

Old Pamphlet Revisited on Red Books Day 2022

THE MAN-MADE FAMINE

JYOTI BOSE

With an introduction by Utsa Patnaik



Sankrityayan Kosambi Study Circle

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Cambridge University Majlis

THE - - MAN-MADE FAMINE

By JYOTI BOSE

“ Destitutes who have collapsed strew the pavement.”

—“ Observer,” Oct. 17

“ A failure that is eloquent of a tragic lack of forethought.”

—“ Times,” Oct. 16

“ The key posts in Bengal’s food control have been
throughout held by British Civil Servants.”

—“ Observer,” Oct. 17

3d.

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FOISTER AND JAGG, ST. ANDREW’S HILL, CAMBRIDGE (1943)

Original cover of the pamphlet, a copy of which is held in the British Library

Introduction: The 1943-44 Famine in Bengal

Utsa Patnaik¹

Three million deaths from starvation, including at least a million children, as the result of Britain extracting £1,600 million from India to finance Allied forces during the War, through a deliberate Profit Inflation advised by J. M. Keynes.

Jyoti Bose's short pamphlet on the Bengal famine, though it relied mainly on the information that was carried in the generally conservative English press, is notable for correctly identifying it as a 'man-made' famine and for refuting the idea that hoarding of grain caused it. At the time the famine raged in Bengal province, many persons associated with the political Left were engaged in famine relief activities, while journalists had toured famine affected areas and reported their findings. Among other notable writers Bhowani Sen later gave a detailed account in his book titled *Rural Bengal in Ruins*, and T. G. Narayanan wrote investigative reports on the famine for *The Hindu*. In England the progressive journalist Henry Brailsford was critical of British policy during the famine. and Rajani Palme Dutt used reports available from India, to track the famine, paying special attention to the rapid rise in prices.

Those who live through a historical event, even if they are accurate in describing what they see, cannot always identify exactly, its full impact or its cause; these are matters that always require careful subsequent research. It is estimated on a conservative basis that about 3 million persons starved to death in the famine during 1943-44 while some observers at that time, put the figure as high as 3.5 million. As regards its cause, very often even academics attribute an event to factors

¹ Professor Emerita, Centre for Economic Studies and Planning, Jawaharlal Nehru University.

that have no bearing at all on the event, by falling into a widely prevalent fallacy - *post hoc ergo propter hoc* - namely, 'after this, therefore because of this'. There are misguided academics in Northern universities who still insist that the famine took place because there was a cyclone preceding the famine, which destroyed crops. The scale of the famine does not seem to concern them, or the fact that the Bengal and Orissa coasts continue to be battered by cyclones every year without any such dire outcome. Fearing a landing by Japanese forces on the Bengal-Orissa seacoast, the colonial rulers had panicked and implemented a policy of denial of resources by destroying around 8,000 private fishing boats, and by taking over food stocks from adjacent villages. This has been cited as a cause as well, and while it did inflict immense local distress, it is unconvincing given the broader location and the scale of the famine.

Above all, 'speculation and hoarding' is a perennial favourite as a fallacious 'explanation' of the rapid inflation marking the period of the famine, that merely mistakes the symptom for the cause. This is a variant of the *post hoc* fallacy, wherein an event occurring not before, but at the same time as the famine, is incorrectly stated to be the cause. It is like a doctor saying that the cause of a patient's death was his running a high temperature, without bothering to investigate what lay behind this symptom. Jyoti Bose explicitly and correctly rebuts the official statements that hoarding was responsible for the rapid inflation that put rice beyond the reach of millions of people dependent on purchasing from the market.

Abnormally rapid inflation of food prices took place from the beginning of 1942 in Bengal province, while food prices also rose, albeit less rapidly, in the rest of British India. The open market price of rice per maund (a maund was equal to 82 lbs. or 37 kg.) in Calcutta was Rs. 6 in January 1942, it rose four-fold to Rs. 24 by April 1943, and nearly doubled over the next six months to Rs. 40 by October (Bhowani Sen 1945, quoted in R.P. Dutt, 1947, p. 263). Thus, there was a seven-fold rise in less than two years. For comparison, the per capita monthly income in

1940 was Rs. 5.33. Assuming that a person at this average income level spent on nothing else except 300 grams of rice daily (this after cooking would give 1100 kilocalories, just enough to survive), she would no longer be able to buy enough rice, by January 1943. The majority of the population in fact earned considerably less than the average income, and faced increasing famishment from the late summer of 1942. Calcutta was relatively better off in that a food rationing system and distribution at controlled prices had been put in place, while price rise was much greater in smaller *mofussil* towns and rural areas, reaching between Rs. 50 to Rs. 100 per maund of rice. The classes worst affected were those who were mainly or wholly dependent on purchasing food from the market — the rural and urban wage paid labourers, poor peasants, artisans, fisher folk and service providers.

