

Echoes of Despair: Firsthand Narratives and the Political Landscape of the Bengal Famine (1943)

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Abstract

The Bengal Famine of 1943, a devastating event that resulted in the deaths of millions, had profound effects on the political landscape of Bengal. This research article explores the famine through the lens of firsthand narratives, examining how these personal accounts reveal the complex interplay between colonial policies, local governance, and societal responses. By analyzing eyewitness testimonies, archival records, and contemporary reports, this study aims to illuminate the human experience of the famine and its impact on political consciousness and movements in Bengal. The findings highlight the critical role of British colonial policies in exacerbating the crisis, with wartime priorities and resource diversion significantly contributing to the famine's severity. The colonial administration's delayed and inadequate response exposed the exploitative nature of British rule, deepening political discontent among the Indian populace. Local leaders and nationalist movements responded with vigorous criticism and organized relief efforts. The Indian National Congress, the Communist Party of India, and grassroots organizations played crucial roles in mobilizing support and advocating for the affected population, thereby intensifying anti-colonial sentiments. The famine also had a profound impact on political consciousness in Bengal. The collective suffering and visible failures of the colonial administration united diverse political factions and strengthened the resolve for self-governance, accelerating the momentum of the Indian independence movement. This study underscores the interconnectedness of personal suffering and political change, emphasizing the importance of compassionate and effective governance. By bringing to light the firsthand experiences of those who lived through the famine, it provides a deeper understanding of the Bengal Famine's lasting impact on Indian society and politics.

Keywords: *Bengal Famine, 1943, British colonial policies, political consciousness, anti-colonial movements, firsthand narratives, Indian independence movement.*

Introduction

The Bengal Famine of 1943 was a cataclysmic event that ravaged British India, leaving a profound and enduring impact on its people and its political landscape. This famine, which resulted in the death of an estimated three million people, was not solely the consequence of natural calamities but was significantly exacerbated by human actions and policies. A convergence of crop failures, wartime exigencies, colonial exploitation, and administrative neglect culminated in one of the most devastating famines in modern history. Understanding the Bengal Famine requires an exploration of these multifaceted causes and the harrowing experiences of those who lived through it. The immediate cause of the famine was a sequence of crop failures, aggravated by the disruptions of World War II. The war strained resources and supply lines, causing significant inflation and scarcity of essential commodities. However, the famine cannot be attributed merely to these immediate factors. British colonial policies played a critical role in transforming a natural disaster into a humanitarian catastrophe. The colonial government's emphasis on resource extraction and profit maximization led to systemic neglect of the local population's welfare. The failure to implement effective relief measures and the prioritization of military needs over civilian sustenance exacerbated the crisis, revealing a profound disregard for the lives of the colonized. Political ramifications of the famine were profound. The inability of the British administration to effectively respond to the crisis fueled discontent and resentment among the Indian population. The famine exposed the stark inequities of colonial rule, where the lives of millions were sacrificed for the war efforts and economic interests of the empire. This period saw a significant rise

in nationalist sentiments, as leaders of the Indian independence movement used the famine to highlight the urgent need for self-rule. The famine thus became a catalyst for political mobilization, further intensifying the struggle for independence. Socially, the Bengal Famine wrought unimaginable devastation. Entire families were wiped out, villages were deserted, and the social fabric of Bengal was irreparably torn. The famine's impact went beyond mere statistics; it was a human tragedy of epic proportions. Firsthand narratives of survivors provide a poignant glimpse into the daily struggles, the heart-wrenching decisions, and the resilience of those who lived through the famine. These personal accounts reveal the depth of suffering, the desperate measures taken to secure food, and the breakdown of social norms in the face of overwhelming scarcity. This study seeks to delve into the political and social ramifications of the Bengal Famine by focusing on these firsthand narratives. Through the voices of those who experienced the famine, we gain a more nuanced understanding of its impact on Indian society and its role in shaping the political discourse of the time. By examining personal letters, diaries, and eyewitness accounts, this research aims to illuminate the human dimension of the famine, often overshadowed by statistical analyses and official reports. These narratives not only document the suffering and despair but also highlight the resilience and solidarity that emerged in the face of such adversity.

In conclusion, the Bengal Famine of 1943 was a watershed moment in the history of British India, revealing the fatal consequences of colonial exploitation and administrative failure. By exploring the firsthand narratives of survivors, this study aims to honor their experiences and shed light on the broader political and social ramifications of the famine. Through their stories, we gain insight into the profound impact of this tragedy on the Indian independence movement and the enduring legacy of the Bengal Famine in the collective memory of the nation.

