

**Understanding the Bengal Famine,  
1943-44 through the British Policies in  
India since 1918**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Colonial repression of the colonies is well known but of the nature that claims 3.1 million lives in a period of just a year is perhaps the most gruesome tale of subjugation in the colonial history of the world. The year is 1942-43 and Bengal is the province which fell prey to the wrong yet deliberately pursued British macroeconomic policies and gave a sacrifice of 'many thousands of men, women and children of Bengal who died in 1943 denied the food they grew for other men's benefit'.<sup>1</sup> In calling these policies as deliberately pursued calls forth some subjective and objective reasons. The subjective angle is the one that appeals to the cynical nature of a researcher that compares the deflationary macroeconomic policies of our free India's present-day government, which is extremely myopic and caters to its narrow objectives of pleasing the corporate at the cruel expense of the million toiling masses, with the colonial macroeconomic policies of the inter-war period. The two has some similarities in its mechanism, while the former has a slow poisoning effect; the latter is the most quick in its malevolence. Given the rate of farmer suicides each year, it is not long when the death toll would reach such horrific figures, if the government deliberately shies away from taking the effective policies and withdraws itself from vital expenditures of public spending. The colonial British government with its single direction of raising funds for the war against Japan adopted the policy of 'profit inflation', which in its wake has taken million of lives in a single year; the catastrophic effect of which is only comparable to the Nazi massacre. A good cynical nature has faith in the general goodness of human nature but not enough faith in the goodness of individual men. It is this cynical mind persuaded with the macroeconomic signals, that were not uncommon both today and the inter-war period of the colonial years, urge me to take up the research of the inter-war macroeconomic policies and to understand how the blatant pursuance of the policies engineered the Bengal Famine of the 1942-43. The people of Bengal are not unfamiliar to famines; two of the worst occurred in 1770 and 1866. But unlike the 1943 famine, these ones were essentially the outcomes of the natural disasters aggravated by the human greed and foolishness. The 1943 famine stands out because it was undoubtedly a man-made debacle aggravated by the adverse nature. To fully ascertain the man-made aspect of the famine, the following section highlights some of the statistics revealing the poor agricultural performance and population of the province.

### **I. Backdrop to the 1943 Bengal Famine**

The province of Bengal covers an area of 82,000 square miles and its population of 63 million is the largest in the colonial India. Hence, the population density per square stood at 730. Around 37-38 million acres out of its total area is cultivable; hence each man in Bengal gets 0.58 of an acre to draw his sustenance from. Bengal's population increased by 10.4 percent between 1921 and 1941, but the increase in net sown area was only by 1.5 percent; while there had been a 20 percent increase in population between 1931 and 1941, there had practically been no rise in the

sown area. Hence, population pressure was one of the primary causes of Bengal's economic troubles and was already noted by the Floud Commission.

Rice is the most important crop of the province and Bengal's normal production is around 481 million maunds of paddy a year. At the rate of 9 maunds or half a seer paddy per person a day, Bengal's annual requirement of paddy to feed its population is roughly 540 million maunds. Normally, her annual deficit stands at 29 million maunds or 500,000 tons of paddy a year. Imports from Burma meet 200,000 tons of the deficit and hence as it figures out Bengal usually ran a deficit of 300,000 tons of rice which otherwise would have fed 18 lakhs of her people.

Here some warning notes must be given . There are only a few dependable agricultural statistics on Bengal's crop production. In the zamindari system of land tenure, where the rent is fixed under Permanent Settlement, the government is plainly uninterested either in undertaking any productivity-enhancing schemes nor estimating the annual yields. The Government has therefore got no estimate of the food deficit which is chronic in the case of Bengal. In the absence of reliable production figures, consumption figures might prove handy because we know the population figures.

