

The Bengal Famine of 1943: A Review of Socio-Economic and Political Aspects

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Abstract: In 1943, when World War II was raging in the international arena, Bengal was ravaged by a terrible famine. It is known as *Panchasher Manwantar* in vernacular sources as this famine occurred in 1350 of the Bengali calendar. According to the then Bengal government, natural calamities and wartime conditions were responsible for this famine. However, subsequent research by economic historians including Amartya Sen has shown that this famine was caused more by inflation rather than shortage of food crops. Different districts of Bengal witnessed the effects of this famine at different rates. The impact of this famine was felt prominently in the socio-economic and political life of Bengal. About three million people starved to death. About 6 percent of people were forced to sell all their property and 11 percent of people were forced to sell part of their land. A class of unscrupulous businessmen took over vast properties through black-marketing and hoarding, and the price of food in the market increased manifold going out of reach of common people. Artificial shortage of food was created. This famine marked the end of Bengal's social history of land-based aristocracy. Increase in anti-social criminal activities saw a loss of all social values. Diseases like malaria, cholera etc. became epidemic. All in all, life became deplorable. Naturally, the loss of three million lives in the famine and the administrative failure of the British government to deal with the famine created intense anger and frustration among people, which played an important role in the nationalist movement against British colonial rule. The far-reaching effects of the famine on the socio-economic and political life of Bengal will be the main focused of this article.

Key Words: The Great Bengal Famine, Socio-Economic Calamity, Nationalist Awareness.

Introduction

Famine usually refers to the extreme situation of starvation of people in a place due to shortage of food supply. Bengal was under British rule as part of the Indian subcontinent for 200 years from 1757 to 1947. During the period of British rule in the history of Bengal, the first terrible famine occurred in Bengal in 1770. About one-third of the people of Bengal died

as a result of that famine. The people of Bengal later witnessed more famines as a result of British colonial rule in Bengal. The famine of 1865 killed 1-2 million people. The famine of 1876 killed millions of people. Then, in 1943, when the Second World War was raging elsewhere, a terrible famine took place in Bengal. This famine occurred in 1350 of the Bengali Calendar, so it is known as "Panchasher Manwantar" in the pages of history. Later this famine had radical and far-reaching effects on the socio-economic and political life of Bengal.

Methodologically speaking, this study has been conducted based on data from diverse sources mainly primary and also secondary. Data has been collected from the Rare Section of the University of Dhaka Library, the library of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, and the "Final Report of the Famine Investigation Commission, 1945" has been an invaluable source. For secondary sources several books, journals, surveys, reports etc. have been reviewed.

Literature Review

A long list of secondary material exists on the subject of the Bengal Famine. However, among them, Amartya Sen's *Poverty and Famine: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2010), Paul R. Greenough's *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: Famine of 1943-1944* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1982) and *Indian Famine and Peasant Victims: The Case of Bengal in 1943-44* (Cambridge University Press, 1980) are particular significance for this work. B. M. Bhatia of written has a comprehensive book about the history of famines in his seminal work *Famine in India: A Study in Some Aspects of Indian Economic History, 1860-1945* (Asia publishing house, 1963) which is essential reading for an understanding of the Bengal Famine of 1943.

Also, various novels and dramas written during that period in Bengali literature are invaluable as they throw light on the social and humanitarian conditions of those times. Among these, Vibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's *Ashnisanket*,

Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay's *Ganadevata*, Sachindranath Sengupta's *Matir Maya* novel, Bijon Bhattacharya's *Nabanna* and Nurul Momen's *Nemesis* play deserve special mention.

Finally, various letters of British officials and various documents of officers, accounts of district magistrates, writings of several newspapers and magazines of that time, especially the final report of the Famine Inquiry Commission are the core documents that have been of immense importance to this study.

Causes of Famine

There are various reasons behind the occurrence of famine in any place. On September 15, 1943 the then Food and Supply Minister Hossain Shaheed Suhrawardy gave a statement in the Legislative Assembly of Bengal about the causes of the Bengal famine. He divided the causes into two categories: natural and military.

Regarding natural calamities, in 1942 the Aush and Aman crops did not yield well. Also, in October 1942, Midnapur and 24 Parganas districts were hit by severe cyclones and floods due to which crop production was severely damaged. In addition, diseases of rice Fungus and locust attacks caused many crops to fail. Military reasons added fuel to fire. Due to the "Scorched Earth Policy" of the government, cultivation was not possible in the Char region of East Bengal.¹

In addition, seizure of large number of boats greatly disrupted deep sea fishing and movement of goods from one place to another. When Japan occupied Burma on March 10, 1943, Bengal had to bear the pressure of many Bengalis returning home. In such a situation, as a result of Japan's occupation of Burma, the Bengal government stopped the annual import of 23 lakh tons of rice from Burma. Naturally in such a situation the lack of food took a deplorable turn. Although the Bengal government blamed the famine on both natural and military causes, according to the Famine Inquiry Commission which was formed after the famine, the main cause of the famine was

the severe shortage of rice supply in Bengal.² However, economic historians Amartya Sen, B.M Bhatia, Paul R. Greenough, while doing in-depth research on the Bengal famine, came to the conclusion that the famine of 1943 was not due to crop loss or scarcity of food grains. In terms of crop availability, 1943 was neither good nor catastrophically bad.

