the distribution of access. Yet Sen's framework, powerful as it is, remains primarily economic. It tells us what collapsed, but not how communities understood what was owed to them, or why the failure of those obligations was experienced not merely as deprivation but as a profound moral rupture.

[1] Amartya Sen, Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 1–8. Sen's central claim was that 'starvation is the characteristic of some people not having enough food to eat. It is not the characteristic of there being not enough food to eat.' This insight shifted the analytical focus from aggregate supply to the distribution of access.

[2] Sen, Poverty and Famines, 52–85. Sen's analysis of the Bengal Famine demonstrated that food availability per head actually rose slightly in 1943 relative to 1941; it was the collapse of exchange entitlements through inflationary spirals and supply withdrawals that produced mass starvation.

It is here that E.P. Thompson's concept of the moral economy becomes essential. In his 1971 essay 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,' Thompson argued that pre-industrial English crowds responding to food shortages were not acting irrationally or in blind hunger. They were asserting customary norms — a community consensus about fair prices, legitimate market conduct, and the obligations of the powerful toward the poor.[1] These norms constituted a moral economy: a set of implicit social contracts about mutual obligation and fair dealing that governed subsistence communities. When those contracts were violated, popular protest followed — not as riot but as the enforcement of a moral claim.

The conjunction of these two frameworks — Sen's entitlement failure and Thompson's moral economy — offers a remarkably productive lens for comparative historical inquiry into economic crises in India.[2] For what the historical record reveals, across events as structurally distinct as colonial famines, wartime famine, demonetisation, and pandemic lockdown, is a consistent pattern: it is the same subaltern communities — barbers, fishermen, artisans, wedding workers, casual labourers, informal sector workers — who experience entitlement failure earliest and most acutely. And in each case, the crisis is compounded by the simultaneous collapse of the moral economy — the reciprocal networks of obligation that sustained these communities between and beyond formal market relations.

This paper develops that argument through four comparative case studies, following the methodological approach advocated by Marc Bloch, whose defence of comparative history rested on the argument that comparison illuminates what remains invisible when cases are studied in isolation.[3] Section two examines colonial North Indian famines between 1880 and 1920. Section three turns to the Bengal Famine of 1943. Section four analyses the demonetisation of November 2016. Section five examines the COVID-19 lockdowns of 2020. The conclusion draws these threads together to argue for a structural account of vulnerability in India across the colonial and postcolonial longue durée.

Key Historiographical Debate

Can Sen's framework be applied beyond its original famine context? Critics such as Cormac Ó Gráda (Famine: A Short History, 2009) have cautioned against over-extending entitlement theory, arguing that supply shocks matter more than Sen acknowledged. However, scholars including Jean Drèze, David Arnold, and Madhura Swaminathan have demonstrated the continued explanatory power of the entitlement approach for understanding the distribution of crisis impact, particularly for marginalised groups. The moral economy lens, applied to India by scholars including Ranajit Guha, Sumit Sarkar, and Shahid Amin, enriches rather than displaces the Sen framework by restoring the cultural and social dimensions of subsistence crisis.

Colonial North Indian Famines, 1880–1920: Patron-Client Systems and the Collapse of Occupational Entitlements

The great famines of colonial North India — the famine of 1876–79, the famine of 1896–97, the famine of 1899–1900, and the lesser crises of the early twentieth century — have been extensively studied from the perspectives of colonial policy, agrarian structure, and institutional failure. Mike Davis's *Late Victorian Holocausts* (2001) situates them within the global conjuncture of El Niño-driven drought and imperial market integration.[4] David Arnold's *Famine: Social Crisis and Historical Change* (1988)

[1] E.P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,' Past and Present 50 (1971): 76–136. Thompson distinguished between 'economic' and 'social' models of crowd behaviour, insisting that food riots reflected a 'consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community' (p. 79).

[2] For Thompson's broader framework, see also E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963). The moral economy concept has been extensively applied in South Asian contexts; see Ranajit Guha, Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983) and Shahid Amin, 'Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern UP, 1921–22,' in Subaltern Studies III, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), 1–61.