What strikes any researcher studying the economy of Bengal particularly during the inter-war period is the fact, although she is the most endowed province with favourable natural and climatic conditions, her agricultural productivity did not bear the same signs. Her rice production, which is 18 maunds per acre, is pretty low as compared to Madras. Yet the Bengal Government never had any proactive and imaginative agricultural policy for the province. What else could have been expected of the colonial government whose only objective has remained to collect revenues from the rich lands and the Permanent Settlement of 1773 served this very purpose by fixing the revenue from land. The zamindars had lost direct contact with the actual tiller; these two are separated by a progressive increase in the middlemen leading to the sub-infeudation of land. No one in the hierarchy of the rent receivers now stood accountable for any measure of agricultural welfare. Subinfeudation has only led to a proportionate rise of landless labourers, which stood now at 29 percent of her agricultural population.

As a macroeconomic manifestation of this indifference of the ruling classes of Bengal, we find, the Bengal Government spent a pittance of just Rs. 3.5 crores in agriculture, as compared to the Government of Madras and the Punjab Government who spent Rs. 20 crores and 35 crores in agriculture respectively. In the year 1941, when Japan had declared war on British India, agricultural expenditure was actually cut down from Rs.69 lakhs in 1940-41 to Rs 50 lakhs and a budgetary allocation of Rs. 4 crores was provided for civil defence. The figures so clearly drive home the point that it is the unbridled greed of the colonial rulers, in nexus with the ruling landlord classes, that wrought havoc in the land, which was traditionally been referred to as 'Golden' or 'Sonar' Bengal. Now that agriculture was in gloomy state, and the cottage industry had been destroyed much earlier, Bengal was thriving on the thin margin where a slight push meant starvation and death in the extreme. ' And how many do you think were killed and

injured in East India by Japanese bombs and gunfire ? 816 killed and 878 injured since Pearl Harbour till April 1943. In Calcutta alone hunger and its after-effects killed between the 16<sup>th</sup> of August and the 16<sup>th</sup> of December 1943, a period of 4 months, over 9,300 victims'<sup>2</sup>.

Bengal is endowed with life-giving rivers and had regular monsoons. While in East Bengal, the problem was one of draining the water that stays on the land brought in by the mighty Padma, in West Bengal, the problem is of flushing the rivers and ridding the countryside of malaria. The Government's apathy in building dam on the river Damodar to manage its waters was manifested when such a scheme was shelved tending to the interests of the coal magnates, who had understood that the enormous weight of water would flood their mines of Jharia coalfields. Moreover, most of the rivers of Bengal were now dead and had turned into prosperous breeding grounds of mosquitoes. The Bengal government never had any systematic attempt at controlling the living rivers or to revive its dead rivers. The point is significant given that these rivers form the fishing grounds of Bengal. Fish is the secondmost important dietary item of the province's people, Here too, the Government have failed to act wisely to husband and cultivate the resources. No legislation was in place to regulate fishing and there was no Government-organised deep sea fishing. Health is another area of sheer government negligence and malaria accounted for nearly 30 percent of the annual mortality of the people. Malaria alone claimed 500,000 lives annually. The basics of a dignified living --- food, livelihood and health---- had remained the most neglected areas of Bengal long before Japan struck at Pearl Harbour on the 7<sup>th</sup> December 1941. The attack only had intensified the effects of the long term macroeconomic policies and fast forwarded the catastrophe, which might have got only postponed without the war looming large in the horizon.

## **II. The Pre-Famine Policies and Provincial Autonomy**

Japan had launched its offensive against Britain and US on 7<sup>th</sup> December 1941 and posed an indomitable threat for a possible invasion into India through Burma. If Japanese invaded, they would probably land on the coast of Bengal, which adjoined Burma. Because of the inadequate defensive installation, the Japanese would be impossible to resist; worse, they might even be welcomed by the locals. The British could discern the growing dissatisfaction among the province's people which as a result also held the enormous potentiality of pro-enemy sympathy and activity in eastern India. In the following January, the War office issued an order under the 'scorched policy', as announced by Churchill on November 14, 1941, in the coastal territories on the Indian Ocean, which were at risk of seaborne Japanese attack. The ordered instructions were to destroy the industrial, military and transport facilities in the districts to be surrendered to the progressing army, while minimum stocks of foodstocks should be distributed to population before withdrawal takes place to avoid bulk supplies falling into the hands of the enemy. As regards Bengal, where the winter crop had just been harvested, the policy meant the removal of rice from traders' and zamindars' storehouses. But this sounded death knell for the population, who even in peacetime, remained underfed. The adverse effects of the scorched policy were not unknown to the Viceroy, Leopold Amery and the Commander-in-chief, Archibald Leopold; the

