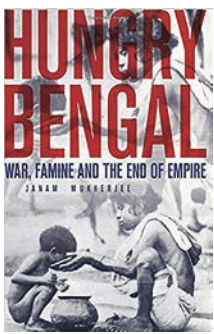


In Search of the Bengal Famine of 1943

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 & 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.

Reviewer: Shubhneet Kaushik, Jawaharlal Nehru University



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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 also 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 to a large extent 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 within sight, 'the national leadership circled around the pie of independence, failing even to notice that ... the population in Bengal were beginning to starve' (p. 252). In the post-colonial India, severe repression of the Tebhaga movement (which was led by the sharecroppers) by the Indian state, also shows clearly that which class had the sympathy of national leadership with it, all the while.

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 classes, extortionary intermediaries 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, where it 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: Everyday Forms of Resistance*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985) and Ranajit Guha (*Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1983) on everyday forms of resistance, Mukherjee forcefully argued that the victims of the Bengal famine did not 'die without a murmur', but in fact, they contested the famine at every stage (p. 12). He provides us an insightful account of the Second World War as it proceeded in South Asia, particularly in the colonial Bengal; the British efforts to save Calcutta, while exposing the countryside to the Japanese invasion and also making the villagers starve, with the so-called 'denial scheme'. Mukherjee also exposes the 'benevolent' nature of colonial rule, by giving the account of the activities of the colonial officials and their 'priorities' in tackling the famine and dealing with wartime shortages.

Japanese invasion, air raid damages and the riots of 1946 (followed by the Muslim League's call for Direct Action Day on 16 August 1946) were aptly dealt with in this book. Linking the Calcutta riot and famine, Mukherjee argued that the Calcutta riots 'ha[d] to be read from within the context of cumulative violence that began with chronic, multi-generational poverty, was compounded by war, and brought to a catastrophic head in devastating famine' (p. 254). This book also draws our attention towards the persistence of famine and starvation in the post-colonial India. The Indian state has failed miserably in addressing the problem of malnutrition, hunger, starvation, and famine.

As far as sources are concerned, Mukherjee relies heavily on the official sources like the famine reports, department files (including Home, Political, Economic and Overseas Department), private papers (e.g., Jadunath Sarkar and Nanavati Papers) and the unavoidable volumes of the *Transfer of Power*. Overreliance on the official sources to tell the story of the Bengal famine is also the major weakness of this book. Though in the bibliography, he mentioned more than a dozen interviews he had taken, he had not incorporated these interviews in his narrative of the Bengal famine. Though Mukherjee talked briefly about the persistence of the famine and continuity of it from the colonial to post-colonial, he neglects the role that the memory of the victims, remembrance of the families affected by the famine played in structuring, shaping, articulating and configuring the experiences and memories of the famine and starvation.

Also, he mentioned about the artists and activists associated with the Indian People's Theatre Association only at the end of the book, and that too inadequately. Though the book began with a quotation of Somnath Hore, it is a pity, that the artists like Chittoprasad, Somnath Hore, Gopen Roy, Ramkinkar, Atul Bose and Zainul Abedin were just mentioned in passing. And their works and the Indian People's Theatre Association's theatrical presentation and songs on the famine were completely ignored in this otherwise insightful and detailed narrative of the Bengal famine of 1943.

divide the ASEAN members on the South China Sea issue and economically weak countries like Cambodia serve the interests of the giant neighbour in doing so. The territorial disputes involving Cambodia on the one hand and other ASEAN members on the other hand further instigate Phnom Penh to accept China's regional actions, even at the cost of a disintegrated ASEAN. Alica Kizekova and Alfred Gerstl pointed out that ASEAN follows the path of multitrack diplomacy and engaging China with the regional institutionalism initiatives to avoid further escalation of tensions in the region. Truong – Minh Vu and Jorg Thiele analyse Vietnam's (and to some extent, Philippines') responses to the South China Sea crisis through multidimensional ways including making friends in the region (including Japan and India), taking the issue to the international forum (such as Permanent Court of Arbitration), provoking popular mandate against China domestically and using strategic restraint by encouraging joint development initiatives.

The advantages of reading this book are manifold. First, it offers wide variety of information both on the intra-ASEAN and extra-ASEAN territorial disputes covering the land borders as well as the maritime ones. Second, it has discussed about the land border disputes that happened to exist in the past; and hence, mostly forgotten by the present generation of students. Therefore, this book should be appreciated as a well-documented fact book containing historical information and analyses. More specifically speaking, this book is cherished as it has explained the impacts of the mentioned conflicts for contemporary Asia-Pacific studies.

This book offers few new arguments. First, besides China, United States is also responsible for the existing divisions within ASEAN as it often indulges itself in the great power rivalries in the region leaving little options for the smaller Southeast Asian countries except to be either with the United States or with China. The role of the United States in the great power game in the region however could have been expounded in a more comprehensive way. Second, in their co-authored chapter on Preah Vihear, Richard Turcsanyi and Zdenek Kriz mentioned that ASEAN countries are coming closer to each other against China. While this logic sounds stimulating and optimistic, the author needs to put more efforts to clarify the reasons behind this particular thinking. Third, Padraig Lysaght, in his chapter, noted that the South China Sea disputes have almost become an anarchical situation, thanks to the roles played by the great powers. However, to add more value to the chapter, the author could have studied the role of the small powers in that anarchy. One striking limitation of this book is the lack of discussions on China's role as the most valued economic partner of ASEAN. Economy plays a pivotal role in dividing ASEAN on the maritime disputes involving China.

However, overall, *Unresolved Border, Land and Maritime Disputes in Southeast Asia* is a most welcome new addition to the existing literature on the political history of Southeast Asia, South China Sea issue and the history of border conflicts in the Asia-Pacific. This would be definitely helpful for the students, scholars and experts on the region as it deals with Southeast Asia in a lucid manner which is the centre of contemporary world affairs.



ASEAN's responses to it, perceptions and behaviour of few individual countries like Vietnam, Philippines and Cambodia to the problem and finally, to offer some solutions to the problem which include prospects for joint development programmes. Scattered over various chapters, while reading the book, a reader will discover the past and present and understand the implications of the South China Sea disputes. The narrative offered by Josef Falko Loher clarifies; Chinese government practises a synchronised strategy to enhance its power in the region on the one hand and on the other hand, tries to keep the extra-regional powers at bay. Simultaneously, in an order to ensure dominance over the region, China tries to

Above: One of the disputed Spratly atolls claimed and transformed by China.