The Bengal famine of 1943 remains a relatively unexplored topic of the modern Indian history. Despite the insightful and thought-provoking works on the Bengal famine by Amartya Sen (Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) and Paul Greenough (Prosperity & Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943-1944, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), both of which were incidentally published in the early eighties, the famine has not been understood in its totality. The teleological nationalist history writing of India has exclusively focused, as Janam Mukherjee rightly notes, ‘on the nationalist struggle, negotiations for a transfer of power, the manoeuvring of the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League and/or the rise of communal rancor’ (p.2). Mukherjee in this work provides a disturbing, yet riveting account of the Bengal famine of 1943, which was, as he aptly pointed out, not limited to the year 1943.

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HE DECLARES IN THE INTRODUCTION of the book that his objective is to demonstrate ‘the deep and abiding impacts that both war and famine had on the course of events in India on the verge of independence’. And to a large extent, he succeeded in fulfilling his objective. He gave us a detailed picture of the politico-economic and socio-psychological conditions which prevailed before and after the Bengal famine of 1943. While analysing the historical events that led to the famine, and understanding the socio-political milieu of the late colonial Bengal, Mukherjee also explores the structures of power and gave the Bengal famine its due centrality in the history of the 20th-century India. He emphasised that famine has to be understood as a complex form of human violence. In this context, Sen in his critically acclaimed work on the famines, Poverty and Famines, noted that starvation essentially means that people do not have enough food to eat and it is not related to the unavailability of food. In Sen’s own words, ‘Famine imply starvation, but not vice versa. And starvation implies poverty, but not vice versa.’ Mukherjee argued in this book that the history of the Bengal famine is the history of power and disempowerment. Exploding the myths around the Bengal famine, Mukherjee shows with great mastery over details, how during the period of the famine and the war, some powerful capitalists made fortunes and even influenced the negotiations for independence. Though the policies of the colonial rulers were responsible for the making of the Bengal famine, the nationalist leadership was also guilty. Although it is true that most of the Congress leaders were behind bars during 1942-1944, when finally out of prison, rather than tackling the issue of the Bengal famine in careful and sensitive manner, the nationalist leadership was quite busy negotiating the transfer of power, with the colonial rule. He also draws our attention towards the fact that the leaders of both the Congress and the Muslim League had close socio-economic and political relationship with the industrialist class of Calcutta, which further led them to overlook the problem of the Bengal famine. Mukherjee rightly noted that as the end days of the Empire was also unfolding, ‘the virtual leadership circled around the pie of independence, failing even to notice that ... the population in Bengal were beginning to starve’ (p. 252). India’s plight in the face of the post-colonial agrarian depression, the movement (which was led by the sharecroppers) by the Indian state, also shows clearly that which class had the sympathy of national leaders in the whole the time.

The Bengal famine was also the direct consequence of the ‘denial policy’ of the British government. It essentially means, to confiscate all surplus stocks of rice in the vulnerable coastal districts of Bengal, so that an invading Japanese army could not feed its troops with locally confiscated stocks. And to worsen the situation further, more than 40,000 boats have been destroyed fearing the Japanese invasion, thus ruining the essential water transport system of Bengal. And the ongoing war, hoarding of the middle class merchants, and the callous attitude of the Indian society towards the problem of famine further made the situation very grim.

Mukherjee treated the famine in a continuum, which was preceded by malnutrition and succeeded by debilitation and disease. And thus he did not limit himself to one particular year, i.e., 1943, but traces the history of the Bengal famine before and after this period as well. Inspired by the works of James Scott (Weapons of the Weak: The到了《当代亚洲研究》上。