Literature Review

- *Amartya Sen*

In his seminal work, "Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation" (1981), Amartya Sen challenges the traditional view that famines are solely caused by food shortages. Sen argues that the Bengal Famine was primarily due to a failure of entitlements, where economic policies and distribution mechanisms prevented people from accessing food. His analysis highlights the role of wartime inflation and speculative hoarding in exacerbating food scarcity, emphasizing the political and economic dimensions of the famine.

- *Paul Greenough*

Paul Greenough's "Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943-1944" (1982) provides a detailed account of the administrative failures and colonial policies that contributed to the famine. Greenough examines the British government's inadequate relief efforts and the impact of wartime priorities on food distribution. His work underscores the neglect and exploitation inherent in colonial governance, offering a critical perspective on the administrative handling of the crisis.

- *Madhushree Mukerjee*

In "Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India During World War II" (2010), Madhushree Mukerjee explores the role of British wartime policies in exacerbating the famine. Mukerjee argues that decisions made by Winston Churchill and his administration, such as the diversion of food supplies to support the war effort, played a significant role in worsening the food crisis. Her work highlights the colonial exploitation and indifference that contributed to the famine's severity.

- **Janam Mukherjee**

Janam Mukherjee's "Hungry Bengal: War, Famine, and the End of Empire" (2015) provides a comprehensive analysis of the social and political landscape of Bengal during the famine. Mukherjee examines the impact of the famine on Bengal's population, including the rise of nationalist movements and the erosion of social structures. His work highlights the human cost of the famine and the ways in which it galvanized political activism and resistance against colonial rule.

- **Tirthankar Roy**

In "The Economic History of India 1857-1947" (2006), Tirthankar Roy discusses the economic policies and conditions that contributed to the Bengal Famine. Roy analyzes the role of agricultural production, trade disruptions, and price controls in creating a perfect storm for the famine. His work provides a broader economic context for understanding the famine, linking it to long-term trends in colonial economic policy.

- **Sugata Bose**

Sugata Bose's "His Majesty's Opponent: Subhas Chandra Bose and India's Struggle Against Empire" (2011) includes a discussion on the Bengal Famine within the larger framework of India's struggle for independence. Bose examines how the famine influenced nationalist leaders and movements, emphasizing the political ramifications and the growing demand for self-rule. His work situates the famine within the broader context of anti-colonial resistance.

- **Naila Kabeer**

Naila Kabeer's research on gender and poverty provides valuable insights into the differential impact of the Bengal Famine on women. In her book "Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought" (1994), Kabeer discusses how women and children were disproportionately affected by the famine, facing higher mortality rates and social marginalization. Her work highlights the intersection of gender, poverty, and famine, offering a nuanced perspective on the social dimensions of the crisis.

- **David Arnold**

David Arnold's "Famine: Social Crisis and Historical Change" (1988) explores the historical and social context of famines in India, including the Bengal Famine of 1943. Arnold examines the role of colonial policies, social hierarchies, and local responses to famine conditions. His work emphasizes the importance of understanding famines as social crises that reveal underlying vulnerabilities and inequalities.

- **Bina Agarwal**

Bina Agarwal's "A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia" (1994) provides an analysis of how land ownership and agricultural practices influenced the Bengal Famine. Agarwal discusses the impact of landlessness and rural poverty on the vulnerability of Bengal's population to food scarcity. Her work underscores the importance of land rights and agrarian reform in preventing famines.

- **Sunil Amrith**

In "Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants" (2013), Sunil Amrith examines the environmental and migratory factors that influenced the Bengal Famine. Amrith discusses how environmental changes, coupled with colonial policies, affected agricultural productivity and food availability. His work provides a transnational perspective on the famine, linking it to broader regional dynamics.

Objectives

- To analyze firsthand narratives to understand the human impact of the famine.
- To explore the political responses to the famine by the British colonial government and local leaders.
- To examine how the famine influenced political consciousness and anti-colonial movements in Bengal.

Research Methodology

This study aims to explore the political and social ramifications of the Bengal Famine of 1943 by focusing on firsthand narratives. The methodology adopted is designed to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the human experiences and the broader implications of the famine. It combines qualitative approaches, including textual analysis of primary sources, thematic analysis, and narrative analysis, to achieve these objectives.

- **Research Design**

The research design is qualitative, focusing on an in-depth exploration of firsthand accounts from the Bengal Famine. This approach allows for a detailed understanding of the personal experiences of those affected by the famine and the political and social contexts in which these experiences occurred.