Amartya Sen in his book "*Poverty and Famine: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*" calculated that the current supply in 1943 was only five percent less than the average supply of the previous five years but was 13 percent higher than in 1941. However, the famine occurred in 1943.³ To meet wartime needs, the hoarding of food grains for the more important classes of people including military officers, the importation of consumer goods was disrupted and black market and hoarding increased drastically. At the same time, the supply of money in the market for the manufacture of munitions increased without a commensurate increase in the supply of goods which led to massive inflation. People's purchasing power decreased at a deplorable rate. Hence this famine can be called an inflationary famine. According to Amartya Sen, "The 1943 famine can indeed be described as a 'boom famine' related to powerful inflationary pressures initiated by public expenditure expansion."⁴

Distressed Economic Situation

Different districts of Bengal witnessed the effects of famine at different rates. Chittagong, Tripura, Faridpur, Dhaka, Noakhali and Mymensingh districts of East Bengal and Medinipur, 24 Parganas, Howrah, Hooghly and Burdwan districts of West Bengal were the most affected. An area of about 21,665 square miles and 29 sub-divisions of Bengal were heavily affected by the famine. Six percent of the total population of Bengal sold all their property and 11 percent sold part of their land.⁵

Taking advantage of the financial distress of the people, the village landlords and moneylenders bought all these lands at very low prices. The first Japanese air attack on Kolkata from

December 20, 1942 started the food crisis in Bengal. From the beginning of 1943, famine occurred in the districts of Bengal as evidenced by the reports of the Commissioner and District Magistrate. The death rate was highest in December 1943 during the famine. The country experienced massive inflation. Prices of goods increased excessively, causing people to lose purchasing power.

Prices of Rice at Calcutta: (March to September, 1943)

Year	Month	Price (Taka)
1945	March	23/24
1945	April	23/24
1945	May	31/32
1945	June	31/32
1945	July	33
1945	August	37
1945	September	36/37

Source: Subhad Kumar Mukhopadhyay, *Banglar Arthik Itihas*
Bingsha Satabdi 1900-194. P:111

A class of unscrupulous businessmen became rich through black market and hoarding and artificial food shortage was created in the market.

Millions of people died of starvation. Historians differ on how many people died in the famine. However, Amartya Sen, examining all contemporary data, using modern methods of evidence, states that the death toll was three million, which most historians accept.⁶

Bengal's landless agricultural laborers were most affected by the famine and they were the ones where the death toll was highest. Fishermen, transport workers, day laborer sand agricultural laborers were also the most vulnerable and economically distressed. There were at least three very important surveys of the people in Bengal who were affected by the famine. Mahalanbish Mukherjee and Ghosh jointly published the results of a survey in 1946 titled " Sample Survey of After Effects of Bengal Famine of 1946."

Another was by Mukherjee which is called "Agriculture, Famine and Rehabilitation in South Asia," while the other is called "A plan For Rehabilitation." These surveys show that the deterioration of the condition of people in various livelihoods during the famine is no different from that just before the famine. This deterioration becomes acute during famines. The prevalence of destitution for every livelihood except beggars became more severe than in the previous four years. It is mentioned here that most of the victims (41%) were from agricultural labor families. Mukherjee conducted a research of the villages of Faridpur district and showed that 14% of small traders, 27.3% of petty servants and priests, and 10% of artisans perished in the famine, along with agricultural labors.⁷

Bengali daily newspapers specially *Statesman*, *Anandabazar Patrika* repeatedly said that, famine is going on in Bengal and thousands of people are dying of starvation.

The contemporary writer Nurul Momen wrote in his play *Nemesis*: "There is no milk in the mother's breast. The children are whining like puppies at the mother's breast without getting any milk. Like reptiles, they scuttle through the streets of the city in search of food. Virgin young women sell their bodies for food in desperation."⁸

People sold their house wares and furniture to collect food. In search of food, many people left their villages and migrated to the cities, where they fell victim to many fraudsters. Many were forced to beg. Many arable lands became barren due to lack of workers to cultivate them. The famine wiped out numerous families. The memory of so many people dying of starvation and the misery of economic disaster attached to a famine has created a permanent trauma in the memory of the Bengali nation.

