The Bengal Famine of 1943

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Disease, Climate Shocks, and Wellbeing: A Long History of Social Response to Crisis

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For decades history has borne witness to calamitous crisis that have thus shaped the historical terrain of many countries. One such instance is The Great Bengal Famine in 1943 that occurred in India, which claimed an estimated death toll of three million people who died of starvation and other related diseases exacerbated by destitution. Wartime inflation led to land appropriation which left thousands of peasants landless, this coupled with stagnant agricultural productivity and a rapidly increasing population resulted in a steady decline of per capita availability of rice and a steep increase in the number of land-poor and landless labourers. Thousands migrated to cities, mainly Calcutta (now Kolkata) in search of employment and government relief. Thus, military, political and natural causes, placed widespread distress on Bengal's economy. Historically, this famine has been categorised as anthropogenic (man-made); the causations attributed to a failure of colonial wartime policies, poor distribution of food and inflation. However, some researchers maintain the famine occurred due to natural causes such as drought and delayed rainfall, we will explore evidentiary data and reports on both points of contention through this paper.

Prior to the partition of India, the Bengal province of British India relied mainly on an agrarian economy. As described by the Government of India's Famine Inquiry Report (1945), Bengal was known as a "land of rice growers and eaters", the report suggests that rice accounted for nearly 88% of the overall agricultural output and was the primary source of daily food consumption in 75% of households. In the backdrop of the Second World War, food needs rose rapidly in January of 1942, with an influx of Indian refugees from Burma. Agricultural scientists note that there were unusual weather conditions during the harvest of 1942, which led to very little marketable surplus and thus a rise in the prices of rice in early 1943. Furthermore, Bengal's capacity to obtain rice and other grains was restricted by inter-provincial trade barriers.

In March 1942, the British Raj anticipating the invasion of the Japanese on the borders of eastern Bengal, implemented a “Denial of rice” policy – a pre-emptive measure to deny invaders any access to food supplies, transport and resources. The first phase of this policy was carried out along the coast of the Bay of Bengal, in districts that were expected to have a surplus of rice, the governor of Bengal – John Herbert issued directives that any surplus stock be destroyed or impounded. However, official figures suggest that the actual amounts of rice impounded were marginally less than expected and contributed to regional shortages. Additionally, evidence of the corruption of purchasing agents suggests that far more rice was removed and destroyed in unauthorised areas which greatly damaged food supply market relationships.

The second phase of this policy, “the boat denial policy” was designed to cut off transport across rivers that flowed into Bengal, the policy authorised the army to confiscate or destroy any boats large enough to carry more than ten people. In his book *Hungry Bengal: War, Famine and the End of an Empire*, Janam Mukherjee states — approximately 45,000 rural boats were confiscated, disrupting river borne movement of labour, supplies and food thus also severely compromising the livelihoods of coasting communities. The ramifications of these policies implemented by the British Raj, crippled the infrastructure and market networks of the farming industry where — the lack of transport meant no avenues to transport seed and equipment to fields or market hubs, there now ceased to be any movement of rice paddy, other alternative food supplies also failed to reach market hubs due to a lack of transport.

These “denial policies” coincided with the fall of Burma, and an influx of Indian refugees from Rangoon, Mandalay and countless other places into Bengal. The cessation of Burmese imports by the government and a sudden increase in population and food needs, further drove up rice prices. The provincial government then issued and then rescinded price

controls, which led to dramatically soaring prices and public alarm. The “price chaos” in March and May of 1943 led to intense inflation, the price of rice saw an 800% jump, accompanied by no relief to in wages or rations by the British government. By the end of May first reports of deaths by starvation began to surface. The government in an attempt to suppress any reports from the press about food shortage, never formally declared a state of famine, although the Famine Inquiry Commission of 1945, characterised this stage as the critical and potentially most dangerous phase in policy failure and a stark demarcation of the widespread suffering and death tolls in the months to come.

By the end of summer in 1943, the famine in Bengal erupted with ferocity, a majority of the victims of starvation were rural dwellers, migrating on foot to large cities in search of relief. The mass displacement of people among which many were refugees, led to added complications. In the first wave of the famine, death by starvation was the main cause of death tolls, hospitals were said to be ridden by “living skeletons”. However, the second wave disease overtook starvation as the main cause of death, malaria being the biggest killer, cholera and dysentery followed close in terms of lives claimed, typically due to consumption of poor quality of food, or the deterioration of the digestive system due to malnutrition. Waterborne diseases were attributed to poor sanitation, conditions of overcrowding and a wandering population. The general social disruption also led to an outbreak of smallpox caused by the inability to effectively quarantine or vaccinate the population.

