



Mapping Famine in Colonial India: Re-identifying the Great Bengal Famine (A Case Study)

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Abstract

As a boat moved across the Brahmaputra River from Bahadurabad, in 1943 October morning, a scientist who was assigned by the government of Bengal noticed heaps of dead bodies all along the river bed, from what seemed to have been an aftermath of a war. However, these dead bodies were not a result of any form of plunder but rather an aftereffect of a disastrous famine that hit Bengal in the summer of 1943, and ultimately caused the death of three million populations due to diseases and starvation. A relook at the Great Bengal famine allows one to trace one of the worst mismanaged famines in 20th century South Asia and how an environmental crisis was grossly linked to the economic and political crisis in Bengal. While, tracing the background of the Bengal Famine of 1943 most pertinently points out to the environmental crisis at its crux but a deeper analysis allows one to understand the a host of other components in consideration, albeit, the high prices of commodities, the role of land market, subsistence crisis, poor agrarian economy, negligent British policy and a host of other reason which this paper tends to study.

Keywords

Great Bengal Famine, South Asian History, colonial policy, Churchill, Amartya Sen

Introduction

The Great Bengal famine of 1943 was undoubtedly the most catastrophic disaster of twentieth century South Asia, which had resulted in the deaths of millions from starvation and famine-related malady. One of the most well documented famines in history, the Bengal famine was also recalled for its immense magnitude and questionable theoretical and political framework. Past studies have attributed the Bengal Famine of 1943 to a serious case of drought and climate-related crisis. However, recent studies on the Great famine back poor British colonial policy responsible for the catastrophe that killed more than 3 million populations. A study conducted on the weather data and moisture content of soil of six major famines in the subcontinent between the years of 1873-1943 presents a serious environmental crisis and soil moisture deficit that evidently coincided with chronic food shortages. However, the same study recorded the 1943 Bengal famine presented different reports for the cause of famine. Although the eastern parts of India were affected by drought and other environmental conditions for most of the part of 1940 to 1941, which peaked through 1943, but, according to a Geophysical Research Letter conducted in February 2019, the rain levels in and around Bengal were above average (Safi).

The conditions that had eventually led to the Great famine of Bengal were rather unique. It is true that the food supplies were reduced through the years foregoing 1943, due to failure of crops and rice imports in the majority of Asia. However, the scholarly work presented by Amartya Sen in 1981 asserted the faulty supplies in the distribution of food. Added to this were the policy lapses and prioritizing military supplies of the Second World War. In addition to the malfunctioning of resources and mismanagement, the war time inflation and panic hoarding led to the increase in the prices of food, making poor people of Bengal unable to acquire food for basic survival. More recent studies point out the exhaustive measures used by Winston Churchill's wartime cabinet during the Second World War. Indian resources were exclusively used to meet the needs of the war, creating a deliberate condition for famine. One of the major reasons that are estimated for the food crisis was rice exportation from India to several parts of the empire. "Rice stocks continued to leave India even as London was denying urgent requests from India's viceroy for more than 1m tones of emergency wheat supplies in 1942-43. Churchill has been quoted as blaming the famine on the fact Indians were "breeding like rabbits", and asking how, if the shortages were so bad, why Mahatma Gandhi was still alive" (Safi).

For a long time, the British administrators had denied the causes of famine and went to the extent of confiscating supplies of rice and boats as the British postulated that the Indians would supply Japanese army with resources in case of future invasions. In a similar situation to the 1873 Famine of Bihar, the local government's swift action prevented the death of thousands; this was, however, severely criticized by the authorities back in Britain for putting in excessive amounts of resources to carry out preventive measures. As a response to this, famines followed by in the subsequent years were inefficiently managed, with low economic backing, leading to high mortality rate. Thus, famines, apart from being one of the gravest environmental crises a nation or a region could ever experience, too buries down the inadequate political measures and colonial policies incorporated as a response to a crisis.

In the history of famine in Colonial India, the Great Bengal famine stands as the most catastrophic event in the elimination of a vast number of India's population due to inefficient colonial policy, poor irrigation practices and lack of welfare system. The Great Bengal Famine is also crucial because it was for the first time that scientists had used soil moisture analysis and data to prove that there was no evidence of drought, but rather lack of policy failure. Thus, the Great Bengal famine was rather a phenomenon that was not directly linked to the moisture content and crop failure. As Shashi Tharoor writes, "Churchill deliberately ordered the diversion of food from starving Indian civilians to well-supplied British soldiers and even to top up European stockpiles, meant for yet-to-be-liberated Greeks and Yugoslavs" (Tharoor).