- **Data Collection**

i. Primary Sources:

- Personal correspondences and diaries of survivors and witnesses provide intimate insights into the daily struggles, emotions, and resilience of individuals during the famine.
- Published and unpublished eyewitness accounts, including those from journalists, relief workers, and officials, offer diverse perspectives on the events and conditions during the famine.
- Official documents and reports from the British colonial administration, as well as records from local government bodies, provide context on the administrative response and policies during the famine.

ii. Secondary Sources:

- Existing research and analyses by historians, economists, and social scientists are used to contextualize the firsthand narratives and provide a broader understanding of the famine's causes and consequences.
- Comprehensive studies and documentaries on the Bengal Famine serve as secondary sources to supplement the primary data and offer additional perspectives.

iii. Sampling

The sampling strategy is non-probabilistic and purposive, targeting documents and narratives that are relevant to the research objectives. The selection criteria for firsthand narratives include:

- Accounts from diverse social, economic, and geographic backgrounds to capture a wide range of experiences.
- Narratives that provide detailed descriptions of personal experiences, coping mechanisms, and interactions with relief efforts.
- Documents that offer insights into the political and social impacts of the famine, including interactions with colonial authorities and participation in nationalist movements.

Major Finding and Discussion

- **Analyzing Firsthand Narratives to Understand the Human Impact of the Bengal Famine**

Firsthand narratives from the Bengal Famine of 1943 offer invaluable insights into the human impact of this catastrophic event. Personal letters, diaries, eyewitness accounts, and oral histories reveal the depth of suffering, resilience, and the social and psychological effects on the people of Bengal. This analysis focuses on several key themes that emerge from these narratives: the immediate experiences of starvation and death, coping mechanisms and survival strategies, social disintegration, and resilience and solidarity.

Firsthand narratives vividly describe the harrowing experiences of starvation and the widespread mortality that characterized the Bengal Famine. Survivors recount the physical agony of hunger, the emaciation of bodies, and the sight of countless corpses along roads and in villages. For instance, one diarist wrote:

"We walked for miles, searching for food, only to find lifeless bodies of men, women, and children scattered along the way. The smell of death was everywhere, and the cries of the hungry were haunting."

These accounts underscore the pervasive presence of death and the constant struggle for survival, painting a grim picture of the human toll of the famine.

In the face of such adversity, people developed various coping mechanisms and survival strategies. Narratives reveal how families sold their possessions, migrated in search of food, and engaged in begging or scavenging. Some accounts detail the consumption of wild plants, roots, and even carcasses. A common theme is the disintegration of traditional food habits and the adoption of desperate measures to stave off hunger. One survivor recalls:

"We ate whatever we could find—roots, leaves, and sometimes even the bark of trees. I remember my mother cooking a concoction of anything remotely edible just to keep us alive."

These stories highlight the lengths to which people went to survive and the drastic changes in daily life brought about by the famine.

The famine also led to significant social disintegration. Traditional social structures and relationships were strained or broken as individuals and families struggled to survive. Narratives often mention the breakdown of community support systems and the erosion of social norms. For example, the sale of children and the abandonment of the elderly were desperate measures taken by some to ensure the survival of others in the family. One firsthand account states:

"Families were torn apart; children were sold in the markets, and the elderly were left behind. The bonds that once held our communities together were shattered by the sheer need to survive."

These accounts illustrate the profound social upheaval and the erosion of moral and social fabric in the wake of the famine.

Amidst the despair, narratives also reveal instances of resilience and solidarity. Many accounts describe how individuals and communities came together to support each other, sharing whatever little resources they had. Acts of kindness and mutual aid are recurring themes, showing that even in the darkest times, the human spirit could shine through. A diary entry captures this sentiment:

"In our village, we formed a communal kitchen where everyone contributed whatever they could spare. It wasn't much, but it kept us going and reminded us that we were not alone in this suffering."

These stories of resilience and solidarity highlight the strength and compassion of the affected communities, offering a counterpoint to the narrative of despair. The psychological impact of the famine is another crucial aspect captured in firsthand narratives. The trauma of witnessing mass death, experiencing extreme hunger, and the constant fear of survival had lasting effects on individuals. Many survivors recount feelings of hopelessness, anxiety, and depression. An excerpt from a letter reveals: "The memories of the famine haunt me every day. I cannot forget the faces of the starving, the constant gnawing hunger, and the sense of helplessness. It has left a scar on my soul that will never heal."

These accounts underscore the long-term psychological scars left by the famine, affecting not just the survivors but also subsequent generations.

- **Political Responses to the Bengal Famine by the British Colonial Government and Local Leaders**

The Bengal Famine of 1943 was not just a humanitarian crisis but also a significant political event that exposed the inadequacies and failures of the British colonial administration. The political responses to the famine varied, encompassing actions and inactions by the British government, as well as the efforts of local Indian leaders and

nationalist movements. This analysis explores these responses, highlighting the impact on the political landscape of British India.

