

The Bengal Famine of 1943: Misfortune or Imperial Schema

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Abstract— *Bengal famine resulted from food scarcity caused by large-scale exports of food from India for use in the war theatres and consumption in Britain. India exported more than 70,000 tonnes of rice between January and July 1943, even as the famine set in. This would have kept nearly 400,000 people alive for an entire year. Churchill turned down fervent pleas to export food to India, citing a shortage of ships - this when shiploads of Australian wheat, for example, would pass by India to be stored for future consumption in Europe. As imports dropped, prices shot up, and hoarders made a killing. Mr Churchill also pushed a scorched earth policy - which went by the sinister name of Denial Policy - in coastal Bengal, where the colonisers feared the Japanese would land. So, authorities removed boats (the region's lifeline), and the police destroyed and seized rice stocks. During the 1873-'74 famine, the Bengal lieutenant governor, Richard Temple, saved many lives by importing and distributing food. But the British government criticised him and dropped his policies during the drought of 1943, leading to countless fatalities.*

Keywords— *Bengal, British, Churchill, famine, drought, peasants, starvation*

"I hate Indians. They are beastly people with a beastly religion. The famine was their own fault for breeding like rabbits."

-Winston Churchill

The British had a ruthless economic plan when operating in India, which did not include empathy for native citizens. Under the British Raj, India suffered countless famines. But the worst hit was Bengal. The first of these was in 1770, followed by severe ones in 1783, 1866, 1873, 1892, 1897 and 1943-44. A recent analysis ("Drought and Famine in India, 1870–2016") in the *Geophysical Research Letters* of famines in India during the British rule and after that lays bare the hitherto unstudied factor of famines. The Indo- American scientific study underlined the more pertinent but less understood reason for brutal famines. It emphasises explicitly that of the six significant famines (1873–74, 1876, 1877, 1896–97, 1899, and 1943), the first five have been linked to soil moisture deficiency, but the earth-shattering Bengal famine of 1943 was not due to drought. It resulted from then-British Prime Minister Winston Churchill's policies of distributing food and provisions to the armed forces throughout the Second World War, halting rice import.

Previously, when famines had the country, native rulers were quick with practical responses to avert major disasters. After the advent of British rule, most famines resulted from monsoonal delays and the exploitation of the country's natural resources for their financial gain. They did little to acknowledge the havoc these actions wrought. If anything, they were irritated at the inconveniences in taxation the famines brought about. The first of these famines was in 1770, which was horrifying and brutal. The first signs indicating the

coming of such a massive famine manifested in 1769, and the famine itself went on till 1773. It killed approximately 10 million people; millions more than the Jews incarcerated during the Second World War. It wiped out one-third of the population of Bengal. In his book "The Unseen World," John Fiske wrote that the famine of 1770 in Bengal was far deadlier than the Black Plague that terrorised Europe in the fourteenth century. Under the Mughal rule, peasants were required to pay a tribute of 10-15 per cent of their cash harvest. This ensured a comfortable treasury for the rulers and a wide net of safety for the peasants if the weather did not hold for future crops.

In 1765, the Treaty of Allahabad was signed, and the East India Company took over collecting the tributes from the then Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II. Overnight the tributes (the British insisted on calling them tributes and not taxes for suppressing rebellion) increased to 50 per cent. The peasants were not even aware that the money had changed hands. They paid, still believing that it went to the Emperor. Partial failure of crops was quite a normal incidence in the Indian peasant's life. That is why the surplus stock, which remained after paying the tributes, was essential to their livelihood. But with the increased taxation, this surplus depreciated rapidly. When the partial failure of crops came in 1768, this safety net was no longer in place. The rains of 1769 were dismal, and herein the first signs of the terrible drought began to appear. The famine occurred mainly in West Bengal and Bihar's modern states and hit Orissa, Jharkhand and Bangladesh. Bengal was the worst hit. Among the worst affected areas were Birbhum and Murshidabad in Bengal. Thousands migrated from the site in hopes of finding sustenance elsewhere, only to die of starvation later—those who stayed on perished nonetheless. Vast tracts of farmland were abandoned. Wilderness started to thrive here, resulting in profound and inhabitable jungle areas. Tirhut, Champaran and Bettiah in Bihar were similarly affected.

