

Famine in Bengal, 1943-44: A Historical overview

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Abstract: *Famine in Bengal was very heart broken disaster situation in 1943. The main cause of famine was starvation of the food and also claimed cyclone, flood, and diseases. The main focus of this work described the construction overall picture of poverty of famine in the various perspectives like as food grains crisis, military demand, etc. During the several time of epidemic like malaria, small-pox and cholera accompanied the famine but malarial disease was claimed the greatest number of deaths.*

Keywords: *Famine in Bengal, Starvation, Food grains crisis, Military demand, Poverty of famine*

‘They know not to whose door they will turn for justice;
Calling on the God of the poor, for once, in their heaving sighs,
Silently they die.’

-Rabindra Nath Tagore ¹

The Famine of Bengal 1943 was highly destructive in Bengal province. Bengal famine also knew “*Ponchasher Monnontor*” in Bengali language.² ‘Famine’ is originated from the Latin word ‘*fames*’. The German language ‘*Hungersnot*’ connotes hunger associated with a general scarcity of food and the Irish language are ‘*gorta*’ (starvation), and, referring to the infamous 1840s, ‘*a drochshaol*’ (the bad times).³ Carmac O Grada also pointed out “famine-prone economies malnutrition is usually endemic and individual deaths from the lack of food not uncommon”⁴ Millions of human life was died during this period, an estimated 2.1-3 millions. But most of the people died for starvation and malarial disease, also died on unsanitary conditions and lack of health care. According to G. Subramania Iyer, “Nearly 200 millions of people living a life of chronic starvation and of the most object ignorance, gum and silent in their suffering, without just in life, without comfort and enjoyment, without hope or ambition, living because they were born into the world, and dying because life could no longer be kept in the body”.⁵ Famine has been common incident in the ancient and modern times of India and also famine was occurred in Mughol period at the time of Shahjahan and Aurangzeb. During 1943, there were reports of distress from the several regions like Noakhali, Chittagong etc. It became clearly evident occurred in May and June. In July most of rural regions of Bengal was involved in famine but during this session death rate being in excess of the normal. From this point onwards the number of deaths rose rapidly and the peak was reached in December, 1943. During the closing month of the year reaping of the aman crop in December and the arrival and distribution of supplies from outside the province, the famine was relived, but death rate remained high throughout the greater part of 1944. During the several time of epidemic like malaria, small-pox and cholera accompanied the famine but malarial disease was claimed the greatest number of deaths.⁶

India was an agricultural country and Bengal was the part of this. In 1943, Bengal was affected by the cyclone in October and also affected by flood and fungus disease.⁷ The people were suffered in a semi-starved condition between half and three quarters period. The Government of India's Famine Inquiry Commission Report (1945) described, “Bengal as a land of rice growers and rice eaters. Rice dominated the agricultural output of the province, accounting for nearly 88% of its arable land use and 75% of its crops. Overall, Bengal produced one third of India's rice more than any other single province. Rice accounted for 75–85% of daily food consumption, with fish the second major food source, supplemented by small amounts of wheat”.⁸

According to the Census of 1931, more than 65 percent population of Bengal depends on day-labourers, petty, agriculturists, artisans and traders. They haven't enough money to pay for meat, milk, eggs, vegetables, sweets and any other essential products. They were own producers of these several food but they were sold the own products for the purchase all essentials products like- rice, wheat, etc.⁹ November 15, 1943 speech of Mr. K.C. Neogy on the Food situation delivered in the Central Assembly. He was said that "The calamity which has be fallen my unfortunate province at the present moment is in a sense unparalleled in the history of human civilization. Starvations, death, pestilence, have been known to follow in the wake of victorious tyrants overrunning foreign territory. In the present instance, however, this gigantic tragedy is being enacted while a well established Government is functioning in the country. If we consider the acts of omission and commission of which Government have been guilty in their attempt to prevent the outbreak of this famine or to deal with it adequately, we cannot help thinking that this famine is primarily a state industry, and to my mind in certain of its aspects it bears the hall-mark of a genuine British manufacture".¹⁰ August 30, 1943 Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya was said "It is a high liagedy that in a country like ours with its abundance of food-stuffs, an expensive system of railways and vast resources of Government both Central and Provincial, there should be deaths due to starvation".¹¹

Table-1

Import and Export of all food grains of Bengal

YEAR	IMPORT (Tons)	EXPORT (Tons)	BALANCE (Tons)
1937-38	1,596,138	966,834	+624,304
1938-39	1,871,693	827,991	+1,043,702
1939-40	2,713,632	492,714	+2,220,918
1940-41	1,549,182	556,267	+992,915
1941-42	1,202,149	770,997	+431,152
1942-43	18,541	379,170	-360,622