latter protested the destruction of the industrial facilities to which 'Amery cabled back on March 27: "it is essential that destruction should be ruthless and should achieve without fail total denial of such resources as would assist enemy operations". Removal of river craft, which the Japanese might use to advance along Bengal's waterways, "should commence now repeat now", he urged. The viceroy sided with the commander-in-chief, however. Demolition along a coastline as long as India would "give handle for agitation", the viceroy wrote; and with "enormous population in threatened areas any scorched earth policy will mean that we will have millions on our hands who will be quite impossible to feed."<sup>3</sup> 65 But there were no buffer policies that catered to such genuine concerns. While withdrawal of men successfully completed from Burma by May 1942, the Government of India had not yet organised a Food Department, even in frontline provinces of Assam and Burma. The Allies had lost the rich rice-lands of Burma which had been the perennial source of rice in peacetime. The pace of Japanese progress was stupendous and caught the British in its unpreparedness both in military and civil promptness. With the evacuation of Rangoon in March 1942, there was now practically no hope of rice imports from Burma, which supplied 1.5 million tons of rice that fed the population of Cochin, Travancore, Malabar and the industrial population of Madras and Bengal. The Government held that Burmese rice imports constituted only 5 percent of India's total rice production and hence called forth austerity to tide over the crisis. The Government at the Centre and the Prime Minister of Great Britain were crassly indifferent to the actual condition of the colonised population. The population of Bengal were actually getting by half-fed, starved and such austerity in the wake of war would plainly mean death for this populace. There was no counter policy undertaken to increase the food supply, either by stopping the exports or through the building up of central grain reserves.

On the other hand, the loss of Burma led to the pouring in of a stream of evacuees into Bengal, whose figures stand at approximately at about 5 lakhs, starting from January of 1942. Nextly, while the Allied Armies retreated from Burma, the reserves in this country had moved up into Bengal and Assam to replace and strengthen. Moreover, the expanding war industries had attracted a considerable labour population into Bengal. All these had put a considerable strain on the province's food reserves, which was already tightened by the loss of Burma. These losses and liabilities were the inevitable fallouts of war but these could have been well foreseen by the British rulers widely known for their prudence and fastidious nature.

In order to check the progress of Japanese fleet, the government was now all set for implementing the scorched out policy in the coastal territories. But tending to the warning of the viceroy and the Commander-in-chief, the policy was now reduced in scope and limited only to coastal Bengal, where it is known as the Denial policy. The policy was implemented in the way of destruction of boats, evacuation of several villages and restriction of the movement of the boats as they were not destroyed. In this way, the policy actually stood in the cultivation of vast tracts of land for boats are the life-line for cultivation in the riverine districts, where majority of the land stand under way all the year round. The boats are the bullock carts of the waterways

transferring seed, manure, the harvest produce and labour. They are indispensable for fishing and hence the policy actually destroyed the livelihood of many thousands, the cumulative effect had to be found in the coming months. In his confession, Leonard George Pinnell, the viceroy's private secretary who was sent to Bengal to implement the Denial Policy, said to a Famine Inquiry Commission of 1944, 'for anyone who knows the Bengal cultivator it (the policy) was completely heart-breaking job'<sup>4</sup>. When he was asked by the Commission if the 'boat policy' had resulted in the 'killing' the economy of certain locations, Pinnell replied: 'I do not think a consideration of that sort would have been of any weight at all'<sup>5</sup>. He further added that boat denial policy 'completely broke the economy of the fishing class.'<sup>6</sup>