Preceding this, whenever the possibility of a famine had emerged, the Indian rulers would waive their taxes and see compensatory measures, such as irrigation, instituted to provide as much relief as possible to the stricken farmers. The colonial rulers continued to ignore any warnings that came their way regarding the famine, although starvation had set in early 1770. Then the deaths started in 1771. That year, the Company raised the land tax to 60 per cent to reimburse themselves for the lost lives of so many peasants. Fewer peasants resulted in fewer crops, which in turn meant less revenue. Henceforth, those who had not yet succumbed to the famine had to pay even greater taxes to ensure that the British treasury did not suffer any losses during this travesty.

After taking over from the Mughal rulers, the British had issued widespread orders for cash crops to be cultivated. These were intended to be exported. Thus, farmers who were used to growing paddy and vegetables were now being forced to cultivate indigo, poppy and other such items that yielded a high market value for them but could be of no relief to a population starved of food. There was no backup of edible crops in case of a famine. The natural causes that had contributed to the drought were commonplace. It was the single-

mindful motive for profit that wrought such devastating consequences. No relief measure was provided for those affected. Instead, as mentioned above, taxation was increased to make up for any shortfall in revenue. Even more ironic is that the East India Company generated higher profits in 1771 than it did in 1768. Although the starved laypeople of Bengal did not know it yet, this was just the first of numerous famines, caused solely by the motive for profit that was to scourge the countryside. Even though all these massacres were deadly in their own right, the deadliest one to occur after 1771 was 1943, when three million people died, and others resorted to eating grass and human flesh to survive.

Winston Churchill, the revered British War Prime Minister who supposedly saved Europe from a monster like Hitler, was disturbingly callous about the roaring famine that was swallowing Bengal's inhabitants. He casually diverted the supplies of medical aid and food that was being dispatched to the starving victims to the already well supplied soldiers of Europe. When entreated upon, he said, "Famine or no famine, Indians will breed like rabbits." The Delhi Government sent a telegram to him, painting a picture of the horrible devastation and the number of people who had died. His only response was, "Then why hasn't Gandhi died yet?" It is worthwhile to remember that the West's assets were built on the graves of the East. While we honour our brave freedom fighters (as we should), it is victims like these, the ones sacrificed without a moment's thought, who paid the ultimate price. It is on us to understand their sacrifice and fettered memory and strive to make the most of this hard-won independence that we take for granted today.

The famine ravaged nearly unimpeded in Bengal throughout the year 1943 has still received only scant attention from historians of humanitarianism. This is surprising given the amount of work published by South Asian scholars on the events and the scale and scope of the crisis. The genesis and development of the famine in Bengal were authoritatively determined by the necessities of the global war that conditioned the prioritisation of military and security concerns over civilian needs. It provides a vivid example of the detrimental impact of war on civilian populations and the importance of the convergence of political, military and humanitarian interests to enable the effective mobilisation of relief. The review of the emergence of responses to the famine further points to the indispensability of the media in bringing the needs of distant populations to public attention. While the use of famine photography to solicit donations and support is commonly associated with media campaigns in response to the Nigeria-Biafra conflict of 1967-70 and the Ethiopian famine of 1983-85, such uses of visuals of famine have telling historical precedents. The circulation of famine photographs in response to the Bengal famine is one example and illustrative for the centrality of visuals of starvation in the mobilisation of human and financial resources to render relief to affected populations. The soldier highlights his solidarity with this imagined community of sufferers through images of his own body, and his reactions are expressed in physiological terms – he visualises the walls of his heart is covered with 'cloudy sediment' at the thought of food shortage in India. In real terms, this is how he understands empathy. The

spectre of famine in India hovers, Banquo-like, before him every time he sits down to eat his rations carefully provided by the British colonial government; the projection of food deprivation in his homeland thousands of miles away reaches out and, almost literally, touches his heart, preventing him from eating.

