

A  
Matter  
of  
Conscience

---

Artists bear witness to The Great Bengal  
Famine of 1943

Nikhil Sarkar

Translated by  
Satyabrata Dutta

Foreword by  
Amartya Sen



PUNASCHA

## FOREWORD

The Bengal Famine of 1943 was an event of extraordinary horror. The misery that it caused is admirably reflected in the drawings and paintings included in this profoundly moving book. For those of us who lived through the famine, the dreadful events are hard to forget. My own memories of the famine—those of a nine-year-old boy in Santiniketan, Dhaka and Calcutta—are still the most haunting recollections of my childhood. Even for us who witnessed the abomination, the pictures presented here help to discipline our memory. For those who have had no first-hand experience of the famine, the collection will undoubtedly be a stirring introduction to an atrocious event of history.

The magnificent talents of Zainul Abedin, Chittaprasad Bhattacharya, Somnath Hore, Sudhir Khastgir, and many others help us to understand what really happened in those terrible months that ravaged Bengal. It tells us how people faced the calamity, how they tried to fight it, how they succumbed to it, and how they were taken away. The eloquence of these silent pictures is hard to match.

### *The Bengal Famine*

The famine of 1943 was the last major famine in India. It killed between 2 and 3 million people—it is hard to estimate exactly, but all accounts indicate that the official figure of famine mortality of 1 to 1.5 million is a serious underestimate. It affected nearly every part of undivided Bengal, though to varying extents. The class pattern of casualty was very uneven (as it always is in every famine), with the greatest impact, in this case, on rural labourers and craftsmen, and on fishermen and river transport workers.

Like all famines, the Bengal famine too was a severely divisive phenomenon, decimating some occupation groups while leaving others nearly untouched. Many people had no relation or friend affected by the famine at all, while others—belonging to more vulnerable groups—succumbed to it, along with their kinsmen. This is not the occasion to discuss the causation of the famine, nor to explore the economic factors behind the pattern of famine incidence and mortality, both of which I have tried to examine elsewhere.<sup>1</sup>

This impressive collection of paintings, drawings and sketches presents a remarkable account of the famine, and we must be grateful to the author for preparing this book with such sympathetic care, selectional judgement and

<sup>1</sup> *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).

explanatory skill. Pictures of privation and hunger, and of devastated bodies and faces, bring out the stark nature of the suffering. Portrayals of death and disintegration reflect the horror of the ultimate fate of the victims who fell. The depiction of illnesses and epidemics tells us how the famine fanned the flames of normal mortality ever present in rural Bengal (endemic in the region, even when there is no famine). And the illustration of stoicism and resistance of hardened victims reveals the battle to survive even in the most adverse of circumstances. One would have to be made of stone not to be deeply affected and influenced by these splendid portrayals of what happened more than half a century ago.

### *Rich Description and Understanding*

Why recollect all this? What is the point of dwelling on agony? The famine is 'dead and gone,' and seems unlikely to return in the near future. What is the purpose of going over these terrible events all over again? These questions will occur to people. The answers are not, I think, far to seek, and are certainly worth examining to appreciate the significance of this work.

First, the appalling anguish and misery that the pictures in this volume portray, through rich description, not only provide a deeply moving experience, they also help us to understand something of the real nature of the suffering from famines. King Lear and Hamlet are 'dead and gone' too, but that is no reason for rejecting the magnificence of Shakespeare's tragedies, nor the understanding that emerges from that creative mode of communication. This is art of the highest quality, with the greatest of social involvement and human sympathy.

Second, while famines in the form that the Bengal famine took may well have disappeared from India, they still do continue to occur in some other countries, quite frequently in sub-Saharan Africa. As fellow human beings we have reason enough to try to understand what the victims of the contemporary famines may be going through. Any famine anywhere in the world is a tragedy for us all, and we have to share the feeling of disaster.