The violent food price inflation was the result of a deliberate official policy of ‘profit inflation’ undertaken by John Maynard Keynes, who was appointed an advisor to the British government on wartime finance in 1940, and was given special charge of Indian monetary matters. He was considered to be an expert on Indian financial questions, for he had a long association with India, from the time of his first job at the India Office in London following which he had published his first book *Indian Currency and Finance* in 1913, at the age of thirty. After leaving the India Office and joining Cambridge University, he gave lecture courses on Indian financial matters to students for a number of years. He was a member of, or gave evidence to, every Commission on Indian Currency and Finance starting from 1913.

Keynes had explained at length in his 1930 book *Treatise on Money – the Applied Theory of Money* that the sudden large leap of military-related spending required during a war, as during WW1, could not possibly be raised by voluntary savings. The ‘rich were too few’ and only a substantial reduction in the consumption of the mass of the people through ‘forced transferences of purchasing power’ away from them, could release the required resources for war needs. However, labour

unions would resist any decline in money wages of workers and would also resist any large tax on wages, so the only feasible alternative for the government was to deliberately follow a policy of letting prices of necessities rise more than money wages so that real incomes and consumption of the mass of the ordinary people, declined. “I conclude therefore that to allow prices to rise by permitting a profit inflation is, in time of war, both inevitable and wise” (Keynes 1971 [1930], p. 155).

Keynes implicitly assumed that workers would not see through the trick of lowering their consumption through deliberate ‘profit inflation’ – the term he used for this situation when prices were made to rise faster than wage incomes, as contrasted with ‘income inflation’ by which he meant a situation where both prices and wage incomes rose in tandem leaving real incomes unchanged.

In the course of 1939 and 1940, in newspapers and journals, Keynes repeated his argument on the necessity of profit inflation and published a pamphlet titled *How to Pay for the War — a Radical Plan for the Chancellor of the Exchequer* (1940). But labour leaders in Britain were certainly not obtuse as Keynes had implicitly assumed, and they refused to agree to be tricked into lowering real wages by the deliberate promotion of inflation. They said that the working class would voluntarily contribute money to fight fascism, but not through inflation designed to lower their real wages. They fully understood that Keynes’s proposal was highly regressive, for rapid food price rise always hits to the largest extent the poorest classes in a population. Facing strong opposition from the unions in Britain, Keynes was forced to give up inflation as a method of war finance, and follow a more equitable course of additional taxation that was progressive, exempting the poorest citizens completely.

In India however there was no public knowledge or discussion of the policy of profit inflation advocated by Keynes, who faced no informed opposition to his favourite policy and had a completely free hand. As soon as the war in Europe broke out, an agreement had been signed by the colonial government with Britain, under

which the cost of the Allies' war operations against Japan was to be met through the Indian budget however high that cost might be, with a promise by Britain to repay the sums spent in sterling once the war ended, whenever that might be. In effect annual forced loans were to be taken from India of unspecified value and with no known terminal date. Against the rupees India spent on Allied forces and war-related construction, equivalent sterling was credited on paper to the Reserve Bank of India in London, but not a penny of the sterling could be drawn and nor was it clear if and when India's loan would be repaid. The implications of this agreement became clear only from end-1941 after Pearl Harbour, when the US joined the war against Japan and every day many thousands of Allied troops poured into Eastern India to counter the Japanese advance through Burma. Barracks, roads and airstrips were constructed at a feverish pace and there was a boom in all war-related industries. India had to meet the suddenly increased cost of feeding, housing and transporting Allied forces and the sharply increased demand for food on account of rising employment in the war-related industries. Most of the procurement of food grains and other supplies by the government took place from the hinterland of Bengal, which saw much higher inflation than the rest of India. The rural population was made to bear the brunt of resource extraction through inflation.

Two facts stand out – the British government going in for an unimaginably rapid rise in rupee spending on Allied operations, by simply printing money, knowing full well that its desired objective of rapid inflation would follow; and its complete indifference to the speed and ferocity of the consumption decline of the classes of persons especially in rural areas, that were market-dependent for food, to the point of millions of starvation deaths. The income of the average Indian was 3 percent of average income in Britain, that had already drained India of all its earnings of gold and foreign exchange from export surplus for 175 years and had already pushed the population into serious under-nutrition, with the largest fall of per capita food grain absorption, by nearly 40 percent in the inter-war period, taking

place in Bengal, under occupation for the longest period. That rapid inflation meant inevitable starvation for the net food purchasers, was clear to the meanest intelligence, but neither Keynes or his Premier, Churchill had the least concern on that account.

According to Andrew Murray (2009, p. 20), “The British Premier held that Hindus were ‘a foul race’ who were ‘protected by their mere pullulation from the doom that is their due.’” Churchill’s personal views were fascist (including a deep interest in eugenics and dislike of the ‘feeble minded’, whose numbers in the British population he wanted to see reduced). Only the fact that Nazi Germany was targeting Britain after occupying France, forced him to oppose Hitler, and the establishment media elevated him undeservedly to the status of a heroic war leader.