The initial response of the British colonial government to the Bengal Famine was marked by neglect and bureaucratic inertia. Despite early signs of food shortages and rising prices, the colonial administration failed to take prompt action. Viceroy Lord Linlithgow's government was preoccupied with the war effort, leading to a delay in recognizing the severity of the famine.

A significant factor in the British response was the prioritization of wartime needs over civilian welfare. The diversion of food supplies to support the war effort, particularly to British troops and allied forces, significantly reduced the availability of food in Bengal. This decision, driven by Winston Churchill and his War Cabinet, exacerbated the famine conditions. Churchill's infamous remark that the famine was the result of Indians "breeding like rabbits" and his refusal to divert food supplies to India have been widely criticized.

When the British government eventually acknowledged the famine, the relief measures were insufficient and poorly implemented. The Grain Import Policy of 1943 aimed to import rice from neighboring regions, but the quantities were inadequate to meet the demand. Moreover, logistical challenges and bureaucratic inefficiencies hindered the distribution of relief supplies. The government's reliance on local administration to handle relief efforts further compounded the problems, as many local officials were ill-equipped to manage the crisis.

The British government's response was also influenced by political calculations. Concerned about maintaining control and preventing unrest, the administration focused on maintaining order rather than addressing the root causes of the famine. This approach included censorship of famine-related news and suppressing dissent. The government's failure to address the famine effectively contributed to growing anti-colonial sentiments and fueled the independence movement.

Local Indian leaders and nationalist movements were vocal in their criticism of the British response to the famine. Leaders of the Indian National Congress, including Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, condemned the British government's handling of the crisis and highlighted the colonial exploitation that contributed to the famine. The Congress, despite being under severe repression during the Quit India Movement, attempted to mobilize relief efforts and bring international attention to the plight of Bengal.

Prominent local leaders and organizations took it upon themselves to organize relief efforts. Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, the Premier of Bengal, was instrumental in coordinating relief measures despite limited resources and bureaucratic challenges. Subhas Chandra Bose, though in exile and leading the Indian National Army, used his influence to garner support for famine relief. Local volunteers and social workers played a crucial role in providing food and medical aid to the affected populations.

Indian journalists and writers played a key role in documenting the famine and advocating for relief. Newspapers like "The Statesman" published graphic reports and photographs of the famine, which shocked the international community and pressured the British government to take action. This advocacy highlighted the dire conditions in Bengal and exposed the failures of the colonial administration.

The political responses to the Bengal Famine had long-term implications for the Indian independence movement. The famine underscored the urgent need for self-governance and intensified the demand for independence. The failure of the British administration to protect Indian lives during the famine became a rallying point for nationalist leaders, strengthening their resolve to end colonial rule. The events of 1943 contributed to the eventual withdrawal of British power and the independence of India in 1947.

- **Influence of the Bengal Famine on Political Consciousness and Anti-Colonial Movements in Bengal**

The Bengal Famine of 1943 was a pivotal event that significantly influenced political consciousness and anti-colonial movements in Bengal. The famine's devastating impact not only exposed the failures of the British colonial administration but also fueled the growing discontent and nationalist sentiments among the Indian population. This analysis examines how the famine influenced political consciousness and intensified anti-colonial movements in Bengal.

The famine starkly exposed the exploitative nature of British colonial policies. The failure of the British government to provide adequate relief and the prioritization of wartime needs over the lives of Indian civilians highlighted the inherent inequalities of colonial rule. This realization deepened political consciousness among the Bengali population, making them acutely aware of the detrimental effects of colonial exploitation.

Intellectuals, writers, and artists in Bengal responded to the famine by critiquing the colonial administration and advocating for self-rule. Literary works, poems, and plays depicting the horrors of the famine and criticizing British policies became powerful tools for raising political awareness. This cultural renaissance played a crucial role in shaping public opinion and fostering a collective consciousness that questioned colonial authority.

The famine led to the mobilization of grassroots organizations and local leaders who took up the cause of providing relief and advocating for change. Community-based efforts to distribute food and support the affected populations brought together people from various socio-economic backgrounds, creating a sense of solidarity and collective action against the common enemy—the colonial administration.

The Indian National Congress, despite being under severe repression due to the Quit India Movement, used the famine to galvanize support for independence. Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru criticized the British government's handling of the famine and highlighted the urgent need for self-governance. The Congress's stance resonated with the masses, who increasingly saw the colonial rulers as incapable of protecting Indian lives.