Third, while famines may not continue to occur in India, people still do die here of undernourishment and of related morbidities. And, furthermore, they die in much the same way as the stricken people shown in these pictures. Premature mortality from deprivation and escapable illness is still, alas, a robustly contemporary phenomenon here. Indeed, according to many of the standard measures of undernourishment, Indian children—and children in the rest of the subcontinent—are more deprived on a regular basis than the average child even in sub-Saharan Africa.

Fourth, if famines have disappeared from India after independence (1947 followed very shortly after the Bengal famine), a major contribution to this elimination has been made by the need to take account of the horrors of famines in the politics of a democratic India. It is not astonishing that no substantial famine has ever occurred in any country with political democracy, pluralist opposition and an uncensored media, and this applies not only to the rich countries in north America and Europe, but also to all the poorer democratic

countries in the world.<sup>2</sup> The governments of independent India have powerful political incentives to do their best to prevent famines that may be brewing. Imperfect though our democracy certainly is, it still makes it very hard for any government to face an election after a famine, or even to survive the plentiful criticism that a relatively free press permits.

For this process of political incentives to work even more widely, our ability to understand the nature of hunger and deprivation is extremely important. The protective function of adversarial politics has not yet worked much against the barbarity of persistent undernourishment—as opposed to famines—in India. Famines are dramatic events, involving millions of people simultaneously, and they are easy to politicize to embarrass the governments, with gigantic statistics. The personal suffering of the individual victims, which is the basis of the social tragedy, has to be more fully understood for our ability to direct our critical wrath on the governance of the country and of the respective states. The collection of pictures in this book richly contributes to this understanding of individual suffering behind the aggregate statistics of famines, and can help us to grasp the barbarity of the 'normal' state of affairs of the undernourished people of this country and the tragedy of each individual deprivation.

Finally, and more broadly, famines are integrally associated with alienation. If the absence of democracy allows—and indeed encourages—the *political* alienation between the rulers and the ruled, the absence of nuanced understanding of the reality of deprivation permits the *cultural* alienation of the people who are not threatened by hunger from those who live under its constant threat. This book is a major attempt to make the general public really understand what it is like to live in—and die of—hunger.

The graphic potentialities of the 1943 famine serve as a magnifying glass to help us comprehend the nature of deprivation and hunger in general. The roots of callousness and cruelty that make the world so terrible often lie in alienation related to ignorance and non-comprehension. These superb portrayals are not only great achievements of art, they are also significant contributions to social understanding, to participatory politics and to a less alienated culture.

### *Responsibility and Culpability*

The issue may be worth pursuing some more. In Bernard Shaw's *Man and Superman*, Mr Malone, an Irish American, refuses to describe the Irish famines of the 1840s as a 'famine.' He tells Violet, his English daughter-in-law, that his father 'died of starvation in the black 47.' When Violet asks, 'The famine?', Malone answers: 'No, the starvation. When a country is full of food and exporting it, there can be no famine.'

As the term 'Famine' is used, there can be little doubt that Malone is wrong: what his father died of was certainly a famine. Indeed, I know of no other famine in the world in which the *proportion* of people killed was as large as in the Irish famines in the 1840s. Malone was making a different point—a very profound one too—with some literary license. The point concerns human

---

<sup>2</sup> On this see my *Resources, Values and Development* (Oxford: Blackwell, and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984); and jointly with Jean Drèzo, *Hunger and Public Action* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), and our jointly edited *The Political Economy of Hunger* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), especially the papers of N. Ram and Rehman Sobhan.

responsibility, especially the culpability of the ruling groups, in causing and sustaining famines. If the Irish famines were entirely preventable, and in particular, if those in public authority could have prevented it, then the charge that the British rulers 'starved' the Irish (and that the deaths were not due to some 'natural' famine) would be cogent enough. As Malone put it, 'Me father was starved dead; and I was starved out to America in me mother's arms.' The real issue here is not whether there was an Irish famine, but who bears the responsibility for it, and it is here that the accusing finger points to the unsympathetic and uncaring rulers in London.