Annual central government spending in India during 1939 and 1940 averaged nearly Rs. 90 crores and by fiscal 1943-44, only four years later, it was raised 9.5 times to Rs. 857 crore. A gargantuan deficit resulted every year, which was met by printing paper money in England and flying in planeloads of notes. Over 80 percent of the deficit was on account of spending for Allied operations, spending that was ‘recoverable expenditure’ which Britain promised to repay in sterling after the war ended (but in practice only a fraction of it in real terms was actually repaid). To get an idea of the phenomenal extent of deficit met by printing money, let us consider today’s budget and GDP figures and apply the same rates of increase seen at that time. In 2018-19 India’s central government outlay was Rs. 15 lakh crore (one lakh crore is 10 raised to the power 12, namely one trillion, so this sum was Rs. 15 trillion, not counting devolution to the states and including a small deficit). This outlay was just short of 8 percent of India’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Rs. 190 trillion. Suppose over the next four years, by the present fiscal year 2022-23, the central government outlay is raised 9.5 times to Rs. 143 trillion, it would amount to 75 percent of the 2019 GDP! Assuming that tax revenues have trebled over the period as in the past, the total deficit in the current fiscal would be Rs. 100 trillion, entirely met by printing notes. Prices would rise manifold and net food purchasers would starve to death.

No country in the world saw such an inhuman monetary policy, specifically designed to extract massive resources from the Indian people regardless of the human cost. Ultimately a total £1.6 billion was extracted as forced savings to finance Allied operations, via profit inflation from a subject population, at the cost of three million civilian lives of which at least one million were children. Three-quarters of this was 'recoverable expenditure', but Britain refused to pay anything for immediate food imports. At the Bretton Woods conference in 1944, knowing full well the carnage unleashed by his policy, Keynes refused the urgent request by the Indian delegation (including by its English finance member) that some small part of the sterling owed to India, be released in the form of dollars for importing badly needed food grains from the USA. Keynes insisted that its sterling debt was a bilateral matter between Britain and India, even though India had financed Allied forces, not solely British forces. Keynes intended that at least a third of the sterling debt that Britain owed to India and Egypt, would never be paid, and another one-third be delayed and paid in later instalments, according to his biographer Robert Skidelsky (2001. p. 414). The imperialists including Keynes projected themselves as 'civilised' and honourable, but acted in a dishonourable manner when it came to their country's economic interests in their colonies. They made promises they had no intention of keeping, and refused to take responsibility for their own actions. In a private letter to the editor of *New Statesman* and *Nation*, Keynes had the temerity to blame the induction of Indians into the civil service and their alleged inefficiency, for the famine (Chandavarkar 1989, p.181). The imperialists were the very embodiment of Jean Paul Sartre's concept of *mauvaise foi*, of bad faith.

Why was there no protest in India, as there was from the working class in England, to Keynes's idea of profit inflation? His objective, that he openly discussed, was to raise *forced savings* by reducing mass consumption. British India's per head income was less than one-thirtieth of that in Britain, and millions were well below this average. Reducing the consumption of people who were already at

the margin of bare subsistence, could have only one outcome. No one in India seemed to realise that deliberate inflation suggested by Keynes was a highly controversial and dangerous policy, even though it was being criticised in the British media. Part of the answer might lie in the fact that the intellectually able leaders of India's freedom struggle were already in jail by 1942, including large numbers of Communists who were simultaneously members of the Congress Socialist Party, and they remained in jail for several years. Jyoti Basu was a very young 26-year-old entrant to the communist movement after his return from England in 1940; he was free, and actively engaged in famine relief. He maintained contact with patriotic students in London, Oxford and Cambridge. If he was the Jyoti Bose who wrote the pamphlet, as seems very probable — though we cannot be absolutely certain of it — by the time the pamphlet was published in 1943, his impassioned plea to the British public to help the famine-affected in Bengal, came too late. Millions were already dead.

Another part of the answer to the question, why there was no overt analytical understanding and specific protest against profit inflation as a policy, sadly lies in intellectual opportunism and complicity. Some if not all Indian students of economics directly taught by Keynes at Cambridge certainly did understand his argument and quite likely followed English trade union debate and resistance, but they were too awed by him, a powerful ruling class intellectual-administrator able to dispense patronage, to articulate dissent. Indeed, Keynes's best student, on his recommendation became the first Indian to serve as an executive director of the newly set up International Monetary Fund. We see to this day, the unedifying sight of many intellectuals who belong to the Indian elite, choosing to keep quiet or to actively promote wrong policies (for which they are well rewarded by metropolitan institutions) as global financial interests wreak havoc through neo-liberalism, which is another name for neo-imperialism. These intellectuals thereby become complicit

in promoting and implementing policies that affect very adversely the hapless peasantry and the poor of their own country.

