"Fables of Famine: Bengal, 1770 and 1943"

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Summarized by Stephen Pitcher

India, along with China, Ireland, and Russia, is one of the proverbial lands of famine. The Indian famines of 1770 and 1943 bookended British rule in the subcontinent: the first began a dozen years after the British achieved paramountcy there, while the second, subsumed into the overwhelming narrative of World War II, is one of the forgotten famines of the twentieth century.

Professor Roy quoted a verse from Rudyard Kipling's 1899 poem "The White Man's Burden," which seems to epitomize the British colonial attitude toward famine: "Take up the White Man's burden, / The savage wars of peace— / Fill full the mouth of Famine / And bid the sickness cease; / And when your goal is nearest / The end for others sought, / Watch sloth and heathen Folly / Bring all your hopes to nought." The image is one of sacrificial labor, performed by selfless demigods for dissolute and ungrateful natives. Roy then adduced another Kipling work, the short story "William the Conqueror," in which, again, a godlike savior must descend *in loco parentis* to provide succor to feckless indigenes. Both works represent a model in which the state bears parental responsibility toward a perpetually juvenile colony. With these literary parables as a prologue, Professor Roy embarked on a depiction of the historical context of the famines, which preeminently involves the British East India Company's transformation from a trading company into an imperial power.

Medieval and early modern Europe hungered for the spices of South Asia, for the purposes of embalming, magical rituals, cooking, and preservation, and as perfumes, medications, and aphrodisiacs. This craving for spices served as a kind of engine for European growth, giving rise to the sea voyages, exposure to foreign cultures, and subsequent colonial conquest that ultimately resulted in a transformed, modern Europe. An important development in this evolution was the improvement in navigational techniques that by the sixteenth century ended Europe's dependency on Arab and Venetian intermediaries, enabling direct access to spice-producing regions. An early Portuguese hegemony, the result of expeditions like those of Vasco da Gama and Ferdinand Magellan, was rapidly challenged by the Dutch, the French, and the British, with the latter's East India Company assuming a leading role, especially in trade with Bengal. Responsible for over 75 percent of the company's procurement of Indian goods, Bengal came to be mythologized as a Garden of Eden, reportedly boasting an abundance unrivalled on Earth. The Company's wresting of *diwani* (taxation) rights from Indian control in 1765, combined with their military presence in the region, in essence turned the trading company into a governing body.

In the period that followed the Company expanded its influence southward and intensified its forms of revenue extraction. The Company's profit motive, along with individual employees' lust for private fortunes, conspired to drain the provincial treasury

and place crushing tax burdens on an already impoverished agricultural class. Many farmers turned to the cultivation of cash crops like indigo instead of grain, thereby increasing their vulnerability to famine. In 1768 the monsoon in Bengal and Bihar failed, and by September 1769 severe drought conditions prevailed, occasioning reports of widespread rural distress (which seem, however, to have had little impact on Company officials). By early 1770 starvation was rampant; in some provinces a third of the populace died. Many residents fled elsewhere to escape the drought and the onerous taxation. Farmland returned to jungle. All through 1770 people starved to death. In June 1770 the [British] resident at the Darbar confirmed that the living were feeding on the dead.

Despite the rains and consequent good harvest of September 1770, death and depopulation continued, and the epidemics (mainly smallpox) that always follow famine killed millions. In terms not just of loss of life, but of extent of human suffering, the Famine of 1770 has been recognized as the greatest calamity of eighteenth-century India. As is true of famines in general, no exact death toll can be had for the Famine of 1770; the late-19th-century historian William Wilson Hunter, author of the most detailed account of the horror, gives the number of 10 million dead. It is important not to succumb to the seduction of such numbers (so much more satisfying than, say, "7.3 million"); famine by its very nature tends to create a rhetoric of hyperbole. It is certain, however, that suffering on a nearly unimaginable scale occurred, that vast areas were depopulated, and that significant portions of the land returned to the jungle for decades.

The Company, meanwhile, was monopolizing rice in anticipation of coming scarcity, which had the effect of exacerbating the famine. It extended a measure of relief to the mercantile and trading classes but none to the peasantry. It also continued to practice its *diwani* rights to the fullest extent possible: more taxation revenue was collected in 1770 than in 1769, the year of the dearth that led to the famine. Historian David Arnold has said of the famine, "It was perhaps the first Asian disaster in modern times to have had an impact on Europe, but it did so by reinforcing an identification of Asia with nature, rather than by emphasizing a common humanity." So Bengal went from being a symbol of bounty to being the native terrain of destructive natural forces over which its inhabitants were helpless to exert any control. The Company was blamed by some for its role in exacerbating the famine, but in general the people of Bengal were seen as being too unenlightened and too fatalistic to fend for themselves: responsibility for the scope of the catastrophe was theirs.

By the latter part of the nineteenth century, famine, for Indian economists and nationalists, had become emblematic of the failures of the colonial state, whose refusal to provide relief, and culpability in the very conditions leading to famine in the first place, exemplified exploitation and negligence at their worst. The emergence of a grudging famine code on the part of the British did little to mitigate this assessment; and indeed the factors listed in the code as being indicative of coming famine—"unusual wandering of paupers," credit and trade irregularities, and a rise in crime—seemed concerned far more with hindrance to governance than with natural or agricultural—or Indian—realities. The Indian independence movement achieved a limited degree of self-governance for several

provinces, Bengal among them, in the 1930s, but the British governor could veto laws deemed detrimental to national security and had the power to suspend the provincial government and assume its functions himself. This was subjection at one remove, and scarcely the less onerous for that.