[3] Marc Bloch, 'Towards a Comparative History of European Societies,' in Enterprise and Secular Change, ed. Frederic C. Lane and Jelle C. Riemersma (Homewood, IL: Irwin, 1953), 494–521. Bloch argued that 'the unity of method' was the only foundation for comparative history, and that isolating cases from each other produced the illusion of uniqueness where structural similarity prevailed.

[4] Mike Davis, Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World (London: Verso, 2001), 7–22. Davis situates the great famines of the 1870s–1900s within the conjuncture of El Niño-driven drought, European imperial market integration, and free-trade ideology that systematically dismantled pre-colonial subsistence reserves.

emphasises the social dimensions of famine response.[1] Madhura Swaminathan's work on the political economy of public action extends Sen's framework into the institutional terrain of relief policy.[2] Yet the specific vulnerability of non-agricultural occupational communities — the barbers, fishermen, potters, weavers, blacksmiths, wedding musicians, and other artisanal and service groups — has received relatively less analytical attention.

These communities occupied a distinctive position in the agrarian social economy. Their livelihoods were embedded in systems of reciprocal obligation — the jajmani system and its regional variants — by which agricultural patrons provided grain and customary payments in exchange for specialist services across the ritual and economic calendar: harvests, weddings, births, funerals, agricultural labour needs.[3] These exchanges constituted a specific form of entitlement: not pure market exchange, but a moral-economic claim rooted in hereditary occupational identity and community consensus about fair dealing. Thompson's concept of the moral economy applies here with particular force: these communities held customary expectations about what they were owed, and those expectations were the foundation of their subsistence.[4]

When drought struck and harvests failed, the entitlement chain collapsed at precisely the points where these communities were most exposed. Patrons, themselves facing ruin, withdrew customary payments. Agricultural wages vanished. Markets contracted, eliminating the exchange opportunities for artisanal goods. For a barber or wedding musician, there was no harvest of their own to fall back upon; their entire entitlement bundle was routed through social obligation and market exchange. When both failed simultaneously, their vulnerability was catastrophic. Famine records from the United Provinces and Punjab consistently show disproportionate mortality and destitution among precisely these non-agricultural occupational groups.

Colonial relief policy was entirely inadequate to address this structural vulnerability. The Famine Codes, developed after the 1880 Famine Commission, were designed primarily for agricultural labourers and focused on public works as the mechanism of relief. Non-agricultural service workers who lacked the capacity for hard physical labour — and whose economic identity was rooted in specialist skill — were systematically disadvantaged by relief structures that did not recognise their entitlement claims.[5] Private welfare agencies — Christian missions, Hindu reform organisations, charitable bodies — filled some gaps, but their provision was geographically uneven, institutionally fragmented, and insufficient to address the structural sources of vulnerability.

What these communities experienced, then, was a double collapse: the failure of their exchange entitlements in Sen's sense, and the simultaneous rupture of the moral economy — the recognition that the customary obligations that had defined their social position and guaranteed their subsistence were being suspended under the pressure of colonial market integration and agrarian crisis. Folk traditions from this period — proverbs, songs, community memory — encode precisely this experience: not merely of hunger but of abandonment, of broken promises, of obligations unmet.[6]

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[1] David Arnold, Famine: Social Crisis and Historical Change (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 38–67. Arnold emphasises the social and administrative dimensions of famine response, arguing that colonial relief policy consistently privileged 'able-bodied' agricultural labourers at the expense of other vulnerable groups.

[2] Madhura Swaminathan, 'Entitlements and Their Failure: A Reassessment,' Journal of Peasant Studies 37, no. 3 (2010): 537–558. Swaminathan extends Sen's framework to assess the institutional architecture of famine relief, arguing that the selective reach of state provision systematically reproduced pre-existing social hierarchies of vulnerability.