The Bengal famine was nothing less than *genocide by economic means*, genocide carried out not by the crude method of guns but through the clever macroeconomic policy of deliberate demand compression to raise forced savings. India had a young population – the expectation of life was abysmally low at less than 30 years before the war. Children, defined in the Census as those aged 14 years and less, comprised 37 per cent of the population. Even assuming that their share in total famine deaths was much less than their share in the population, in Bengal *at least one million children were starved to death in the course of 20 months*. This number was twice the total mortality in Britain, which was a little less than half a million, over the entire war period, counting armed forces plus civilians. The conservatively estimated civilian mortality alone from the famine taking both adults and children in Bengal, at 3 million, was thus over six times the total British toll during the entire war period. Additionally, nearly one lakh Indian soldiers died fighting in war theatres.

The British were probably the cleverest of the European imperialists. That the cleverness of these imperialist leaders in economic and financial matters was combined with complete ruthlessness and a total lack of morality when pursuing their economic aims, is not understood to this day even by critical writers from the South. The global capitalist system that runs on money and profit as its sole objectives, has been in the past and continues to be, though imperialism, inextricably linked with and parasitic on the global South. Imperialism is inherent in the money form itself, and it turned otherwise decent people into veritable monsters of amorality. Yet they succeed to this day, in incorporating intelligent Indians into their project of global exploitation. The truth of the Bengal famine must be more widely known and the ‘man-made famine’ must never be forgotten. For neo-imperialism continues to take its toll today in human lives from India;

governments in the industrial North and international financial institutions pretend that the 3.5 lakh debt-induced farmer suicides since the 1990s in India, have nothing to do with the pressure they have successfully exerted to ‘open up’ India and other Southern countries to free trade and economic re-colonisation.

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Man-Made Famine

Jyoti Bose

THE SITUATION TODAY

Today, one of the most terrible famines in human history is sweeping over the densely populated parts of India, affecting already over a hundred million people. Even the most rigorous censorship has failed to conceal this fact from out through the gagged silenced² enforced by the British authorities “read like extracts from some medieval chronicle of Black Death.” To quote the correspondent of the “Daily Herald”³: “Children and parents can be seen sharing food with the animals in the gutter, famished fathers snatching scraps of food from their youngsters’ grasp, and mothers who have long ago given up hope of suckling their babies....Down the river, smoke is spiralling into the sky above a fading red glow. They are preparing the burning ghats for another day’s work.” Calcutta has become the “city of slow death.”

VICTIMS OF STARVATION

“The Times” on October 11 was obliged to admit that something like 150 to 200 people are dropping dead daily like flies in the streets of Calcutta; 4,400⁴ sufferers from starvation have been admitted to Calcutta hospitals between August 16 and August 28, of whom nearly a thousand have since died. The number of destitutes

² Huq’s statement in the Bengal Assembly, as reported in “Daily Worker,” Oct. 18.

³ Sept. 20, 1943.

⁴ “Times,” Sept. 20.

in that city alone has risen to the enormous figure of 230,000⁵. Starvation babies are made semi-fit in hospitals, and are then discharged to their homes to starve again. But Calcutta is a cheerful spot compared with the rest of the countryside, where the most appalling scenes of suffering are taking place. According to a survey made by the Anthropological Department of the University of Calcutta, agricultural labourers and cultivators are the worst sufferers, their deaths numbering hundreds daily. The "Calcutta Statesman"⁶ has reported that, according to reliable estimates, the number of deaths numbering hundreds daily throughout Bengal vary between 8,000 to 11,000. In the Barisal district, once known as the granary of Bengal, children and infants are being exchanged for money, or food. Landless labourers, destitute men, women and children, hundreds of famished families are arriving⁷ daily on the Bengal-Assam frontier; many of them coming to the cities in search of food, only to be cruelly disappointed and starved to death.

CLOTHING SHORTAGE

Starvation only does not complete the tragic side of the picture. There has been an acute clothing shortage. Merchants and millowners ascribe this mainly to large scale exports and the use of cloth by the military.⁸

RISE IN THE COST OF LIVING

The rise in the cost of living which has been 600 per cent has affected all classes. The price of rice in Dacca, it was stated in the Bengal Assembly, on September 29, has gone up 80 Rs. Per maund, that is, a twenty-fold increase. Some idea of the

⁵ "Observer," Oct. 17, 1943.

⁶ Reported in "Daily Worker," Oct. 18, 1943.

⁷ "Manchester Guardian," Sept. 24, 1943.

⁸ "Daily Worker," Oct. 18, 1943.

plight of the poor peasants may be gathered if one were to imagine a loaf of bread costing 4/- in this country; but even then, the comparison is hardly adequate, because the purchasing power of the English poor is several times greater than that of their Indian counterpart.

THE AREAS AFFECTED

Nor is the extensiveness of the famine confined to different parts of Bengal only. It has affected other provinces as well, and is indeed spreading all over India with unabated fury. On September 30, the "Times" reported that the condition of Orissa was fast approaching that of Bengal. The "Observer," on October 17, describes Contai and Tamluk as "places of the dead." The famine has bitten deep into areas as far south as the Madras Presidency. Over half of a million people are destitute there.⁹ Indeed, the scourge has spread throughout the Southern half of the Indian peninsula as severely as in Bengal.