Another related policy that came on the heels of the 'Boat Denial' Policy is the 'Rice Denial' policy whereby surplus rice was purchased from the denial districts to be stocked up in North and North-western parts of Bengal. A key element of the policy was the panic that the policy created in the minds of the cultivators through the Government purchasing agents. The cultivators were told, that in case of non-compliance with the policy terms, their grain would either be confiscated by the Government or robbed by the progressing Japanese. The fearing cultivators readily parted with their grains, even not keeping aside a part of their yearly needs, at a price slightly higher than the ruling price. As per Major Gen. E Wood of New Delhi's Department of Food, 30,000 tons of rice were purchased from the denial districts but less than 3,000 tons of it were sent out of Bengal. The price of rice stood at Rs. 5 per maund.<sup>7</sup> Though the Government instructed on paper that sufficient rice for consumption for the next 12 months should be left in the denial districts, actually far less was left. The rice denial policy was again a wrong decision but it was not removed until the public outrage took wild shape. The policy owed its implementation to the Central Government, the executive of the Bengal Government and to some extent Bengal's chief minister Fazlul Huq and his Cabinet. There was public outcry at the time of the implementation of the denial policy. But while the Government did not bother to respond on the pretext that it has the actual figures, the ministers, being servile to Governor, Sir Arthur Herbert, also did not enlighten the public about the actual state of affairs. It was until some months of the public protests that the Chief Minister broke his silence and on 10<sup>th</sup> March 1943, while answering a debate on food policy expressed his doubts in Government's figures. He revealed the weakness of his Cabinet and disowned Cabinet's responsibility of the working of the Government's departments. The Cabinet had no knowledge of the export of grains nor of the administration of the denial policy. Fazlul Huq, after resigning from office in March 1943, disclosed further that the rice denial and the boat denial policy were inaugurated by Sir Herbert on instructions from the Central Government in April 1942, without seeking consent from the ministry. With haste, the Governor had advanced on his own risk a huge sum to the purchasing agents and asked the Secretary to produce the agents in hurry. It is these agents who had went into agreement with the Government without the knowledge of the Cabinet. Although Fazlul Huq's confession does not absolve him, but it brings out another vital point, which is the sabotage of the Provincial Autonomy by the Civil Servants acting in accordance to the instructions of the Indian agents of the British Parliament. Provincial Autonomy was a hoax,

while the power was borne by the India Office, and the then Secretary of State, Leopold Stenett Amery. Amery had tried to shift the onus of the food scarcity to the Provincial legislatures because food was their responsibility, but the world cannot be deceived as to who real mastermind of the schemes. It is sad that our Indian ministers had connived with their British superiors to cover the true picture, reported good stock position and held the position that both wheat and rice denial policies were not responsible for the famine. These positions were then suitably altered to account for the thousand of deaths that followed. Provincial Government in actuality was a diabolical ploy to appease the long demands of the patriots and politicians but in effect, it is the Government with responsibility without power in conjunction with the Government of power without responsibility. It is, of course, not the purpose of the researcher to highlight any of the following: the loss of Burmese rice, the influx of the evacuees from Burma the denial policy, as the single most cause behind the tragedy. But of course, some of them were uncalled for and followed by quick succession by the follies which no government should have committed.

Now the question arises to the cynical mind whether the folly or mistakes by the colonial government, that had endangered the food security of the masses and claimed 3.5 million of lives, could be just passed off as ignorance on its part? The researcher believes an entire new perspective is lighted if the Bengal famine is placed against the broader macroeconomic policy framework of the inter-war period. The present research proposal argues that the causes that are usually believed to have brought about the 'famine' and are already analysed in famine literature are narrow in their scope and missed vitally the conscious and proactive role of the colonial rulers in the same, which would only come to the fore if the macroeconomic policies of the inter-war period are correctly analysed. Until these problems that led to the 'famine' are satisfactorily dealt with, so long will Bengal, in fact the whole of India and South Asia, continue in travail.