Researchers and historians have relied mainly on mortality statistics to ascertain the true extent and causes of the famine. Even today, among historians and researchers there exists a continual dispute regarding the actual and projected death toll of the famine as well as its conclusive causations. The demography of Indian Famines by Arup Maharatna, points out mortality statistics can present a confusing picture in terms of distribution of deaths and causes among age and gender groups. According to the study on the demography of South

Asian famines (1991), males suffered higher death rates than females, however the death rates for female infant deaths were higher than males. This could thus indicate discriminatory biases, in terms of food distribution and food entitlement based on gender which was an additional problem faced by the population of the province during that time. Typically, researchers claim famines primarily affect infants, however with the case of the Bengal famine, the highest mortality rates were among adults and older children. These statistics have been considered unreliable as they do not take into account roadside deaths that occurred as a result of an exodus of rural poor fleeing villages. In an appraisal of the Famine Inquiry Commission (2014) Madhusree Mukerjee points out that the commission used projected rather than actual data on rice availability, in an attempt to absolve the British Empire from in its role in aggravating the crisis. The commission's data does not include accounts from the army who implemented the "scorched earth" policies in eastern Bengal, and failed to include rice export records that continued even during the famine. Moreover, Mukherjee presents evidence that Winston Churchill's cabinet was repeatedly warned that the exhaustive use of India's resources could result in a famine. It is thus estimated that the death toll, has been underestimated by 2 million people.

Historians have gained more exacting information on the impact of the Bengal famine through eyewitness accounts, mainly the memoirs of Asok Mitra a civil servant in Bengal at the time of the famine's peak in 1943. He describes the famine as a 'holocaust', that caused a disintegration of the social fabric of a people that was rich in its culture and vigour just a year before. His accounts describe the scenes on the streets of Calcutta as 'an encounter in witnessing the dissolution of people under nutritional assault' —

> ***"More than half the people you met on the street looked haggard, drawn, listless with vacant stares... The skin on the face looked like parchment, the bones stuck out. Coarse unhealthy hair stood out***

like pins on the legs and the arms on thin, dry, skins. Even now this transformation haunts me more than the actual deaths that came the following months".

The author criticises the Governor John Herbert's policies and traders being forced to lend existing stocks of rice to feed the British Army as the major causes for the famine.

Archival records from the leading English language papers in Bengal at the time — *The Statesman* and *Amrita Bazar Patrika* also throw light on the embargo by the British Government to suppress the flow of information and censor any reportage on the food shortages, a published editorials asserted that "the famine was sorely due to speculation and hoarding". However, as conditions progressed, a turning point in the role of the media occurred when Ian Stephens the editor of The Statesman, published jarring photographs of the victims in July 1943. This thus, garnered international attention to the grotesque reality of the situation and put pressure on the authorities to acknowledge the death toll and provide relief.

In 1973, a study by the Rice Research Institute pointed out a revaluation of the conditions around the time of the famine, which suggested that while policy failure was a contributing factor, the *helminthosporium* disease that affected crops in 1942 was the main reason for the shortage of rice that year. Furthermore, the study illustrates that unusually heavy rains followed by flooding, furthered crop damage. Continuous cloudiness at the time of maturity of the crop was emphasised. In 1981, economist Amartya Sen argued that war economics was principally the cause for the famine and that food availability was up by 11% that year. His argument dismisses any evidence of food shortages but rather highlights the lack of distribution of excess stocks.

In 2019, in an attempt to find more conclusive evidence as to why the famine claimed so many lives, IIT Gandhinagar's civil engineering department published a new study that

implemented old weather data and modern simulation methods to reach a conclusion. The study reconstructed agricultural droughts in India in the half century between 1870-2016, using data from weather stations and estimated soil moisture content. Data from 1901 onwards was available from the India Meteorology Department, and scientists were able to develop a observations from 1,690 stations across India. The estimated measure called soil moisture percentile or SMP, when measured at less than 20 was categorised as drought. Thus, the simulations showed that famines were caused by large scale soil moisture droughts that hampered food production, however this as true only for the periods of 1873-74, 187, 1896-97 and 1899. In the year 1943, projections showed that SMP did not indicate any deficit. In a statement to the Indian Express by Prof. Mishra who led the study states that, “The evidence consistently points out that the Bengal Famine of 1943 did not occur as a result of drought but rather a failure of policy during the British Era”.

The death toll of the Bengal famine reflects the severity with which the poor were affected, famine mortality also functions as an indicator to the effectiveness to relief systems. As research illustrates during the Bengal Famine, central and provincial administrations though under the strain of military activities were still intact and had recently revised tactics to provide relief to those affected by the famine. Even so, the relief responses were slow and inadequate, limited to Calcutta and some areas of the countryside. Agricultural loans provided little assistance to those who had little or no land, grain relief was also provided sporadically. Theorists suggest that the slow and delayed relief provided to the province was mainly because the officials in charge had improper infrastructure to deal with a rice market crippled by mad-made shocks. While colonial efforts for relief began to trickle more to the rest of the population large segments of the economic occupations had suffered massive losses, particularly agricultural labourers and artisans. Relief efforts failed to revive the economy immediately, the effects of the famine extended well into 1944 and 1945.

In its aftermath the famine only accelerated pre-existing socio-economic disparities and aggravated income inequality and ruined the social fabric of Bengal. Nationwide opposition, led by Mahatma Gandhi and growing dissent as a product of shoddy policies and controlled distribution of supplies helped strengthen the Indian Independence movement which in its eventuality led to the dissolution of the Raj. In conclusion, 78 years later India has successfully averted any famines in spite of an increased population owing to an improvement in yields after the Green Revolution more efficient irrigation practices, stronger food distribution. The Bengal famine of 1943 remains the only famine in modern history to have occurred for reasons other than a serious drought.

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