Source: Kali Charan Ghosh, *Famine in Bengal 1770-1943*, 1941, Calcutta: Indian Associated Publishing CO. Ld., p. 31

The table shows the real situation in that period. Starvation was the main problem of this famine and it's claimed that Foodgrains Export. According to this table the exports are much higher than imports in 1943. There are also shortages of money for the import of the all food grains in Bengal. In November 10, 1943 Times of India Special Correspondent reported about the agricultural field situation: "A grim but not entirely uncommon spectacle in East Bengal to-day is to find a whitened skeleton in corner of a field bearing the richest riot crop in half a century".¹²

Tarak Chandra Das briefly discussed in his book, the people were used unhusked bajra (Penmsetum typhotdeum). Thus disaster struck the people and then digestion system had been weakened by starvation and consumption of unwholesome food Khichuri, is ordinarily a heavy diet for the Bengal and the addition of bajra occasionally unhusked made it. Gradually, the food crisis increased day by day. They compelled to move door to door for the gruel, and said that "Mago! Ektu Phan deo" (Mother! Give a little gruel). The children were moved to here and there for the Phan. But there was not sufficient gruel for the hungry people. Therefore, every day 2-3 people were death for the unavailable food.¹³ He also gave the description of the real scenario of the famine and he had arrived at village of Daimond Harbour and there people had been without a morsel of food for two days. Their familiarity people here, in the city, they asked for phan which was readily given from the

quantity stored for consumption at night. Without even a pinch of salt they drank the liquid with the avidity that beggars description. Every member of that hungry little party drew the starchy liquid from the pot for full two minutes at breath and then seemed to heave a sigh relief.¹⁴ One day ten years old child collected one glass Phan, he ate first offered to his mother but she refused it, then child walked to his father, he accept it but he drank half then taken down the glass and mother drank after that child drank it.¹⁵

The background of the causes that led to the famine of 1943, it is necessary to carefully scan the statement of high officials of the Central and the Provincial Governments from the very beginning of the 2nd World War. England has been anticipated by those who had declared war on the Axis powers on behalf of India, they were played a great part in the World War, it may be a more glorious part in gallantry and sacrifice than of Britain herself. Committees and Boards relating to food were set up as quickly as chance permitted and in 1941, instead of a Food Department Committee was set up to help the supply, the procurement of foodstuffs for the Defence Services of India and overseas. From October 1939 to September 1942 there were six price control Conferences in Delhi. In April 1942, the Food Advisory Council was established. The Food Department came into existence in December of the same year. In April 1943, Regional Food Commissioners were brought into existence and three Food Members were appointed in quick succession to supervise the whole. Lord Linlithgow, the Viceroy, held the portfolio for sometime after Mr. Nalini Ranjan Sarkar had resigned. There were other officers and appointees, too many to mention, but with all that 1943 proved to be one of the darkest chapters of the British rule in India.¹⁶

Under this circumstance, the political condition of Bengal province was drastically changed. The formation of the Coalition Cabinet in January 1941, with Mr. A.K. Fazlul Huq as premier, Sir John Herbert, the then Governor of Bengal, became “not only unsympathetic but in many cases positively obstructive”.¹⁷ There were “interference and obstruction in matters of day to day administration” and the Finance Minister, Dr. Shyama Prasad Mookerjee, resigned on November 16, 1942 in the Central Assembly, Mr. Fazlul Huq, the then Premier of Bengal, had said: “We do not require for the next few months any rice even though we are in deficit”.¹⁸ And “We know rice is enough for us, we do require some wheat from outside”.¹⁹

The statement of Sir Azizul Huque of August 9, 1943 has found a place in the white paper of the British Government. In the background of Mr. Fazlul Huq’s statement in the Food Conference, there were other more weighty utterances of officials of the Central Government. Nalini Ranjan Sarkar, the then Member for Education, Health and Lands, said on April 6, 1942: “Owing to the extension of rice cultivation in areas released from jute, and favourable weather, the rice deficit in Bengal has been converted into a large surplus of 13.1/2 lakh tons”.²⁰ Amartya Sen's influential analysis, “At the time, the authorities blamed the unfolding crisis on undue war-induced hoarding by merchants, producers and consumers. The view that the famine was mainly due to market failure in wartime conditions rather than to adverse food supply shocks was popularised in the 1970s and 1980s by Bengal native and 1981 Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen. Sen's now-classic account not only began an academic debate about the Bengal famine but also switched the focus of analysis of famines generally away from Food Availability Decline (FAD) per se to the distribution of, or entitlements to, what food was available. In Bengal, Sen argued, the problem was less the supply of food in 1943 than its distribution; in theory there was enough to feed everybody, but massive speculation, prompted in large part by wartime conditions, meant that a minor shortfall in food availability was transformed into a disastrous reduction in market supplies. Sen's analysis has been enormously influential.”²¹