Background of the Bengal Famine

To explain further the causes of the 1943 Famine, it is important to understand the background of the conditions in Bengal. Bengal had three kinds of rice crops each sown in May and June and harvested in November; another sown in April, August and harvested in September; and another sown in November and harvested in February and March. As Amartya Sen explains, "The winter crop is by far the most important, and the respective shares of the three crops during the five years 1939-43 were: 73, 24, and 3 per cent" (Sen 52). In 1942, two out of the three seasonal crops did not have efficient harvest due to the cyclones in October, which was followed by excess rainfall. This year also saw a gradual spread of a fungal disease. On the military front, the Japanese army had occupied Rangoon, Burma in March 1942. Rice imports were halted, which impacted supplies to Bengal. Thus, the Great Bengal famine could be easily detected in the light of

natural consequences, given the climatic disruptions caused by cyclone, excess rain, flooding and fungal disease and secondly, changes caused by the war that suspended rice imports from Burma. As Sen explains, “The wholesale price of rice, which had been between Rs. 13 and Rs. 14 per 'maund' (about 82.3 lbs.) on 11 December 1942, rose to Rs. 21 by 12 March 1943 and to above Rs. 30 by 21 May; by 20 August it had risen to Rs. 37. Because of a government order fixing a maximum price, quotations for rice transactions are difficult to obtain from September 1943 onwards, but there are non-official reports of further rises, especially in retail markets, such as in October that rice was being sold in Chittagong at Rs. 80 per maund (see *The Statesman*, 5 November 1943; Bhatia, 1967, p. 323), and in Dacca at Rs. 105 per maund” (Sen 55). This caused a severe economic crisis that had already been in effect since March of 1943, where famine had not relatively started yet, but economic distress had struck a majority part of the population, eventually causing death and diseases and reached its peak in November of 1943 and all through 1944. All throughout the years of the crisis, the region fell into a fuming period of starvation and epidemics. Amartya Sen divides the economic experience of Bengal into three phases: “Phase 1: from the beginning of 1942 to March 1943; Phase II: from March 1943 to November 1943; Phase III: From November 1943 through most of 1944” (Sen 55).

The journey of the economic distress taking shape into a disastrous famine could be traced from the district commissioner reports all over the province of Bengal. There were reports in districts away from Calcutta, that stated hunger marches led on by communists, distress caused among local people due to lack of food availability, eventually moving in the path of crimes, looting property and agriculture, movement of people in search of rice, economic crisis rising to its peak, increase in death rate, so much so that disposal of the dead bodies became an acute problem, deaths caused by starvation as well as famine-related diseases. In Calcutta however, “the official policy was based on the firm conviction that 'the maintenance of essential food supplies to the industrial area of Calcutta must be ranked on a very high priority among their [the government's] war time obligations', and as early as August 1942 the Bengal government had explained to the Bengal Chamber of Commerce that as far as Calcutta was concerned the government promised to do 'all in their power to create conditions under which essential supplies may be obtainable in adequate quantities and at reasonable prices'. The 'Bengal Chamber of Commerce Foodstuffs Scheme', guaranteeing essential items of food to the grain shops of industrial concerns connected with the Chamber, came into existence with the

government's help in August 1942; it covered 620,000 employees by December of that year" (Sen 56). Calcutta's condition of famine elevated when a poor vagrant population trickled into the city. A total amount of 100,000 were estimated to be starved and deceased.

Analyzing the Cause of the Great Bengal Famine

According to the Famine Inquiry Commission, the serious deficit of rice supply was considered to be the primary cause of the catastrophe, added to this were the natural disasters such as cyclones and floods that reduced the crops by one third. However, a critical analysis of the reports shows several inaccuracies. The crop harvests in the year of 1943 were indeed low, but not disastrous as the Inquiry assumed. As Sen analyzes, the harvest was only 5 percent lower than usual. "Even the rice yield per acre, which is given separately for the Bengal province, is shown to have been higher in the year 1942-3 than in 1940-1, despite the fact that the acreage in 1942 3 was known to be much higher than in 1940-1" (Sen 59). Apart from rice, wheat was also a dominant crop that was grown and imported, quite abundantly, and in fact higher in 1943 than that of 1941. "During the last quarter of 1943, Bengal imported 100 thousand tons of rice (as opposed to an average of 55 thousand tons per quarter earlier in the year), and 176 thousand tons of wheat (as opposed to an earlier average of 54 thousand tons)" (Sen 62).

In pre-Independent India, Bengal was a part of British Indian province that comprised both Bangladesh and today's West Bengal state. One of the causes attributed to the famine was the rise in the prices of rice and staple crops. Between the months of February and September, the prices of necessary items peaked to more than thrice of the actual price. It was not quite long ago, in 1942, that Japan had occupied Burma and the borders that interpolated between Burma and Bengal in Eastern front became a war zone. "But Bengal was an agriculturally developed region, had good transportation and a stable government. Fresh supply of rice should be easy to arrange. So why did supplies fail? The Bengal famine was a calamity, but the mid-20th century was no stranger to them. It remains a puzzle because it is difficult to agree on an answer to the question: what caused the famine? Why is the answer so difficult to find?"(Roy).

The answer to this lies in the policy lapses; the war had caused Britain to prioritize supply of necessary commodities to the military and other alike civil services. Distressed local economy caused by the war led to food shortages in Bengal. Rice imports were stopped, market supplies and transportation systems in Bengal were disrupted, and the

British administration refused to publicly declare that the famine had hit Bengal. Recent analysis carried out by Indian Institute of Technology declared that the years between 1943 and 45 did not have any major drought in Bengal. Therefore, “The Bengal famine of 1943 was "completely because of policy failure” (The Economic Times).