Food dominates much of these epistolary conversations, with Indian soldiers reflecting on their army rations and diet abroad. Rumours of a tremendous and devastating famine sweeping India, and particularly Bengal, in 1943 reach them, despite the censorship of news and letters. A Havildar or junior officer, part of the Sappers and Miners unit, writes from the Middle East: "From my personal experience, I can tell you that the food we get here is much better than that we soldiers get in India. But whenever I sit for my meals, a dreadful picture of the appalling Indian food problem passes through my mind leaving cloudy sediment on the walls of my heart which makes me nauseous, and often I leave my meals untouched."

Churchill said that history would judge him kindly because he intended to write it himself. The self-serving but elegant volumes he authored on the war led the Nobel Committee, unable in all conscience to bestow him a peace award, to give him, astonishingly, the Nobel Prize for Literature — an unwitting tribute to the fictional qualities inherent in Churchill's self-justifying embellishments. Madhushree Mukherjee's 2011 book, *Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India during World War II*, records that substantial food exports from India caused the famine. Mukerjee's book depicts a truth more dreadful than any fiction.

In 1943, some 3 million brown-skinned subjects of the Raj died in the Bengal famine, one of history's worst. Mukherjee delves into official documents and oral accounts of survivors to paint a horrifying portrait of how Churchill, as part of the Western war effort, ordered the diversion of food from starving Indians to already well-supplied British soldiers and stockpiles in Britain and elsewhere in Europe, including Greece and Yugoslavia. And he did so with a churlishness that cannot be excused on the grounds of policy: Churchill's only response to a telegram from the government in Delhi about people perishing in the famine was to ask why Gandhi hadn't died yet.

It did not end anytime soon. Famines recurred in 1869 and 1874. Between 1876 and 1878, during the Madras famine, anywhere from four to five million people perished after the viceroy, Lord Lytton, adopted a hands-off approach similar to that employed in Ireland and Orissa.

As Mukerjee's accounts validate, some of India's grain was also exported to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) to meet needs there, even though the island wasn't experiencing the same hardship; Australian wheat sailed past Indian cities (where the bodies of those who had died of starvation littered the streets) to depots in the Mediterranean and the Balkans; and offers of American and Canadian food aid were turned down. India was not permitted to use its sterling reserves, or indeed its ships, to import food. And because the British government paid inflated prices in the open market to ensure supplies, grain became unaffordable for ordinary Indians.

Lord Wavell, appointed Viceroy of India that fateful year, considered the Churchill government's attitude to India "negligent, hostile and contemptuous." "Apparently, it is more important to save the Greeks and liberated countries than the Indians, and there is reluctance either to provide shipping or to reduce stocks in this country," writes Sir Wavell in his account of the meetings. Mr Amery is more direct. "Winston may be right in saying that the starvation of anyhow under-fed Bengalis is less serious than sturdy Greeks, but he makes no sufficient allowance for the sense of Empire responsibility in this country," he writes.

The delay of the international media response contrasts strikingly with reactions to previous famines in India. This owed much to the colonial authorities' prioritisation of security concerns and military necessities, which came at the expense of the free circulation of information. In 1939 the colonial regime promulgated the Defence of India Act which added a vital instrument to the existing legal regulation of the press and enabled the authorities to ban print material perceived as harmful to the war effort. In many respects, the public awareness of famine in Bengal was viewed as dangerous to military considerations. First, it potentially provided Japan with an incentive to invade Bengal, which by 1943 had become the Allied Forces eastern war front and central to the supply and production of war materials. Second, the advent of famine in India provided ammunition for Indian nationalist demands. And third, the diversion of resources to relief efforts was perceived to endanger the smooth operation of the war machinery and industry. The colonial regime, therefore, attempted to conceal the severity of the food crisis. Official statements in London downplayed the problem, and words like "famine" and "starvation" were frequently erased from despatches to be replaced by the less alarming euphemisms "food situation". The East India Company helped kill off India's once-robust textile industries, pushing more and more people into agriculture. This, in turn, made the Indian economy much more dependent on the whims of seasonal monsoons.