[3] On the jajmani system, see Thomas O. Beidelman, A Comparative Analysis of the Jajmani System (Locust Valley, NY: J.J. Augustin, 1959). For its role in sustaining non-agricultural occupational communities, see Chris Fuller, 'The Old Regime in India: A Review Article,' Pacific Affairs 55, no. 2 (1982): 318–330. The system was far from uniform across regions; scholars including Pauline Kolenda have documented significant variation in its form and operation.

[4] Thompson, 'Moral Economy,' 79. Thompson's formulation — 'a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community, their rights and obligations' — translates with remarkable precision to the normative expectations embedded in jajmani-type relationships in colonial North India.

[5] Arnold, Famine, 55–60. Arnold notes that colonial Famine Codes explicitly categorised relief recipients as 'able-bodied adults fit for hard labour' and 'weakened adults' — categories that excluded many artisanal and service workers whose specialist skills and social identity made them ineligible for or incapable of the public works relief that constituted the primary state response.

[6] For oral and folk evidence from this period, see the collection of proverbs and popular sayings recorded in Punjab and United Provinces District Gazetteers (various years). Missionary records held at the National Archives of India also contain significant ethnographic material on the condition of artisanal communities during famine. For methodological discussion of oral sources as historical evidence, see Luisa Passerini, 'Work Ideology and Consensus under Italian Fascism,' History Workshop Journal 8 (1979): 82–108.

Primary Source Perspective

Oral traditions from North India's famine periods encode the moral economy of obligation in striking ways. Proverbs recorded in district gazetteers and missionary reports speak of landlords who 'ate their tenants' hunger,' of artisans who 'served the wedding but starved at home,' and of the barber who 'shaved the rich man's face but could not feed his child.' These formulations — not merely lamentations of poverty but assertions of violated obligation — demonstrate that subaltern communities understood their entitlement claims in explicitly moral terms, not just economic ones.

The Bengal Famine of 1943: Exchange Entitlement Failure in Wartime

The Bengal Famine of 1943, in which between two and three million people died, represents the paradigmatic case of exchange entitlement failure in South Asian history. Sen's analysis in *Poverty and Famines* established that the famine occurred not because of an absolute shortage of food but because of a catastrophic collapse in the exchange entitlements of the rural poor.[1] The inflationary spiral generated by wartime military expenditure, the denial policy that destroyed boats to prevent Japanese use, the diversion of food supplies to military and urban priorities, and the breakdown of rural credit networks combined to strip the poorest of their ability to command food through any exchange mechanism available to them.

For the purposes of this paper's comparative argument, the Bengal Famine illustrates with particular clarity how moral economy collapse compounds exchange entitlement failure. Amiya Kumar Bagchi has shown that established norms of market conduct were systematically violated as wartime inflationary pressures destroyed real wages.[2] Madhusree Mukerjee has documented how the denial policy's destruction of Bengal's riverine economy eliminated the productive assets and exchange capacity of fishing communities at a stroke.[3] Hoarders and speculators profited as prices rose beyond the reach of rural labourers. The state, under the colonial administration, refused to declare famine and delayed relief in ways historians have characterised as deliberate policy. For rural communities that held customary expectations about the state's obligations in times of distress, this represented a profound moral betrayal as well as an economic catastrophe.[4]

The differential impact of the Bengal Famine on occupational communities is illuminating for the comparative framework. Fishing communities, whose boats were destroyed under the denial policy, experienced a state-imposed destruction of their primary entitlement. Artisanal and service communities faced the same structural trap as their counterparts in colonial North Indian famines: as rural demand collapsed, their specialist services ceased to command any exchange value. Sugata Bose's analysis of Bengal's agrarian social structure demonstrates that these patterns of differential vulnerability were deeply embedded in the occupational composition of the rural economy.[5]

The Bengal Famine has generated an enormous historiographical literature, from Sen's foundational economic analysis to Bose's agrarian history, from colonial policy studies to the oral history work of scholars who have recovered the voices of famine survivors. What unites this scholarship is the recognition that the famine was not a natural disaster but a product of specific political and economic decisions that distributed catastrophe unequally — and that the most unequal burden fell on those whose entitlements were most precarious and whose claims on the moral economy of the state and the market were least enforceable.