### **BENGAL FAMINE: A LONGER VIEW**

Lets examine the following macroeconomic data that highlights some of the under-researched areas of the colonial history of the inter-war period

- **There had been a well documented, long term decline of food production per head in British India. By independence in 1947, production level per head had dropped from around 200 kg per head in the triennium ending in 1918 to about 150 kg (Blyn 1966: Appendix). The availability decline was harshest in Greater Bengal, registering a fall of 38 percent, even after adjusting for net imports.**
- **The overall production of non-food grains expanded over ten times faster than foodgrains, an annual trend rate of 1.31 percent as against 0.11 percent.**
- **The real national income per capita, over the period from 1918 to 1946, remained stagnant according to all estimates (Mukherji 1965) at around Rs. 260 at 1948-49 prices.**

Assuming for the time being that income distribution was intact, the significant drop in per capita production level, would clearly have had pushed down a substantial section of small peasants, poor peasants, and artisans, who were already near minimum consumption levels to subsistence and below subsistence levels by the eve of the second war. Moreover, **this decline in per head food availability combined with rising per head commercial crop production actually provided the channel through which a portion of the Indian tax revenues should unilaterally be transferred to Britain through a merchandise export surplus. This mechanism of unilateral transfers of revenue is in effect the infamous 'drain of wealth' by the colonial rulers, as was expounded by R.C Dutt and D. Naoroji.** 'From the year 1765 onwards, a fraction of total taxation receipts was set aside and termed 'investment' and later 'expenditure incurred abroad'; in the 1930s. **This was transferred to Britain mainly through a surplus of primary sector exports from India to the rest of the world, whose exchange proceeds were appropriated by Britain against the corresponding entry of 'expenditures incurred at home or Home Charges', shown as a debit item in the current account of the Indian Balance of Payments vis-à-vis Britain.** So the Indian producers of export surplus had no claim on the foreign exchange they had earned, and were paid in rupees out of the rupee tax revenues they had contributed'(U. Patnaik, 1984). To the extent that the taxation system was quite regressive, this implied a relatively heavier burden on the less well-to-do peasants and profits for trading intermediaries.

With the onset of the severe downturn of the Great depression in India, **from the early 1920s,** agricultural prices fell faster and earlier **than industrial prices, deteriorating in its wake the international crude barter terms of trade for India by 30 percent between 1922 and 1932 (Bagchi 1972:86).** The income terms of trade had declined for agriculture from a World War I high by 33 percent upto 1929-30, and then declined by a further 17 percent upto 1934-35 (Goswami 1988:13). The small peasants had now began to feel the push, while earlier it was confined to the poor-and-hired and the landless. The adverse effects of the Depression was further enhanced by the colonial government's ardent pursuance of balanced budgets through strategic cuts in public expenditure, affecting the rural areas in particular in terms of incomes and employment generation. On the other hand, the depression years also meant a larger burden of transfer in real terms because the flow of unilateral transfers was maintained intact in the event of falling excise revenues. A whopping amount of 28.8 million pounds sterling, as Home charges, was transferred to Britain in 1933-34, compared to the previous high of 31.8 million in 1924-25.

**In the event of falling prices, pursuance of balanced budgets and reduced excise revenues, the maintenance of high Home Charges could hardly been achieved except without an enforced drop in domestic consumption, resulting in a fairly marked trend of 'pauperization' of the rural masses. Studying the above combination of long term macroeconomic trends, we find that it is these trends in combination with the deterioration of terms of trade during the Depression years that had created a set of 'pre-famine' conditions. In the absence of**

**countervailing intervention, these conditions contained the potentiality of generating a large scale famine, when necessarily combined with any substantial shock to the economic system. This shock may be termed as a ‘pre-famine conjuncture’.**