DISEASE FOLLOWS FAMINE

To make matters worse, an epidemic of the worst sort has broken out extensively, and has already taken toll of thousands of lives. Starving, desperate people, tortured by hunger and forced to eat indescribable filth, have been attacked by cholera, typhoid and other dangerous diseases. Cholera, in particular, has appeared wherever there was food shortage. Calcutta hospitals are working at full capacity, but the mortality rate in that city, caused by the diseases, does not show any signs of decreasing. Cochin and Travancore---some 1,500 miles away from Calcutta---have also been in the grip of the disease of unprecedented severity. In the Malabar district of India, there have been 30,000 cases with 80 per cent. mortality.¹⁰ The spread of

⁹ "The Manchester Guardian." As quoted by the "News India" (London), Vol. vi, Oct., 1943.

¹⁰ "Manchester Guardian," Sept. 24, 1943.

the disease to every district of Madras has been reported by some papers.¹¹ Hospitals report the deaths of 50 people a day in some parts of the country. Indeed, so desperate is the position in the hospitals that “it has to be a killing disease or starvation to the point of death”¹² before admission is considered. Others with the slightest chance of recovery are left to suffer by the roadside.

THE GOVERNMENT DOES ITS DUTY!

What, one might ask, is the Government doing in this widespread calamity? As usual, it is “doing its duty” by firing on hungry crowds¹³ who raid food shops, and by picking up corpses of those who have died during the night. According to its own estimates, during the latter half of August its patrols disposed of 2,500 corpses from roads of Calcutta alone. Efficiency indeed!

Political bickering was the chief preoccupation of the Government. But did it pay the slightest heed to demands for rationing, or adequate methods of distribution, which might have prevented this extreme crisis? Rice was exported while people starved.

THE HOARDING FALLACY

The rulers of India, failing in their duty to the Indian people, and betraying so far, an almost complete inability and unwillingness to deal with the situation, is now trying to throw the blame on other quarters for the terrible tragedy which is taking place. The old policy of finding scapegoats is once again cunningly used: Who were

¹¹ “Manchester Guardian,” Sept. 24, 1943.

¹² “Sunday Pictorial,” Oct. 17, 1943.

¹³ In Kashmir, as reported by “Manchester Guardian,” Sept. 24, 1943.

responsible for the famine? Hoarders! - the Government tries to explain. But do facts justify this assertion?

In the first place, the large majority of landless peasants, whose poverty staggers the imagination, can hardly have the means to buy up in advance large stocks. The number of people who have the means to hoard in India is very limited. But even if the people did hoard, can any sensible person seriously believe that individual hoarding on any scale can produce famine of this magnitude? The experience of any country would refute this bold assertion made by the Government.

Lastly, even if some hoarding did take place, why did not the Government discharge its rightful function in war-time by taking adequate measures against hoarders as happened in this country?

The bogey of hoarding seemed rather convenient for the Government: but it failed to see that it might come back as a boomerang on itself. Can the Government deny that it, itself, gave a fillip to rising prices by buying up and hoarding large stocks in advance to feed its own war machine? Its war workers are to-day supplied free by employers on subsidised food in order that the war effort in Bengal be protected from the impact of the famine.¹⁴ According to the B.U.P. correspondent, in some of the big European hotels, seventeen course dinners are being served to-day while lean, emaciated faces can be seen staring wistfully through the windows. What else but hoarding or special food imports can account for these sumptuous meals which are meant for the privileged few whom the Government dare not touch, for they constitute the second line of defence of a government which lack deplorably the backing of the people? The principal hoarders, if they exist at all, are not to be found in the ranks of the people, but in higher quarters.

¹⁴ "News India." Oct. 1943, p. 6.

BURMA RICE

A great deal has been said about the rice imports from Burma. The stoppage of such imports is mainly responsible for the famine, says the Government. But this statement is hardly convincing in view of the fact that Burma imports supplied only 5 per cent, of the entire Indian need. The rest of the supplies were procured from the country itself. The other fact that must not be overlooked, is that in normal times, the net exports of rice from India exceeded net imports from Burma. To what, then, can the cause of this shortage be ascribed? There were no crop failures. The only factor that can be mainly responsible for the shortage is the Government's short-sighted policy of continuing large-scale exports from India to feed its Middle Eastern Armies. Moreover, as early as 1942, the Government, alarmed by the swift Japanese advance to the borders of India, started to buy up large stocks for itself. A cumulative rise in food prices then set in. The imminence of a crisis seemed probable. Strong appeals were then made to the Government to bring some amount of control and distribution of food. If it had taken note of these appeals at that period, much of this distress might have never taken place.

LACK OF AUTHORITY?