Exactly the same issue has engaged us in India again and again throughout the British rule, and never more so than in the famine of 1943. Why did the rulers of British India allow the Bengal famine to happen? Admittedly, the priorities of winning the war against the Japanese diminished all other concerns, but still this was too large a calamity to be accepted by the British public and the politically conscious community there in the 1940s, by which time the Raj was under severe general criticism in London itself.

#### *What Happened in 1943?*

1943 was not a year of exceptionally bad harvest. Despite a cyclone in October (of which much was made by those who wanted, later, to explain the famine in the traditional terms of food output decline), there was no major drop in food availability per head. The food statistics made it unnatural to expect such a calamity, and this encouraged the British Indian government to expect nothing more than some local shortage (as it frequently reiterated). As people started dying of starvation in the spring of 1943, the imperial rulers were not only deceived by the statistics and their dogmatism about their implicit 'theory' of famines, they were also lulled by their own misinformed callousness and indifference about what was going on.

The horrific story of hunger and suffering and death, graphically reflected in the pictures included in this volume, was powerfully suppressed, and even the Parliament in Britain was kept much in the dark. The Indian papers were severely censored, and in any case did not reach the rulers in White Hall and Westminster, and the English papers read in London stuck to the imperial model of 'responsible' behaviour, recommended by the Viceregal office, of not causing alarm and disruption of war efforts. When eventually on 16 and 18 October, after months of famine and a ferocious death toll, the editor of *The Statesman*, Ian Stephens, could take it no longer, and decided to break this rulers' alliance and published fuller information and a frank denunciation of governmental policy (describing 'the Secretary of State for India' as 'a strangely misinformed man'), the long postponed furore in Parliament did occur and the process of 'waking up' to the reality began even in London. In comprehending how Indians were 'starved to death' (to use Malone's expression) the indifference and callousness brought about by informational control is extremely important to understand.

#### *To Know and to Act*

In fact, information and understanding are central to the prevention of famines. While a famine is a deeply divisive phenomenon, which rarely affects more

than a small proportion of the people (hardly ever more than 10 per cent of the population of the famine-affected land—typically much less), an understanding of what is going on makes it a difficult thing to tolerate even for those who are not affected by it at all, but who sense some responsibility for not preventing these events. In this respect, the model of self-centred human beings that the prevailing theory of modern economics has made common is dead wrong, along with its sloganizing generalizations such as ‘everyone maximizes self-interest,’ or ‘there is no free lunch.’

Indeed, the feeling of sympathy for fellow human beings and the sense of responsibility towards others whose lives depend on one’s actions are natural accompaniments of living in societies. Information has to be suppressed and brutal pictures made to look benign—or slight—to blot out the instinctive response of people to each other’s extreme predicaments. This is precisely why cultivated illusions play such a big part in the survival and tolerance of merciless cruelty and misery as well as criminal procrastination of every kind.

Even though many parts of Marxian social theory have come under severe scrutiny and telling criticism (in my judgement rightly so), the need to understand the pervasive role of ‘false consciousness’ and of ‘objective illusion’—central to Marxian theory—in explaining social comprehension and the choice of action and non-action remains profoundly important. This applies to other types of selective deprivation as well (involving class, gender, race and nationality), and the contribution made by greater social awareness can be truly profound.

In traditional Indian philosophy, a distinction has often been made between the path of action and that of knowledge (along with the path of devotion). Work and knowledge are, in many ways, distinct paths, but in the social context, the path of action is deeply parasitic on knowledge, and the former cannot be viewed isolated from the latter. We have to comprehend the horrors adequately to develop the commitment to eliminate them by concerted efforts. The pictures presented in this volume contribute both to our sympathetic understanding and to reasoned action.

In this sense, the portrayals of deprivation we have here involve at once art, perception, knowledge, and the very foundation of our practical reason. It is not a small task, and there are excellent grounds for us to feel indebted to the author.