When World War II broke out, the colonial government in Delhi, in alliance with British objectives, declared war against the Axis powers. The Indian nationalist Congress Party, in protest at non-consultation and subordination, withdrew from participation in government in response, while the provincial government in Bengal remained thoroughly subordinated to all agents of British rule. The colonial government in Bengal, alarmed at Japanese victories in Hong Kong, Singapore, and especially Burma (a major exporter of rice to Bengal), in 1942 adopted the Boat Denial Scheme, which entailed destroying tens of thousands of boats used for livelihood and transportation in coastal areas—an act that would translate into disproportionately high mortality rates in fishing communities in the famine to come. A cyclone in 1942 was devastating to rice crops, and the Rice Denial scheme, mandating the sale of massive quantities of rice to the government for military consumption, was both the product of and an incentive to the looming hysteria. Prices surged exponentially, panicking growers and traders withdrew stocks, and general mayhem ensued. The famine of 1943 has been termed a manmade event; it is certain that many men profited mightily as it transpired.

Widespread starvation and death spawned a host of collateral traumas: massive refugeeism; the vulnerable female population being subjected to sexual molestation or reduced to prostitution; land transfers of historic proportions; and routine consumption of objects not normally deemed comestible. Yet the colonial government remained impervious to the crisis, accusing India of over dramatizing the situation. Churchill, in particular, who hated Gandhi and Hindus in general (he is on record as having described Hindus as “a beastly people with a beastly religion,” and declaring them the “beastliest people in the world, next to the Germans”), refused to be swayed by the urgency of the moment, and denied ships to Canadians, Americans, and Australians desirous of contributing to emergency relief. Just as the Irish were blamed for marrying too early and having too many children, and thereby calling down famine upon themselves, the Bengalis were accused of being seditious and, as Churchill put it, “breeding like rabbits.” The viceroy did not bestir himself to visit Bengal, and the Famine Code was never invoked (it was feared it might prove a distraction from the focus on the war effort). Reportage of the famine was muted, in order that it not impinge on war-time patriotic morale. Colonial infrastructure remained unperturbed, as people starved to death in front of food shops guarded by police, and transport of food grains *out* of Bengal by hoarders and profiteers proceeded smoothly (another salient parallel to Ireland). The famine was officially declared over with the large harvest of 1944, although scholars suggest an endpoint almost two years later, in mid-1946.

There are varied estimates of the death rate in the 1943 Bengal Famine, as is usual with famine; Nobel Prize–winning economist Amartya Sen supplies the estimate of 3,000,000 dead. His *Poverty and Famines* provides a revolutionary readjustment of the standard viewpoint on the etiology of famine, rejecting the canonical Malthusian thesis that the

exponential growth rate of population will inevitably adjust to the linear growth rate of food resources, typically by means of some violent catastrophe such as famine. Sen insists that the onset of famine is associated with issues of equity and access, not, as previously held, with measures of scarcity vs. plenty. According to his view, modern famines are not caused by simple lack of food or ecological disturbances such as floods and droughts; sometimes there is no decrease in the quantity of available food. Drought, flood, or crop shortfalls may create proximate cause of famine onset, but they do not explain why some people starve and others don't. Sen attributes the 1943 Famine not to lessened food availability (the decline was actually rather small) but rather to market failures and the miscalculations, or transgressions, of state policy. He also concludes that democratic regimes, with a free press and electoral accountability, are less hospitable to famine than are non-democratic or totalitarian states.

The 1943 Bengal Famine was responsible for a huge outpouring of art; a grim slideshow in tribute to this effusion concluded Professor Roy's presentation.

Q&A

Participant: Comparing these two talks [Roy's and the preceding one by Professor Edgerton-Tarpley], how does the gender element correlate to the reality of dying?
Roy: Looking at the mortality figures available it's difficult to calculate—it depends on who you talk to, and where your ethnographic work is done. In general, women tend to survive famines at a slightly higher rate than men. This is true for the Bengal famines, true for the Great Hunger in Ireland in the 1840s, and true for most famines for which there are reliable records. There's a disconnect between the reality of gendered death and the way it's represented. You often find that coming out of the Bengal famines and the Irish famine: the represented subjects chosen were women—sexually vulnerable and/or mothers. The incapacity of mothers to feed their children equals the complete breakdown of natural order. This comes up again and again in a variety of genres—to a large degree in literature, but also in visual records—photos, sketches, newspapers—with greater or lesser degrees of sentimentality. It's also found in captions.

Participant: Indian casualties in World War II were not spoken about much. Could you speak some more about Burma being bombed in World War II?

Roy: True: as I've said that famine was the "forgotten famine"; but other things are forgotten as well. There were considerable Indian death tolls in both world wars, which are not spoken of, even in India. There's a battlefield in the northeast where there were fairly important military engagements between British–Indian and Japanese troops, and nothing much is made of them. For India, World War II gets erased in favor of the Nationalist Movement. It is also overwritten by multiple tragedies, and the devastatingly brutal starvation. It's the same things for Burma: you have to look at the fiction—[Amitav] Ghosh, *The Glass Palace.* Some Burmese were repatriated, but not many.