The Great Bengal Famine became the epitome of nationalist criticism of British colonial policy in India. The complacent attitude of the administration of Bengal had led to the prohibition of food imports into India. Any measures taken by the district administration to waive the catastrophe were severely criticized. “Lord Wavell, who became the new Viceroy at the last stage of the famine and who had to battle hard for increasing food imports into India, went on record in this context that he felt that 'the vital problems of India are being treated by His Majesty's Government with neglect, even sometimes with hostility and contempt” (Sen 79).

Secondly, the British administrative system in India, never officially declared a famine which made the officials unsure whether to organize relief programmes and redistribute food supplies in Bengal. Thus the general ability to anticipate the dire consequence of the situation and act accordingly resulted in a major policy failure on the part of the British imperial system in India. “When the existence of the famine was eventually acknowledged officially in Parliament by the Secretary of State for India in a statement in October 1943, the influential Calcutta daily, The Statesman wondered why 'the speech contained no direct admission of grave misjudgement on the higher authorities' part or even of error', overlooking 'previous official assertions in London and New Delhi that there existed virtually no food problem in India' In view...one can argue that the Raj was, in fact, fairly right in its estimation of overall food availability, but disastrously wrong in its theory of famines” (Sen 79). Officials like K. C Neogy asserted that the famine was a testimony of an industry typical of a British manufacture: Gross administrative negligence, inefficient governance, black-marketing and profiteering of one section of traders could only justify this catastrophe. “The policy failures began with the provincial government's denial that a famine existed. Humanitarian aid was ineffective through the worst months of the food crisis, and the government never formally declared a state of famine” (The Economic Times).

Furthering into the argument of incompetent colonial measures, it could be unquestionably noted that Winston Churchill's wartime cabinet and its undertakings had exacerbated The Great Bengal Famine. Recently, journalist Madhushree Mukherjee has argued that, “the cabinet was warned repeatedly that the exhaustive use of Indian

resources for the war effort could result in famine, but it opted to continue exporting rice from India to elsewhere in the empire” (Safi). Among many other issues, pertaining to the British colonial policy in India, The Great Bengal famine marked the epitome of an atrocious regime Bengal had ever faced. Churchill’s ignorance of the repeated dangers of famine could be attributed through his announcement that the Indian’s “must learn to look after themselves as we have done... there is no reason why all parts of the British empire should not feel the pinch in the same way as the mother country has done.” Still more disgracefully, he said in a jocular way that “the starvation of anyhow underfed Bengalis is less serious than that of sturdy Greeks” (The Churchill Project). The politically incorrect language that had cost the life of three million people was indeed a trademark of British Colonial Policy at its best, succumbing Winston Churchill to a wartime statesman at its finest.

Conclusion

It is also to be noted that the researches, dated as far back in the 1980s too show that the famine was in fact, a result of human action rather than fully being an agricultural failure. The imperial policy of the British administrators in India was indeed suffused with dysfunction, brimming insufficiency in famine guidelines and ignorant towards a catastrophe that could affect millions of Indians. Shortages of crop was undeniably the most pertinent cause of the Great famine but what elevated this problem to the brink of famine was the faulty government colonial measures and obliviousness towards the general well-being of the Indian population, at large.

Added to this, there was a lack of proper irrigation facility, efficient groundwater pumping and no mechanical pumps. Diseases and health hazards like malaria, starvation and malnutrition added to the misery of the poor. “Humanitarian aid was ineffective through the worst months of the food crisis, and the government never formally declared a state of famine” (The Economic Times). A number of people who survived the famine could not survive the economic and social decline as they had to sell their lands, ploughs and cattle to buy food and other basic necessities. It is also to be noted that “the crisis unfolded against a background in which a large section of the rural people were suffering from poverty and malnutrition. This did not cause the famine, but it aggravated the impact of the crisis when it struck” (Islam 438).

And lastly, as mentioned above, the conditions leading to famine were closely articulated through district commission reports and by local officers, however no

immediate actions were taken at any phase of the crisis to stop or aid the public dying from hunger and famine-induced diseases. In Calcutta, as Amartya Sen explained, The Bengal Destitute Person (Repatriation and Relief) Ordinance, claimed to provide temporary repatriation, rather than relief. However, the death rate was estimated to lower down as some regions received aid, and a good harvest of autumn and winter crops, but famine-caused epidemics continued to exist. Thus, the British government was not completely unaware of the shortages of rice due to cyclones or the loss of rice due to the stoppage of Burma imports. They were simply ignorant of the adversity of the situation.

Environmental hazards such as famine are still present in India in the twenty-first century. However a comprehensive analysis of droughts throughout the history of India will help one to learn from past mistakes and shape the nation to prepare for such disasters in future. Nevertheless, the Great Bengal Famine served as an exceptional example how a lack of efficient governance and environmental crisis can lead to a catastrophe killing millions in the land of India; the Great Bengal Famine successfully showed how environmental problems often collided with the political landscape of a century to give birth to such a catastrophe.

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