Another excuse the government has found very handy is that food is a provincial matter, owing to the autonomy which each province enjoys. The centre, therefore, is powerless to compel one province to supply another. But this argument is hardly impressive to anyone who has the slightest knowledge of the system of administration in India. The viceroy, thanks to Emergency Powers under the 1935 Act and the Defence of India regulations, enjoys autocratic rule, and the provincial Governors under the same Acts possess unlimited powers in their own provinces subject only to the orders of the Viceroy. Provinces which had a Congress majority

constitute more than half of British-controlled India. They were now under complete bureaucratic rule. In the rest of the country, where Home Rule is supposed to prevail, the Governor's powers are wide and every Indian Minister is surrounded by British Civil Servants, who practically run the Administration.

Only some time ago when Congress was suppressed and the voice of the people muzzled, this entire bureaucratic machinery worked with rigid discipline and impressive uniformity. The Government of India has always been quick and efficient in its policy of suppression, but now that a crisis has taken place in the life of the nation, it puts forward the excuse of fictitious provincial autonomy.

BENGAL EX-PREMIER'S ALLEGATIONS

The responsibility of the Government in this calamity is made clear by the revelations made by MR. Faglul-Huq in the Bengal Assembly. He alleged that the Governor encouraged sections of officials to over-ride the authority of Indian Ministers as though the latter did not exist.

He also alleged that there was reckless speculation in rice by Government agents, which deprived the rural areas of food. Rice was exported from Bengal even after the assurance of the Central Government that no exports would be made. Mr. Huq further charged the Government with appointing a British official as Rice Controller without consulting the Ministry, supposedly autonomous in this sphere, despite the latter's demand for an experienced Indian to do the same job.

These statements by a man of responsible position expose in all its hollowness the Government's argument that it lacks authority and cannot, therefore, impose its will conveniently.

It is significant to note that Mr. Huq's demand for a Royal Commission on the famine was flatly refused.

THE MAN-MADE FAMINE

That the Government has signally failed to cope with the situation is admitted surprisingly enough by one, or two, British newspapers. The “Calcutta Statesman,” whose unswerving loyalty to the Government is hardly questionable, has even gone so far as to say that “the most outstanding factor has been the lack of foresight and planning capacity by India’s own civil governments, Central and Provincial.” “We say with deliberation that the present Bengal famine constitutes the worst and most reprehensible administrative breakdown since the political disorders of 1930 and 1931.... Under the present system of Government, responsibility for the breakdown inescapably rests in the last resort on the authority and its immediate representatives here.”¹⁵

The “Daily Mail” takes up a similar tone. “The truth is,” says this paper, “that the British Government, the Central Government of India and the Bengal Government share the responsibility, and all must share the blame.”¹⁶ The “Observer” speaks of “piecemeal methods, archaic administration,”¹⁷ as factors aiding the confusion. Even the “Times” on September 1st was forced to admit that the “crisis has been aggravated by the late stage at which effective official intervention has been invoked,” and on October 11th the same paper said: “Bengal continues to fight the famine with an administration that has become seriously run down.” These revealing admissions, wrung from one or two prominent British sources by the force of events, show where the real blame lies. It rests on the Government, and that Government is British.

¹⁵ “News India,” p. 6. Vol. vi, Oct., 1943.

¹⁶ “Daily Mail,” Oct. 18, 1943.

¹⁷ “News India,” Oct. 1943, Vol. vi, p. 5.

MEASURES SUGGESTED

What, then, is to be done now? The measures so far taken by the Government have proved to be inadequate on their own admission. Rationing, supposed to begin in Calcutta from the middle of October will not now begin, according to the "Times," till the middle of November.¹⁸

The rulers of India, headed by Mr. Amery, continue to maintain that same criminal indifference which has so far characterised their attitude to India.

India starves, while Australia and Canada have an abundant surplus of food-grains. In fact, Mr. William Scully, Australian Minister of Commerce, declared recently that Australia could supply all the food needed for the starving population of Bengal and other stricken parts of India. The supplies are only waiting to be shipped.

We, therefore, urge upon the Government to release such shipping as a necessary in order to supply the famished people of India given priority in the immediate future over other affairs for two highly important reasons: (a) India's consumption per head is already so low that there is not the same margin for reduction as in other countries; (b) the area nearest to large scale military operations in the near future, Bengal, is the scene of the greatest distress. To quote the "Times" again: "The military importance of Bengal makes the relief of the present misery in the Presidency a military, political as well as a humanitarian duty."

Further, we urge the Government of India to stop immediately any shipments of grain from India to other countries, if such exports are still going on. India must become for the duration of the war a net importing country, and cease to be a net exporting country. Her needs at the present moment are very great indeed. The Gregory Committee recommends the importation of 1,000,000 tons of food-grains

¹⁸ "The Times," Oct. 11.

annually till further notice, with an additional 500,000 tons during the first year to form central reserves.