Sir Azizul Huque, said on August 9, 1943, in the statement just referred to above, "the rice crop of 1941 was a surplus crop in Bengal by about 1.5 million tons over the normal average, thus providing a fair carry over for the following year".²² After the resignation of Dr. Shyama Prasad Mookerjee, the trouble in the Bengal Government began to be more acute and the policy of the Governor, Sir John Herbert, was not very conducive to the solution of the rice problem in Bengal. A few days after his return from the first Food Conference, the Hon'ble Mr. Fazlul Huq's Ministry went out of office. What was the rice position at that time in Bengal? The Hon'ble Chief Minister for Bengal, Sir Khawaja Nazimuddin, in a speech in the Muslim League Conference held in New Delhi on November 15, 1943, said that when he took office, on April 24, 1943, the Government of India had announced their basic plan under which Bengal was to get 793,000 tons of food grains. Then this arrangement must have been made prior to Sir Nazimuddin's taking charge of the province.²³ Mr. Fazlul Huq stated that "he had heard reports of a post mortem examination where grass was found in the stomach of a dead man."²⁴ A Civil Supplies Press Note stated that "the Hon'ble Minister is convinced that any deficit this year can be fully met from the carry-over of the 1941-42 crop, and as a result of the steps which are being taken to rationalise consumption, and to popularise the increased use of substitute food-grains, as well as the reduction in consumption due to the high price level. The public may, therefore, rest assured that there is no cause to fear any ultimate shortage of food grains".²⁵ The Civil Supplies Minister, Mr. Suhrawardy, said that the solution was in sight and also '...if the hoards of Bengal could be made more mobile, the situation could be made more mobile, the situation could be eased'.²⁶ The Hon'ble Sir Azizul Huque, Hon'ble Mr. Suhrawardy and Major General Wood, Secretary, Food Department, Government of India, tried to prove by elaborate statistics, which had absolutely no relation to actual facts, that there was no shortage of food stuffs in Bengal and that "psychological factors were among the main causes for shortage of essential foodstuffs and the rise of prices."²⁷ That is just two days after the Press Conference mentioned above, the Hon'ble Sir Azizul Huque, at Krishnagar, "stressed the accuracy of the figures recently published by Government regarding rice and maintained that Bengal was not yet deficit in rice".²⁸ The Civil Supplies Minister, "did not wish to say that there was not enough rice in Bengal or that enough rice would not be coming from outside".²⁹

T. G. Narayan discussed in his book, the great famine of 1943 was undoubtedly aggravated the human made catastrophe by adverse influence of nature.³⁰ The statesman also mentioned, 'the sickening catastrophe is man-made..... It's is accounted for by no climatic failure, rainfall has generally been plentiful ... we say with the deliberation that the present famine constitutes the worst and most reprehensible administrative break down in India since the political disorders of 1930. Under the present system of the Government, responsibility for breakdown rests in the last report on the authority in Britain and its immediate representative here'.³¹ T. G. Narayan had done the survey related to the agricultural wealth and the population of the Bengal and sown those 82,000 square miles area and approximately 63 million people were living in Bengal province.³² The Flood Commission warned, "We consider the pressure of population on the land is the ultimate cause of Bengal's economic troubles".³³ Rice was raised over the 21 million acres and produce around 481 million maunds of paddy a year but here annually roughly needs 540 million paddy in a year. Then the Government evaluated the situation and import the food production for the handle position. The Bengal Government had no imaginative for the development of agricultural system and improvement the policy for the province. They were only depended on the Zamindar system and taxation system from those. The Government was not interested on irrigation system for development of cultivation. When Bengal province expenditure for the development irrigation system 3.5 crores, then Madras Government spends 20 crores and Punjab Government spend 35 crores.³⁴