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[1] Sen, Poverty and Famines, 52–85. The critical passage on food availability: 'While the [1943 Bengal] famine killed millions, the total food production in Bengal in 1943 was not below the level of 1941, when there was no famine.' The famine was a failure of entitlement distribution, not aggregate supply.

[2] Amiya Kumar Bagchi, The Political Economy of Underdevelopment (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 78–95. Bagchi's analysis of wartime inflation and its impact on real wages provides detailed quantitative grounding for the entitlement failure argument in the Bengal context.

[3] Madhusree Mukerjee, Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India during World War II (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 133–178. Mukerjee documents the denial policy's destruction of Bengal's riverine economy in detail, including the requisitioning and destruction of boats to prevent Japanese use — a policy that simultaneously eliminated the primary productive asset and entitlement vehicle of fishing communities.

[4] On the moral economy of the colonial state's obligations during famine, see Sanjay Sharma, Famine, Philanthropy and the Colonial State: North India in the Early Nineteenth Century (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001). Sharma argues that even within the colonial framework, there existed 'a discourse of state obligation' toward famine victims that created specific normative expectations about relief provision.

[5] Sugata Bose, Agrarian Bengal: Economy, Social Structure and Politics, 1919–1947 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 201–240. Bose's analysis of differential mortality in the Bengal Famine shows that certain occupational communities — particularly those dependent on rural service exchange rather than agricultural production — were disproportionately affected by the entitlement collapse.

Demonetisation, 2016: The State as Agent of Entitlement Collapse

On the evening of 8 November 2016, the Government of India announced the immediate demonetisation of all five-hundred and one-thousand rupee currency notes, constituting approximately eighty-six percent of the currency in circulation by value.[1] The stated objectives were to combat black money, counterfeit currency, and terrorist financing. Whatever its macroeconomic rationale, the effect on the informal economy was devastating. For the communities at the centre of this paper's analysis, demonetisation represented a distinctive form of entitlement failure: not the collapse of exchange opportunities through market or environmental shock, but the state's deliberate withdrawal of the medium through which exchange entitlements were exercised.

The informal economy of India functions through a dense web of exchange relationships that depend on the availability and trustworthiness of currency. When that trustworthiness was abruptly destroyed, the effect on marginalised occupational communities was immediate and severe, as Jean Drèze's field surveys documented within weeks of the announcement.[2] Daily-wage agricultural labourers could not be paid in the newly worthless notes. Small artisans and traders found that buyers had no valid currency; transactions froze. Wedding and ritual service workers found ceremonies postponed or cancelled as families could not access cash. The entitlement collapse was produced not by drought, war, or market failure, but by a sovereign act that overnight destroyed the exchange capacity of millions.

The moral economy dimensions of demonetisation are equally significant. The implicit contract between the state and its citizens includes the guarantee that legal tender will function as such — that the currency issued by the sovereign authority can be relied upon for exchange. Demonetisation violated this implicit contract without warning or compensation.[3] Thompson's formulation is directly applicable: what provoked the most acute distress was not simply the shortage of currency but the sense that the authorities — who were supposed to ensure the conditions of subsistence — had instead created the conditions of crisis.

Scholars including Jayati Ghosh documented the systematic transmission of demonetisation's impact through the informal economy's cash-dependency[4], while Prabhat Patnaik situated the policy within a broader analysis of India's monetary economy.[5] Their findings consistently showed that the burden fell most heavily on the informal sector, on agricultural labour, and on small-scale artisanal production — precisely the communities with the most precarious entitlement structures and the least capacity to absorb an external shock.