Social Disaster and Trampled Humanity

In this famine and pestilence, the daughters of the motherland of Bengal appeared the most vulnerable. They were forced to sell their bodies just for a meal. Fathers sold their daughters, husbands their wives, and brothers their sisters to brothels for

money. Hundreds of girls were sold in brothels, of which Kolkata's Sonagachi brothel was the largest. Girls were bought and sold through bargaining. The price of a girl was usually one rupee and four annas. However, if that girl was relatively beautiful, the price would be a little higher, around four to five rupees. A Bengali proverb that was very much in vogue then was:

I see the goods!
The color is a bit black.
Very tired!
Spring spots on the face again,
Hey where's the meat?
Body is just bones.
Stay, it can be continued.⁹

Through this proverb, the overall naked image of the buying and selling of women and girls during that time has emerged. Customs, tradition, ideals, humanity, religion all became irrelevant during the bargaining process of the buying and selling of female bodies. Everything surrendered to life's cruel reality of terrible, violent and absolute hunger!

The procession of death was everywhere in the plantations, in the streets and in the market place. Beggars cried out in pain for a morsel of food. Give food, give life! In many cases people were seen fighting with dogs to collect leftover food from dustbins. Humans forget their own existence by turning into scavengers without food, clothes, dignity and humanity.

Under such circumstances, malnutrition and waterborne diseases occur. Cholera, dysentery, smallpox, fever, malaria became epidemic. There was a lack of doctors, nurses, and medicine to treat the people. As a result, many people died of these diseases due to lack of treatment. All over the city, human corpses were strewn on the streets. Relief organizations cremated thousands of bodies in 1943 alone.¹⁰

The reason for the increase in mortality in the district towns was the epidemic of famine. When Chitraprasad and his companions visited Medinipur during the famine, they rescued

a six-year-old child from a paddy field who, in Chitraprasad's words, was a "black doll made of bones".¹¹ It was not just a reflection of Medinipur but the overall picture of Bengal in that period.

As a result of famine, many socially privileged families lost their previous social position. Everyone looked like a skeleton, just skin over the body structure, "said veteran actor Soumitra Chatterjee.¹² He was only eight years old during the famine.

People lost their comfortable life and became destitute. People could not bear the burning of hunger and got involved in various social criminal activities. Heinous crimes such as murder increased as well as robbery. In place of landed aristocracy, the era of capitalism began. It was a great change in the social sphere. Cruel scenes like the child's constant efforts to suckle the dead mother's breast abounded. Above all, it can be observed that this famine brought disaster to the social and human life of Bengal. As a result, humanity suffered.

A section of people in the country benefited immensely from black market and speculation. This money-centered new class took the place of the old land-centered aristocracy. They continued to influence all spheres of society and became an influential group. This phenomenon brought a radical change in the way society developed in the years to come.

Increased Political Awareness and Accelerated Nationalist Movement:

The inadequacy of the policies adopted by the British government at that time to deal with the famine in Bengal is a widely discussed and criticized issue. The "Famine Inquiry Commission" made a detailed analysis of the policy failures of both the state and central government of India. The famine was at the center of nationalist criticism of British imperial policies in India. Due to the severity of the famine, there was a need to import more food, which required organizing sea transport. However, the British government did not agree to this, and this

decision was highly criticized. The programs and relief measures specified in the Famine Code of 1883 were not followed. According to diaries written by British soldiers in charge of Indian administration, Winston Churchill's government rejected requests to send emergency food aid to India for months.¹³

The reason for this was the fear of running out of food stocks in Britain and the deployment of ships for tasks outside of the war. *Churchill's Secret War*, is written by Indian writer Madhushri Mukherjee. In the book, the author condemned the famine as man-made. She accuses Churchill of racial discrimination and points to this as a contributing factor. During the famine, no provision was made for food supply, and food was withdrawn from Bengal and Bihar. Churchill's argument was that if the Japanese soldiers occupied Bengal and Bihar after Burma, they should not have the opportunity to loot food, and they should die from starvation! According to Churchill's instructions, food was collected from these areas and stored elsewhere so that the soldiers would not have any shortage of food if the war got prolonged. Churchill even stockpiled food for Europe when the worst famine was going on all over Bengal.¹⁴

This terrible famine had tragic consequences for the people of Bengal. The black shadow of famine turned people's lives upside down. The British government did not take any effective measures to combat the famine. The utter failure of the British administration to deal with the famine is clearly evident. As a result, the loss of lives and the administrative failure of the British government created intense anger and frustration in the minds of the people.

The famine highlighted the helplessness of the farmer of Bengal, and immediately after it, various peasant revolts including the *Tebhaga* Movement took place across Bengal during 1946, which was a direct result of the famine.

The Bengal famine of 1943 is a vivid example of how a famine can bring radical changes in the socio-economic and political

life of a country. This famine showed how brutal British colonial rule was and how neglected and oppressed the Indians were by their colonial rulers.

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