Richard Schmeer discussed in his article Indian Government had no policy for the basic need of food. He also mentioned the food policy, “It was no one’s responsibility, either in the trade or outside to insure that the supplies necessary for everyone were actually produced and distributed. The free activities of traders, producers, consumers, largely suffered to secure this result”.³⁵ He also describe this situation wheat prices fixed at incredible levels, rice rates also fixed and scarcity increasing, the railroads snarled with military traffic, and food supplies also decreasing, the central government instituted the extraordinary "denial" policy in Bengal: rice and paddy estimated to be in excess of local requirements. The laconic account in the official mentioned Report that: “The measures were necessarily unpopular. As regards the extent to which the movement of rice was impeded it is impossible to frame an estimate. Obviously the removal of so large a number of boats (66,563) must have had a considerable restricting effect on the movements of food grains from the denial areas. ... In the area to which the denial policy was applied boats formed the chief means of communication ... the fishermen who had been deprived of their boats suffered severely during the famine. . . . Considerable areas of land were requisitioned for military purposes during 1942- 43. ... It appears that more than 30,000 families were required to evacuate their homes and land. Compensation was of course paid but there is little doubt that the members of many of these families became famine victims in 1943”.³⁶ Many food grain shop owners were stopping their business in Calcutta. Then the situations of Bengal fear, confusion, ineptitude, corruption were increased and finally this position occurred like a disaster. In March 1943, the crisis in Calcutta intensified. The paddy reserves almost completely disappeared, leaving a half-hearted effort in collecting the Bengal government. The rationing system had opened in District as well as Calcutta region which was fallen in starvation. The Bengal government had specifically declared that statutory was not the highest price for wholesale transactions and would not be.³⁷

According to the Famine Inquiry Commission, in 1943 mortality widespread was higher on Bengal in India the main problem starvation of people. During the next year was little difference between disease and mortality of Bengal. In 1943, mainly people were suffered in rural areas like well-to-do people, industrial people. Sir John Woodhead and his colleagues reported that “perhaps one-tenth of the population 6 million people were seriously affected by the famine. As the price of rice rose during the first half of 1943, the poor in the villages without sufficient stocks of grain in their possession found themselves unable to buy food. After an interval during which they attempted to live on their scanty reserves of food, or to obtain money to buy rice at steadily rising prices by selling their scanty possessions, they starved”.³⁸ Further disease was also spreaded and families were broken and moral lost. Rapidly increased the price of food and during the World War II, military demands were too much of food production.

Table-2

Food purchased for military

Year	Purchases for the Army (tons)
1940-41	22
1941-42	47
1942-43	115

Source: The Famine Inquiry Commission Report on Bengal, 1943, p.20

During that session 1940 to 1943, the table has shown rapidly increased food demand. As a result rural areas were suffered by the famine disaster. Then Government was undertaken the situation and many conferences would hold. The conference was discussed on “On the whole there does not

seem to be grave apprehension at the moment regarding the rise in the price of agricultural products, but the question of wheat prices has to be carefully watched. It may be positive, or it might even be necessary, for a rise in the price of wheat".³⁹ From May, 1942 onwards was not a phenomenon peculiar to Bengal of the rise in price.

Table-3

Import and Export products of Bengal during the first seven months

Month	1941		Net Imports(+) Export(-)	1942		Net Imports(+) Export(-)
	Imports	Exports		Imports	Exports	
January	42	15	+27	29	45	-16
February	62	22	+40	28	60	-32
March	60	31	+29	41	61	-20
April	66	22	+44	8	66	-58
May	51	20	+31	12	32	-20
June	83	15	+68	9	30	-21
July	68	11	+57	8	26	-18
	432	136	+296	135	320	-185

Source: The Famine Inquiry Commission Report on Bengal, 1943, p.28

During the seven months of 1942 were corresponding period of 1941 by nearly 300,000 tons, exports during this session increased from 136,000 tons in 1941 to 320,000 tons in 1942. The results were decreases in imports and increase in export was that net import 296,000 tons in 1941 was changed into a net export of 185,000 tons in 1942. During the last five months of this year 1942, export decrease and were only 30,000 tons.⁴⁰

Lance Brennan describe in his article "Government Relief in Bengal, 1943" that "An estimated seven and half million people died of starvation and related diseases in China, Vietnam and India during the half of Second World War".⁴¹ He was also describing clear direction of when to act and relief for famine. He was seen that difference food crisis on 1936 and 1943. Here Amartya Sen argues that the famine was not caused primarily by a decline in the availability of food but by an economic crisis brought about by the inflationary funding of the war effort. This reduced the real wages of occupational groups such as fishermen, agricultural labourers and transport workers such an extent that they were unable to buy food".⁴² By March 1943 P. N. Banerjee, the revenue minister, was aware of the extent of the crisis and the need for coordination and for a short time in March it was possible that an integrated administrative structure would confront the coming famine. He accepted and wanted to take Sen with him as secretary of a joint department because, he explained to Sir John Herbert, the governor, the control of civil supplies was inseparable from dealing with the famine of unprecedented character that faced them. The possibility of an integrated department of food supplies and relief was lost on March 29 when Herbert forced the resignation of Fazlul Huq's ministry. From April 1943 the Revenue Department, continuing to fund relief on districts in Bengal affected by natural disaster. This was mainly for agricultural loans and test relief, with little spent on gratuitous relief. The poor people were left to the mercy of local charity. During July 1943 all provision for relief was slashed, ostensibly because agricultural operations were demanding labour.⁴³