The research proposes to inquire into the identification of such **‘pre-famine conditions’ for Bengal Famine**. In case of Bengal Famine, this shock was administered by the colonial government, which had now abandoned the policy of balanced budgets with the outbreak of the Second War. **The entire war financing in the South Asian theatre officially came upon India through an agreement signed with Britain, which ultimately ballooned the total government outlays to nearly 38 billion rupees over the period 1941-46, as compared to a normal pre-war budget of around 2 billion rupees annually (RBI 1947). Out of this, Britain undertook to repay Rs. 17.5 billion, after the War, in sterling. During the duration of the war, these ‘recoverable’ expenditures was only an accounting entry in favor of India, against which India, had to find the money resources; the remaining expenditures was met by India entirely (Joshi 1965). These fictitious sterling reserves proved to be inflationary since it counted as reserves, against which money to the extent of 2.5 times could be printed. In the event of high taxes, the recourse to money supply resulted in an estimated rise of money supply by five-fold in four years from 1940 (RBI 1954: Table 25). A war boom that had resulted led to the phenomenal rise in demand for food in the already food-deficient province of Bengal; rice prices started rising and had quadrupled within 18 months. While the manufacturing work force and even the urban poor got some cover from the price heat through the rationing system, the rural masses had to bear the real burden of the war. An *ex-ante* excess of investment over savings was converted to equality through forced savings extracted via food price inflation from the unprotected mass of the rural population.**

The present study wants to look at the colonial macroeconomic policies that were in place at least a quarter century before Independence----- a period from 1920 to 1947, with special reference to the inter-war period. The entire study from 1918 to 1947 would be built with the central objective to understand how the war from 1941 onwards in Asia, was financed by putting the burden on India.

A successful completion of the research would contribute positively to our theoretical understanding of the challenging times we live through. While we talked about the decline in food grain availability during the Second World War, independent India does not show any blissful image. Starting from the early years of economic reforms, till 2003, taking three-year averages, the annual absorption of foodgrains per head has come down from 177 kg to 155 kg. Such low absorption levels can only be compared to the ones during the initial years of the Second World War. With the passage of time, the decline is getting steeper. The more recent NSS data on consumption reveals that, between 1993-94 and 2004-05, over 60 percent of India’s rural population has seen an absolute decline in the intake of both cereals and animal products, while the top 10 percent registered a sharp rise in animal products intake though not in cereal

intake. With the ardent pursuance of income deflationary policies, the purchasing power of the majority dependent on agriculture has also fallen, which perhaps explains the falling total absorption of food plus feed grains on their parts which in aggregate is so large that it has been more than cancelling out the sharp rise for the top group which is a minority.

While the most official data sources as well as the ground-level experience of individual researchers and of organizations working in rural areas testify to such a phenomenon of increasing numbers in hunger, the perception of the government and of the majority of academics, is however very different from that expressed above. They interpret the development as a positive one, indicating a voluntarily chosen, more diversified basket of consumption by all segments of the population including the poor. The exhibition of this 'denial mode' among the ruling classes and also amongst those who are associated with making or influencing policy during the concerned period and can be compared with the crass indifference shown by the colonial rulers towards the threatened food security of the policy-burdened masses of Bengal to finance war. But the prevalent bland justifications of the phenomenon of rising hunger and starvation in the face of stark reality of increasing hunger, is so striking, that it perhaps requires a theoretical explanation (U. Patnaik, 2004). The researcher believes that the proposed study, if undertaken, because of its *ex ante* nature would greatly enrich the economic and political literature on hunger and poverty. The study would open a new avenue in the way famines are viewed at, for it is very important to monitor the macroeconomic trends in the economy and to identify the possible pre-famine conjunctures in order to anticipate and prevent famines.

## NOTES

1. Narayanan, T.G. (1944), *Famine Over Bengal*, Note of Dedication.
2. Ibid, p. 18.
3. Mukherjee, M. (2010), *Churchill's Secret War*, p.65.
4. Ibid, p. 66.
5. Ibid, p. 67.
6. Ibid, p. 67.
7. Narayanan, T.G., *Famine Over Bengal*, p.26.

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