Moreover, the Indian Government should make use of the Emergency legislation, and put an end to the provincial anarchy which is aiding the confusion and adding fuel to the fire. The centre should set up a nationally represented food board to secure continuous and conscious co-ordination of effort in all directions, as well as to have the last word in regard to food-price changes, the allocation of supplies and the management of the central food-grains reserve. As Mr. P.C. Joshi alleged, the work of the food committees which were set up as voluntary organisations was generally obstructed by officials. The Governor of Bengal should stop such obstruction, and immediately invite their co-operation.

Some form of rationing should be introduced, at least in urban areas. But the greatest need is in the direction of tightening up the machinery for the procurement of supplies through large-scale importations. That is the first condition of recovery.

The epidemic which has broken out must also be dealt with immediately. Great provisions for medical relief for post-war Europe are being made in this country and elsewhere. "The United Nations' Relief and Rehabilitation Administration" and other organisations and relief committees have been set up for that purpose. But the position in India, where no Wehrmacht prevents the doctors from bringing succour to the afflicted victims, has not yet received the attention that it rightly deserves. The sending of a medical relief committee to India, consisting of experts, will be immensely helpful in extirpating the epidemic. The doctors who undertake such a mission will, on their side, be provided with an experience that will serve them well in their later work elsewhere. We, therefore, urge the Government to send such a relief committee to India immediately, before the epidemic creates frightful havoc.

Our last---and the most important---demand is that the true leaders of India be released at once from the prisons which the Government have been shameless enough to create for them, and they be given all the necessary administrative powers to cope with the situation. They have the confidence and the implicit trust of the people. Only they, acting in the interests of the broad masses, can put things right.

THE FUTURE

The past record of British administration in India has not been a very proud one. Brutal persecution and suppression of the people in their demand for self-expression---these have formed a part of that record. The rulers of India have already done enough to forfeit all possible claims to rule the country. But now, if in this crisis, perpetrated and aggravated by them, they maintain their same old attitude and let a staggering number of people perish, the severance of Indo-British relations will be complete. No amount of propaganda will exonerate them from this crime. Nor will the Indian nation ever forget.

People of Britain!! The unanimous demand of the Indian people today is for food and freedom. Those of you who believe in the principles for which the greatest war of all times is being fought to-day, those of you who believe in the right of every man to be economically secure and to make his own destiny, will find in these demands of a nation asking for justice at the bar of history, a fundamental part of your own demands. We therefore appeal to you to exert pressure on your government and the real rulers of India in order that something may be done to relieve the situation. If Indo-British relations are to improve in future, if Axis propagandists are not to be supplied with fresh material for their work, help to India must be dispatched immediately.

Her needs are great. Her condition is desperate. There is no time for delay.

In Lieu of an Afterword

‘A famine came to Bengal in the midst of plenty, and has left in its wake broken minds, damaged bodies, and crushed hopes. No longer does the sight of a good green crop bring exultation to the hearts and a smile to the lips of the agriculturalist, for no longer does it spell security from at least hunger for him. He greets it apprehensively and with reservation, for much of it is already mortgaged to his landlord, who in his turn has sold it to the smooth-spoken merchant from the cities.’

——— Ela Sen, *Darkening Days: Being a Narrative of Famine-Stricken Bengal*

‘Here was the golden treasure of the grain, the dream El Dorado of thousands upon thousands of the emaciated sons and daughters of Bengal. It was expected to bring relief of itself, but instead it brought disillusionment, for the mass of the people had to suffer yet again the frustration of seeing the crop filter through the official procurement channels into the store of the hoarder and the bottomless pit of the black market.’

——— Freda Bedi, *Bengal Lamenting*

To many contemporary observers, the causality of the Bengal Famine was quite clear. Its depredations were well-documented. Yet, this pamphlet by Jyoti Bose is of special significance not merely because of the possibility that its author could indeed be the communist leader and later Chief Minister of West Bengal, Jyoti Basu, but because it is one of the earliest articulations of the memorable epithet that was made popular by the Communist Party of India (CPI) — ‘man-made famine’. No words were minced in attributing the responsibility of this colossal calamity to the British colonial state. It is a scathing critique of the smug

indifference and imperial designs that had led to the famine and stands as a testimony to the rich history of political activism by Indian students in Britain during the Second World War.

This pamphlet was published in 1943 by two Trinity men, Balachandra Rajan (who later became a diplomat and literary scholar) and D.M. Sen, on behalf of the Cambridge Majlis — the pre-eminent association of Indian students at the university, founded in 1891 at the house of Dr Upendra Krishna Dutt. Its Oxford counterpart was established in 1896 and a London Majlis came into existence in 1936, whose founder secretary was Jyoti Basu himself, then a student of law.

These were important spaces of political ferment where many Indian students had their first brush with the causes of anti-colonial activism and communism. While one can only speculate if this pamphlet was ghost-written in the name of 'Jyoti Bose' (as Jyoti Basu was often referred to in his student days) in the same manner in which the Marxist historian Susobhan Sarkar wrote under the name 'Amit Sen', or if there really was another progressive Cambridge student by the name of Jyoti Bose who authored this text, its purpose was clear: to make people in Britain realize that the famine in Bengal was *not* a natural calamity.