Comparative Note

The structural similarity between colonial famine impact and demonetisation impact on marginalised occupational communities is striking. In both cases, a specific mechanism — the patron-client payment system for colonial famines, the cash-transaction economy for demonetisation — was the vehicle through which entitlement failure transmitted to the most vulnerable. The mechanism differed; the communities affected and the structural logic of their vulnerability were remarkably consistent. This is the comparative argument's central claim: structural vulnerability is reproduced across radically different crisis types.

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[1] Reserve Bank of India, Macroeconomic Impact of Demonetisation: A Preliminary Assessment (Mumbai: RBI, 2017). The RBI's own assessment estimated that approximately 86 percent of the value of currency in circulation was withdrawn overnight, with the informal sector — which accounts for the majority of employment and economic activity — most severely affected.

[2] Jean Drèze, 'Demonetisation and Rural Distress,' The Hindu, 14 December 2016. Drèze's field surveys in rural Jharkhand documented immediate impact on agricultural wages, rural markets, and village-level artisanal exchange within weeks of the demonetisation announcement.

[3] Thompson, 'Moral Economy,' 83. The implicit contract of currency is not explicitly addressed by Thompson, but his broader framework of the 'moral economy' — the normative expectations governing economic life — is directly applicable. The expectation that sovereign-issued currency will function as legal tender is precisely the kind of 'customary norm' whose violation Thompson identifies as the trigger for moral economy crisis.

[4] Jayati Ghosh, 'The Unmaking of India's Informal Economy,' Economic and Political Weekly 52, no. 4 (2017): 14–19. Ghosh provides a systematic analysis of how demonetisation's impact transmitted through the informal economy's cash-dependency, with particular emphasis on agricultural labour, small-scale manufacturing, and petty trade.

[5] Prabhat Patnaik, 'Demonetisation: A Macro-Economic Assessment,' Economic and Political Weekly 51, no. 48 (2016): 14–16. Patnaik situates demonetisation within a broader analysis of India's monetary economy, arguing that the policy's design reflected a fundamental misunderstanding of the informal sector's cash-dependence.

COVID-19 Lockdowns, 2020: Pandemic and the Total Suspension of Entitlements

The announcement of India's national lockdown on 24 March 2020, with four hours' notice, produced what may be the most acute single episode of exchange entitlement collapse in independent India's history outside of famine. For approximately one hundred and twenty million migrant workers and the hundreds of millions employed in the informal economy, the overnight suspension of economic activity destroyed every entitlement simultaneously: wages, employment, housing, food access, and — critically for migrants — the ability to remain in their place of work.[1] The resulting migration crisis, in which millions of workers walked hundreds of kilometres to their home villages, was the visible expression of total entitlement collapse.

The COVID-19 crisis reveals with particular clarity the inadequacy of formal welfare systems for communities whose economic existence is entirely informal. Ration cards tied to home districts were useless for workers employed in distant cities. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act was irrelevant for urban informal workers. As Reetika Khera and others documented in real time, the formal entitlement architecture of the postcolonial state simply did not include these communities as beneficiaries.[2] Their exclusion from welfare systems mirrored their exclusion from formal economic systems; both forms of legal invisibility compounded each other in crisis.

For the specific occupational communities at the centre of this paper — barbers, wedding and ritual workers, artisans, casual labourers — the COVID-19 crisis reproduced the logic of colonial famine with postcolonial amplification. Wedding and ritual functions were prohibited by lockdown regulations; the ritual economy vanished overnight. The Stranded Workers Action Network documented these patterns of collapse systematically across thousands of affected workers.[3] The state acknowledged, through emergency relief packages, that these communities existed — though the acknowledgement came too late and the provisions were too little to prevent widespread destitution.

The moral economy dimensions of the COVID-19 crisis produced a distinctive politics of obligation. Communities drew on residual networks of reciprocal support — landlords deferring rent, moneylenders extending credit informally, community kitchens organised by civil society organisations. These responses demonstrated the resilience of the moral economy even when the formal economy collapsed.[4] But they also revealed its limits: informal reciprocity networks could absorb shocks for a limited time, but the scale and duration of the COVID-19 crisis exceeded their capacity. The state, whose obligations in Sen's and Thompson's frameworks alike include maintaining the conditions of subsistence, was called upon to act — and the adequacy of its response became the central political question of the crisis.