AMARTYA SEN  
Calcutta, 15 June 1996

In 1350 (as the traditional Bengali calendar marked it, or 1943-44, as the rest of the world records it), the artists, writers, poets and all thinking people of Bengal came down to the earth. It was not as if they were all upholders of art for art's sake, or that they had made some ivory tower their home. As a matter of fact, there had always been a tradition of humanism running through the art and literature of Bengal. The tradition had developed into a mode capable of coming to terms with reality, and absorbing the entirety of the joys and sorrows and the hopes and frustrations of everyday life in art and literature in many different ways. Yet in 1350 they confronted a reality unprecedented in severity as far as their experience went. They were face to face with the Bengal of 1176 (again according to the Bengali calendar), another year of calamitous famine, come back again. The Bengali poet opened his eyes to observe with anguish: 'The bronze Seeta stands naked today, our land in the throes of famine.'

Famines have been quite a common occurrence in this subcontinent. Historians have counted at least twenty-two in modern times, during British rule alone. Conditions of scarcity have been even more frequent. After the famine of 1176 a lot of money went into the making of the famous Gol-Ghar, a piece of innovative architecture, as a storehouse for foodgrains, in Patna, inscribed with the words: 'For the perpetual prevention of famines in India.' The enormous pitcher was never filled. The stomachs of innumerable Bengalis went without fill for generations, while the British masters ruled. Processions of living skeletons had trudged across the green earth of Bengal again and again before 1350. The large banyan tree in the Company's Garden (now the Botanical Gardens) at Shibpur is said to be the lone living witness of the devastating famine of 1176. But even today people bearing names like Akailya (lit. 'one afflicted by or born in a famine') or Duikhya (lit. 'one afflicted by or born in misery') bear through the generations the memories of those terrible times. The nightmare that was 1350 must still be haunting many more Bengalis with all its vivid and glaring horror.

The famine of 1350 (corresponding to 1943-44 by the international calendar) has been extensively written about, and still remains a worthwhile subject for study and research in India and abroad. Skeletons piling up in Ethiopia, Sudan and Somalia are chronicling for posterity the sheer heartlessness of the civilization of our times, Memories of the famine in China in the fifties or that in Bangladesh in the seventies may have faded by now for the rest of the world. But the Bengal of 1350 endures in memory with strange stubbornness. It endures not through the tireless curiosity of researchers alone, but also in the works of the sensitive Bengali artists, writers, poets, lyricists and singers



The starving Buddha

who have contributed to keep the grave memory alive. The facts of modern famines are recorded in administrative reports and documents or material preserved in the official archives. But it is the writers, artists and artisans who have inscribed in history all the famines of the past. Episodes in the Buddhist Jatakas have carried down to posterity memories of famines in prehistoric times. One of the Jatakas even chronicles an uprising of hungry people against their rulers. The Rigveda records a prayer hymn supposed to relieve one of hunger. Yet death in the form of hunger has stalked the people of this subcontinent for several ages. Death has been confined to a region on some occasions, has chosen for its target the helpless people of a particular section of society on some other occasions. Famine in those times usually came in the wake of natural calamities like drought, floods or the invasion of locusts. Or there would be wars, epidemics or administrative failures calling forth a carnival of death. And there was of course the unbroken continuity of living by begging for one's daily bread, a narrative recorded in our art and literature for generations to come.

Niharranjan Ray, in his history of the Bengalis of early times, comes back to the theme again and again : 'In the poor, lower income sectors of society, the Bengalis suffered perennially. Contemporary literature offered images like : "There's no rice in the pot, we're in the throes of daily starvation, and yet the family grows larger, like the frog's ;" "hunger has shrunk the eyes and bellies of the children, their bodies lean like corpses ;" "There's only a drop of water in the broken pitcher;" "wearing rags with no needle in the house to mend them;" "the crumbling hut with its posts tottering, its roof fluttering, and its mud walls melting.'" If that was the reality in the early phase, it was no different in the middle phase, when life for the rural poor was just as miserable. The image of starving humanity in seventeenth century Bengali poetry is one of

The misery of going without rice,  
like the mouth deprived of the betel leaf,  
no covering for the body.  
Why do you wear a mass of hemp ropes  
on your lean body?  
Your head an awesome sight of disorder !