This has become increasingly self-evident with later advances in scholarship. Following Amartya Sen, Janam Mukherjee has shown how the famine was catalyzed by a whirlpool of factors including ill-regulated wartime commodity markets, senseless government stockpiling, opportunist private hoarding, rampant black marketing, and other kinds of market withholding. It was caused not so much by the scarcity of rice but by skyrocketing price inflation that adversely impacted the economic entitlements of the poor agrarian population of Bengal—leading to over three million deaths, even by conservative estimates.

The two-pronged 'denial scheme' adopted by the colonial government led to the appropriation of huge stocks of rice from the Bengal countryside (especially

from the coastal districts) and the large-scale destruction of boats that crippled the crucial riverine transportation system of Bengal, with the aim of denying the Japanese any easy logistical foothold in that deltaic province. This was followed by repeated waves of coercive procurement and confiscation of rice by both the government and crony merchants, eventually resulting in ever-greater hoarding in private hands, diversion of food stocks for servicing the war, price inflation and even destruction of grain reserves due to criminal negligence.

One anecdote of such negligence is offered by the author Manindra Gupta in his autobiography, *Akshay Mulberry*. He witnessed truckloads of food grains procured from different districts of Bengal by the colonial government and the Ispahani Merchant Company being stored with the cosmetic protection of tarpaulins in the Botanical Garden at Shibpur. Heaps of these undistributed food grains got infested with fungi during the early monsoons of 1943 and were consequently rendered inedible — worse than even animal feed. The then General Secretary of the CPI, P.C. Joshi had sent the artist Chittoprasad Bhattacharya to visually document the misery of the Bengal countryside, which resulted in a book of powerful, unsettling and empathetic ink drawings called *Hungry Bengal*, all but one copy of which was destroyed by the colonial government.

The famine was inextricably tied to the war and was in turn deeply imbricated in the political economy of the empire. In a personal telegram to Franklin D. Roosevelt (April 29, 1944), Winston Churchill wrote:

I am seriously concerned about the food situation in India...Last year we had a grievous famine in Bengal through which at least 700,000 people died...I am impelled to ask you to consider a special allocation of ships to carry wheat to India from Australia...I have resisted for some time the Viceroy's request that I should ask you for your help, but... I am no longer justified in not asking for your help.

Roosevelt replied on June 1, noting that while Churchill had his 'utmost sympathy', his Joint Chiefs had said they were 'unable on military grounds to consent to the diversion of shipping...Needless to say, I regret exceedingly the necessity of giving you this unfavorable reply.'

A month later in 1944, it would be discovered at the Bretton Woods Conference, by the Indian delegation (comprising Jeremy Raisman, C.D. Deshmukh, Shanmukham Chetty, and Ardeshir Shroff) that Britain owed India more than a billion pounds in sterling balances for financing the war, something which London was ill-willing to repay. The Indian delegation called for 'settlement of abnormal indebtedness arising out of the war' to be made into a prime objective of the newly founded IMF. The appeal fell on deaf ears. The leader of the British delegation, J.M. Keynes merely assured that Britain would 'settle honourably what was honourably and generously given.' Underneath this dishonest assurance and colonial euphemism of honour was lurking the good old imperial tactic of theft and deceit. As per Srinath Raghavan, the Americans refused to involve the IMF in a matter of bilateral wartime indebtedness, and hoped that 'most of the blocked sterling balances should be written off and the rest unfrozen' which later became the case.

India's ridiculously precarious position was summed up by Shroff: 'You are placing us in a situation which I compare to the position of a man with a \$1 million balance in the bank but not enough sufficient cash to pay his taxi fare.' Among other things, Britain and USA won the war by first starving the most populous province of an impoverished colony and then by breaking its back financially, refusing to repay what was not 'honourably and generously given' but forcibly and mercilessly taken. Utsa Patnaik's introduction to this new edition of the pamphlet, squarely locates this 'man-made famine' within the calculus of imperialism, which thrived as much after the Second World War as during it, albeit by different subterfuges.

The text of this pamphlet has been taken from a copy held in the British Library. The spellings have been left unaltered while the footnotes have been made consistent. Rajarshi Adhikari and Shashi Singh have transcribed the text afresh for

this edition, Vighnesh Tekriwal and Ananyo Chakraborty have edited it where required. K. Gopika Babu has designed the front cover, taking inspiration from Chittaprosad. Zoinul Abedin's moving cover painting for Ela Sen's *Darkening Days* has been reproduced as the back cover under a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 4.0 license, courtesy the Trustees of the British Museum, with whom its copyright rests. Other members of the Study Circle and Prof Suchetana Chattopadhyay have extended their kind help whenever required. If you have read thus far, please consider sharing this forgotten text, for all red pamphlets, whether print or digital, are meant to be spread.

Suchintan Das
(On behalf of the Sankrityayan Kosambi Study Circle)

Zairul
1973