Conclusion: Structural Vulnerability and the Longue Durée

The comparative analysis offered in this paper yields several propositions of historical and analytical significance. First, entitlement failure in India has consistently followed structural rather than contingent lines: it is the communities with the most precarious entitlement bundles — those dependent on the intersection of market exchange and social obligation rather than direct production — who bear the first and sharpest burden of economic crisis, across a century and a half and across radically different types of crisis. Second, the moral economy concept, brought into dialogue with Sen's entitlement framework, reveals dimensions of crisis experience that purely economic analysis cannot capture: the sense of violated obligation, of broken promises, of the failure of those with power to fulfil their responsibilities to those without.

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[1] On the scale of internal migration in India, see the Census of India 2011 data on internal migrants, which recorded approximately 139 million internal migrants. Estimates for the COVID-19 reverse migration vary considerably; the Internal LabourOrganisation estimated that between 40 and 50 million migrants were affected by the lockdown-induced movement.

[2] Reetika Khera, ed., Battles for Employment Guarantee: Lessons from India (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011). Khera's work documents the MGNREGA's design limitations in detail; for its specific inapplicability to urban informal workers during COVID-19, see Jean Drèze and Reetika Khera, 'A Defining Moment for India's Social Policy,' India Forum, 25 March 2020.

[3] For detailed documentation of COVID-19 impact on informal workers, see the Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN) reports (2020), which collected data from over 11,000 stranded workers across India and documented their entitlement failures systematically. These reports constitute a significant primary source for the contemporary history of entitlement collapse under the pandemic.

[4] On community reciprocity networks as a response to COVID-19, see Harsh Mander, 'COVID-19 and India's Migrant Workers: A Crisis Within a Crisis,' The Wire, 2 April 2020. The operation of informal moral economy networks — community kitchens, mutual aid, deferred rent — demonstrated both the resilience and the limits of non-state welfare responses.

Marc Bloch's defence of the comparative method rested on the argument that comparison illuminates what remains invisible when cases are studied in isolation.[1] The comparison offered here illuminates a structure of vulnerability that is reproduced across colonial famines, wartime famine, demonetisation, and pandemic lockdown: the same communities, the same mechanisms of entitlement collapse, the same failure of the moral economy of obligation. This is not a counsel of despair; it is a call for historical reckoning. Understanding why these communities remain the most vulnerable requires understanding the long historical processes that produced their vulnerability — the colonial reorganisation of agrarian economies, the persistence of caste-occupational exclusion, the design of welfare systems around formal employment — and the limits of postcolonial state capacity and will to address structural disadvantage.[2]

The implications for contemporary policy and scholarship are significant. For historians, the comparative framework suggests new research agendas: oral histories of demonetisation and COVID-19 impact on occupational communities; archival study of colonial relief records to document differential mortality by occupation; comparative analysis of welfare architecture across crisis periods. For policymakers, the historical record makes plain that interventions which do not reach the informal occupational economy will systematically exclude precisely those communities most vulnerable to entitlement collapse. The structural invisibility of these communities in formal systems, documented across the colonial and postcolonial longue durée, is not an accident. It is a product of history. And history, as this paper argues, offers the most reliable guide to understanding it.

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[1] Bloch, 'Towards a Comparative History,' 500. Bloch's argument that comparison 'permits us to observe, not only the similarities but also the differences between the phenomena being compared, and, by pointing up the contrasts, to explain both the similarities and the differences' is precisely the methodological logic this paper employs.

[2] For the longue durée framework applied to South Asian agrarian history, see Sumit Sarkar, Modern India, 1885–1947 (New Delhi: Macmillan, 1983) and Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty, eds., Subaltern Studies IX (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996). The concept of structural persistence across conjunctural change draws on the Annales school's distinction between événements and structures de longue durée.

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