Before this, whenever the possibility of a famine had emerged, the Indian rulers would waive their taxes and see compensatory measures, such as irrigation, instituted to provide as much relief as possible to the stricken farmers. The colonial rulers continued to ignore any warnings that came their way regarding the famine, although starvation had set in early 1770. Then the deaths started in 1771. That year, the Company raised the land tax to 60

per cent to repay themselves for the lost lives of so many peasants. Fewer peasants resulted in fewer crops, which in turn meant less revenue. Hence, those who had not yet succumbed to the famine had to pay even higher taxes to ensure that the British treasury did not suffer any losses during this travesty. As more chilling accounts trickled into Calcutta and London, Mr Beadon made a belated attempt to import rice into Orissa. It was, with cruel irony, hindered by an overabundant monsoon and flooding. The relief was too little, too late, too rotten. Orissans paid with their lives for bureaucratic foot-dragging. His point was simple. India had enough food supplies to feed the starving – then why had the government instead let them die? While Orissans perished in droves in 1866, Mr Naoroji noted that India had exported over 200m pounds of rice to Britain. He discovered a similar pattern of mass exportation during other famine years. "Good God," Mr Naoroji declared, "when will this end?"

However, given the web of intimate relations that connected Bengal and the world, the attempt to control all communication channels could only be maintained with high energy, personnel, and persistence. Since early 1943 Indian and British supporters of India's demand for self-rule attempted to raise awareness in Britain, drawing on their contacts to the diaspora to circulate news from Bengal. Local newspapers in Bengal contained frequent reports about the daily horrors they encountered, while letters of British and American soldiers in Bengal began falling through censorship cracks. As a result, information about the famine trickled into the metropole, but public attention was at first considerably diluted to ongoing horrors in Europe. Overshadowed by the war, news about India's food crisis failed to compete with images of human suffering in the enemy-beleaguered territory. On a flying visit to Orissa in February 1866, Cecil Beadon, the colonial governor of Bengal (which then included Orissa), staked out a similar position. "Such visitations of providence as these no government can do much either to prevent or alleviate," he pronounced.

Extracts from letters archived at the British Library, exchanged between the Indian home front and international battlefronts during the Second World War, become textual connectors linking the farthest corners of the Empire and imperial strongholds requiring defence against the Axis alliance. Such letters map the breadth of a global war and plunge deep into the Indian soldier's psyche, revealing ruptures in the colonial identity imposed on him.

The shortage, Mukherjee writes, was caused by significant exportation of food from India for use in the war theatres and consumption in Britain - India exported more than 70,000 tonnes of rice between January and July 1943, even as the famine set in. This would have kept nearly 400,000 people alive for an entire year. Mr Churchill turned down ardent appeals to export food to India, citing a shortage of ships - this when boatloads of Australian wheat, for example, would pass by India to be stored for future consumption in Europe. As imports dropped, prices shot up, and hoarders made a killing. Mr Churchill also goaded a scorched earth policy - which went by the sinister name of Denial Policy - in coastal Bengal,

where the colonisers feared the Japanese would land. So, authorities removed boats (the region's lifeline), and the police destroyed and seized rice stocks. Bengal famine rankles the mind of the students of history, but unfortunately, it has not been studied as holistically as it should have. This study is a modest analysis of the already existing resources in the historical realm, but history has failed in recognising the sacrifices of the faceless millions who perished in the famine of 1943 due to the scheming policies of the then-British regime, which has not been, unfortunately, brought to light by researching the archival materials of the imperial rule.

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