Janam mukherjee also said "1943 was the most graphic and extreme stage of famine in Bengal particularly in the capital city of Calcutta".⁴⁴ Mike Davis has mentioned, "Famine is never a delimited spectacle or neatly contained 'event', but rather than is part of a continuum with the silent

violence of malnutrition that precedes and conditions it, and with the mortality shadow of debilitation and disease that follows”.⁴⁵ In its *Report on Bengal*, Famine Enquiry Commission found, a bit less conservatively, that the Bengal Famine had, in fact, begun “in the early months” of the same year. In 1982, historian Paul Greenough, in his work *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal*, argued “to expand this framework several more months, suggesting that the Bengal Famine could said to have begun in October 1942, in the wake of a devastating cyclone which decimated the district of Midnapore, south-west of Calcutta”.⁴⁶ He was also seen that “starvation, and the myriad of diseases that prey on starving populations, remained a nagging reality well into 1946”.⁴⁷ In *Poverty and Famines*, Amartya Sen comes to a similar conclusion. Another event that has had extensive currency since 1943 is the idea that victims of famine in Bengal, as in the words of eminent historian Sugata Bose, “died without a murmur,”⁴⁸ or as in the words of Paul Greenough, “accepted, virtually without protest, their victimization.”⁴⁹

Amartya Sen also to provide “an aggregate profile based on the characteristics of those who are identified as poor, problems of aggregation have to be squarely faced”.⁵⁰ Finally and most importantly the causation of poverty raises questions that are not easily answered. It is not possible to say at all precisely how many people were killed by the Bengal famine of 1943. According to the official Famine Inquiry Commission there is evidence that an estimate of around 3 million would be closer of 1.5million arrived. The regional pattern of famine mortality, the relative importance of different districts changed quite a bit between the starvation and the later epidemic.⁵¹

Notes and References

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² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bengal_famine_of_1943

³ Cormac O Grada, *Famine: A Short History*, Princeton University Press, 2009, p.4

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.6

⁵ Kali Charan Ghosh, *Famine in Bengal 1770-1943, 1941*, Calcutta: Indian Associated Publishing CO. LD., p.vii

⁶ The Famine Inquiry Commission: Report on Bengal, p.1

⁷ Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and deprivation* 1981, Oxford: Clarendon press, p.52

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bengal_famine_of_1943

⁹ Tarak Chandra Das, *Bengal Famine (1943): As revealed in a survey of the destitute in Calcutta*, 1949, University of Calcutta

¹⁰ Kali Charan Ghosh, *Famine in Bengal 1770-1943, 1941*, Calcutta: Indian Associated Publishing CO. LD., p.171

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. xi

¹² *Ibid.*, p.x

¹³ Tarak Chandra Das, *Bengal Famine (1943): As revealed in a survey of the destitute in Calcutta*, 1949, University of Calcutta, p.7

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.8

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.9

¹⁶ Kali Charan Ghosh, *Famine in Bengal 1770-1943, 1941*, Calcutta: Indian Associated Publishing CO. LD., p.16

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p.17

²⁰ Tarak Chandra Das, *Bengal Famine (1943): As revealed in a survey of the destitute in Calcutta*, 1949, University of Calcutta, p.31

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- ²³ *ibid.*, p.20
- ²⁴ *Ibid*
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- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.31
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- ³⁰ T. G. Narayan, *Famine over Bengal*, Calcutta: The book company, 1944, p.1
- ³¹ Richard Schneer. "Science and Society" vol-II, "Famine in Bengal: 1943". Guilford press. P.171
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- ³³ *Ibid.*, p.4
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.6
- ³⁵ Richard Schneer, *Science and Society*, vol-II, Famine in Bengal: 1943, Guilford press, P.171
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- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.175
- ³⁸ The famine inquiry commission: report on Bengal, p.2
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.20
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid*
- ⁴¹ Lance Brennan, *Government Famine Relief in Bengal: 1943*, The Journal of Asian Studies, Vol- 47, No-3" p.541
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, p.542
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.546
- ⁴⁴ Janam Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal: war famine and the end of empire*, Oxford University Press, 2015. p.11
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid*
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- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.12
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid*
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- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.215