Yet another poet offers an incredible image of the extent poverty could reach : 'Destitute from birth, he had no utensil for food. All that he had was a drain for *amani*' [the watery remains drained from the rice after being boiled]. Accounts of the famine of 1176 have come down to us, not only in the descriptions of Hunter and Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, but also in a piece appended by an anonymous scribe in 1177 to his copied version of Kavikankan Mukundaram's *Chandimangal* : 'In 1176 there was a great famine, following drought. There were no crops except in the south and some of the marshlands, raising the price of rice normally selling at 12 seers a rupee to six *pons* and a half for a rupee [a seer is nearly a kilogram, a *pon* nearly half a seer]. There were no vegetables, no edible herbs or creepers, there was nothing to eat. A septuagenarian said that he had never heard of such a state of things. So many





A Mughal painting by A'mal Bosawan

died in this. . .’ In a manuscript text *Sudām Charitra* there is an account of a famine in 1235 (corresponding to 1828) : ‘The gods gave no rain for the entire year of 1235. So I wrote this book, having no other work to do. The villagers were leaving home in search of work. The price of rice rose to 24 seers a rupee, but was not available even at that price. Half the population of the village went without rice. They left the village and ran in search of food. . .’

Simultaneously with the vague accounts of famines recorded in official documents and administrative reports, the poets and artisans too were recording their own observations, often engraving them with hammers and chisels, as in the text inscribed in a temple in Medinipur : ‘Shri Shri Radha-Krishna. In the origin. Begun in the month of Māgha [December-January], 1272 [1865]. Completed in Baishākha, 1275 [1868] and dedicated. In the interim the famine of 1273, with rice selling at thirteen seers to a rupee, but the artisan still at his work.’ It was this famine of 1273 (corresponding to 1866) that was the occasion of *Ākāl Charitra* (Portrait of a Famine) by the poet Dwija Naphar : ‘In Shrāvana [July-August] the mother of famine was bathed in menstrual flow, in Bhādra [August-September] famine came to her womb. / In Āshwin [September-October] famine was born, unknown to men./ Famine was over the earth . . .’

Bengali poets have portrayed famines again and again. Literary portrayals of deprivation in the form of stories about the daily sufferings of the people of the lower orders bring up time and again news of mass deaths. Indian art has its stock of indirect evidence of large scale deaths from starvation. The figure of the starving Buddha made of slate and on view in the Lahore Museum, and considered a masterpiece of Gandhara art, is of course a representation

of the Buddha in meditation, but the artist who carved it in the second or third century AD must have been familiar with the appearance of man as he would look, when his body was emaciated from starvation. How else could he have carved this extraordinarily realistic image of a starving man? Artists in a certain period in Europe are supposed to have stolen corpses from graves and dissected them to study human anatomy and the arrangement of bones and muscles. With processions of skeletons in constant view, artists in our famine-ravaged country have never felt the need for such adventurous research. We know of a famine that struck Bihar in the third century BC. The artist concerned may have witnessed other famines too after that. He must have seen for himself the form that a starving man's body assumes. There is no doubt whatsoever that the image of the starving Buddha is a synthesis of realism and imagination. The starving with begging bowls make their appearance in the Ajanta murals of the sixth century. These men with begging bowls are no Buddhist mendicants, but just starving people. They are present in Mughal paintings of a later period. An extraordinary painting by Bosawan, preserved in the Indian Museum, bears the inscription on its back : 'Shabih Kaish Ibn Amir urf Maznoon. A'mal Bosawan.' Dated 1585, it is supposed to be a picture of the lovelorn Maznu, suffering the pangs of separation from Laila; with his favourite horse and dog too reduced to skeletons. Analysing this painting in detail, Niharranjan Ray has shown how the colouring of the man, the beloved horse and the pet dog against a seared naturesscape draws on a real life famine situation. The painting sets against the shrivelled dog a plump jackal making its escape. Ray reaches the conclusion that the painter could not have painted this portrait of the lover in the throes of *viraha* if he had not observed himself the state of starving men and domesticated animals at a time of famine. As a matter of fact this Mughal painting does not go by the conventions of colour and style associated with *viraha*. Ray has history on his side, for India, and northern India in particular, had been devastated by famines several times between 1540 and 1590. The famine of 1582-84 had centred on Delhi proper. Bosawan obviously did not have to go for a flight of the imagination. One wonders at times if the Kali worshipped by the Hindus in skeletal form is only a product of the meditative artist's speculation. All those plaintive prayers addressed ceaselessly in art and literature alike to Annapurnā, the deity of food, only go to underline the presence of hunger as man's constant companion in this country. Kali in the skeletal form, the Kali of the cremation ground, and Kali as protector may after all be only embodiments of the same prayer of the destitute—a prayer for security against death, against famine and plague. With death so often so total, the prayer is more often than not all-encompassing. When the historical examples had receded into an indistinct, shadowy oblivion, the Bengali writers and artists once again woke up with awe to the reality that had once confronted Mahendra and Kalyani in Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's *Ānandamath* : 'Famine loomed large before them.' The nightmare struck barely fifty years ago. It was 1350 in Bengal.