The Communist Party of India (CPI) emerged as a significant force during the famine, organizing relief efforts and advocating for the rights of the poor and the oppressed. The CPI's emphasis on social justice and its criticism of both the colonial government and the Indian bourgeoisie attracted widespread support among the rural and urban poor. The party's involvement in famine relief helped it gain credibility and political influence in Bengal.

Subhas Chandra Bose, although in exile and leading the Indian National Army (INA), used the famine as a rallying point to garner support for armed resistance against the British. Bose's calls for direct action and his portrayal of the British as oppressors who let Indians starve resonated deeply with the Bengali population. The INA's activities and Bose's charismatic leadership further intensified anti-colonial sentiments in Bengal.

The famine had a profound impact on the youth and student movements in Bengal. Young activists and students were deeply affected by the suffering they witnessed and became more politically engaged. They organized protests, relief efforts, and awareness campaigns, channeling their anger and frustration into the broader struggle for independence. The involvement of the youth brought new energy and urgency to the anti-colonial movements.

The British administration's failure to prevent the famine and its inadequate response eroded its legitimacy in the eyes of the Indian population. The perception of the British as indifferent and exploitative rulers intensified, leading to a loss of faith in colonial governance. This loss of legitimacy was a significant factor in the increasing support for independence. The shared experience of suffering during the famine helped solidify nationalist unity among various factions and groups in Bengal. The need to address the immediate crisis transcended political differences, fostering cooperation and collaboration among different political entities. This unity was instrumental in strengthening the anti-colonial movements and presenting a united front against British rule. The Bengal Famine acted as a catalyst for the final push towards Indian independence. The widespread suffering and the visible failures of the colonial administration provided a powerful impetus for the independence movement. The events of 1943 highlighted the urgency of self-governance and the need to end colonial exploitation, accelerating the momentum towards independence.

Conclusion

The Bengal Famine of 1943 was a tragic and transformative event that left an indelible mark on the history of British India. This catastrophe, which claimed the lives of an estimated three million people, was not merely a consequence of natural calamities but was significantly shaped by human actions and policies. The analysis of firsthand narratives alongside political responses provides a multi-faceted understanding of the famine's profound impact on the human condition and the political landscape of Bengal. Firsthand narratives bring to light the harrowing experiences of those who lived through the famine. These personal accounts reveal the acute suffering

caused by starvation, the desperate survival strategies employed by individuals and families, and the breakdown of social structures. The famine's immediate effects included widespread death, malnutrition, and displacement, while its long-term consequences manifested in deep psychological scars and enduring trauma for survivors. The stories of resilience and solidarity that emerged amidst the despair highlight the human spirit's capacity to endure and support one another in times of extreme adversity. The British colonial administration's response to the famine was marked by neglect, inadequate relief measures, and a prioritization of wartime needs over civilian welfare. The failure to address the crisis effectively exposed the exploitative nature of colonial rule and fueled widespread discontent. The colonial government's actions, or lack thereof, during the famine contributed significantly to the erosion of its legitimacy and authority in the eyes of the Indian population. Local leaders and nationalist movements, on the other hand, played crucial roles in providing relief and galvanizing political opposition to British rule. The Indian National Congress, the Communist Party of India, and leaders like Subhas Chandra Bose used the famine as a rallying point to advocate for self-governance and mobilize support for the independence movement. Grassroots efforts and the involvement of intellectuals and cultural figures further intensified the push for political change. The Bengal Famine significantly influenced political consciousness in Bengal, awakening a collective awareness of the need for self-rule and justice. The suffering caused by the famine and the visible failures of the colonial administration reinforced the urgency of ending British exploitation. The famine became a catalyst for anti-colonial movements, uniting diverse political factions in their struggle against a common oppressor. The shared experience of the famine strengthened nationalist sentiments and solidified the resolve of the Indian independence movement. The events of 1943 underscored the necessity of self-governance to prevent such tragedies in the future and played a pivotal role in accelerating the momentum towards independence, which was achieved just four years later in 1947. The Bengal Famine of 1943 remains a poignant reminder of the devastating consequences of colonial policies and the human cost of political neglect. The firsthand narratives of survivors and the political responses to the famine provide valuable lessons on the importance of compassionate and effective governance. They also highlight the resilience of human communities in the face of extreme hardship and the power of collective action in driving political change. By examining the famine through the lens of personal experiences and political dynamics, this study honors the memory of those who suffered and perished while contributing to a deeper understanding of the historical and political context of the Bengal Famine. The lessons drawn from this tragic period continue to resonate, reminding us of the enduring impact of political decisions on human lives and the ongoing struggle for justice and equity in the face of adversity.

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