A brief account of the famine of 1350 (or 1943) should precede an evocation of how the writers, poets, artists and thinkers of Bengal served their

conscience and their commitment to their community with exemplary heroism in the face of crisis. In his novel *Mamwantar*, Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay describes a picture: 'A Picture . . . The demon of War dances in whirling motion, with the figures 39, 40, 41, 42, 43 blazing on him. He snaps his fingers at the earth, and calls out : Come, come ! There rises from the earth an angry skeletal look in the form of a terrible female figure, almost naked; its mouth, a gaping, devouring hole; with yet another face peeping from under its feet, a face with its skin peeled off—epidemic. Carnivorous kites and vultures circle in the skies, with shells bursting all around, planes zooming overhead, the sun lost in smoke, all under the pall of a mist. The inscription below, reading: New Year, 1943.' The famine of 1350 or 1943 was no sudden disaster. The background to 1943 had already been set in 1941, or even earlier, in September 1939, when Germany invaded Poland. Two days later Britain and France declared war against Germany. The Second World War had begun. In November the Allied powers resolved to consolidate their strength and strike at Germany with full force. As Britain's largest colony, India soon found itself involved in the war, with its substantial manpower and economic resources. India's resources and labour power, employed so long in the nurture of Britain's empire and the enrichment of the British Isles, were now put to use in the interests of the empire. In December, the Indian forces were already in the western front. In June 1940, there began the conscription of Indian skilled labour. The front was extended further in early 1941. The Indian forces were engaged in battle in West Asia against the Nazis, as part of the Allied Army. The war took a new turn, with yet another piece of explosive violence, when Japan bombed the US naval base at Pearl Harbour. On the same day Japan attacked China, Malay, Philippines and Hong Kong. On 11 December the United States declared war against Italy and Germany. The scene was shifting fast. The Great War had already reached the east. The United States, France, Britain, the USSR, China and 22 other countries were arrayed against the three Fascist powers—Germany, Italy and Japan. There were fierce hostilities on many fronts. Jibananda Das, adored for his characteristic stance of detachment and known as the poet of alienation and melancholy, saw before him a different face of 'nature all around'—

The hub of Calcutta, Tokyo, Delhi, Moscow and  
the Atlantic all around me,  
A dawn of supplies,  
Incomparable morning hymn ;  
Myriads of men spewing time and blood,  
As homes and houses, the desert and the moon give way,  
And blood and bones settle on harbours, jetties, docks ;  
There is no affection, seeking for peace of the heart.  
One comes up against an enchanting hell  
Beating against the first gateway to heaven.

While the Great War was still news from afar, its shadow loomed large on Calcutta, and in fact the whole of Bengal, already a part of that hell. The panic within soon turned to real terror, a scare gripped the green earth of Bengal,