

The Great Famine of 1943 and North Bengal: Revisiting its Genesis and its Impact

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[Editorial Note: The paper revisits the origin and the impact of the Great famine of 1943 especially in context of North Bengal. The author has explored various primary and secondary sources to present the sufferings of the people in terms of subsistence, malnutrition, economic hardships, cloth famine, etc. leading to a situation of existential crisis amongst the people of North Bengal.]

***Abstract:** The most catastrophic event which took a heavy death-toll in Bengal was the great famine of 1943. It shattered the socio-economic foundations of the then Bengali society. The people of North Bengal also went through this calamity which became very acute in the districts of Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri and Rangpur. Millions of people suffered from hunger, mal-nutrition, epidemics etc. which altogether accelerated the mortality rate during 1943-1944. Their age-old professions were at stake and they lost the capacity to purchase the foodgrains and other essential commodities from the open markets which practically went in the hands of the black marketeers. Peoples' sufferings were further multiplied with the outbreak of the 'cloth famine' at different places of North Bengal. Thus the famine of 1943 dealt a heavy blow on the life and livelihood of the people of North Bengal and led them into an 'existential crisis'.*

Key Words: Bengal Famine, North Bengal, Nazimuddin, Suhrawardy, Syama Prasad Mookerjee

On 24 April 1943 Sir John Herbert, the then Governor of Bengal, issued a proclamation by revoking the provision of Section 93 of the Government of India Act, 1935 and invited the Leader of the Muslim League Assembly Party, Khwaja Sir Nazimuddin to form a new ministry. Having been supported by 140 members of the Bengal Assembly (out of total 250 members), Nazimuddin on that very day formed a 13 -member ministry which came to be known as the 'Bengal Coalition'. The most serious challenge that the Nazimuddin Ministry had to face immediately after its installation was the horrendous Bengal famine which became very severe

from May 1943 and continued till the end of 1944. The famine spread over nearly 21665 sq. miles out of its total area of 82,955 sq. miles;¹ completely affected and jeopardized 1/3rd of the total population of Bengal and took the lives of millions of people. The famine mortality was much higher in East Bengal in comparison to West Bengal. It reached its peak during July 1943 and June 1944 and it did not return to its 'normalcy' until the middle of 1945. According to the Reports of the Famine Enquiry Commission (which was formed under the presidentship of Sir John Woodhead and better known as 'Woodhead Committee Report'), 1.5 million people died in Bengal during the famine. According to Prof. Amartya Kumar Sen, "... the Commission's own method of calculation does lead to a figure around three million deaths...."² and he is "inclined to pick a figure around 3 million as the death toll of the Bengal famine".³ Bhabani Sen, a noted scholar, in *Bhanganer Mukhe Bangla* made estimation of 3.5 million deaths in Bengal due to famine in 1943 which according to him severely affected the lives of 20 million people (out of its total population of 60 million).⁴ He further mentioned that in the famine – affected areas, 10 percent of the total population or an estimated 1.2 million to 1.5 million men, women and children completely turned into beggars.⁵ Parallely another 6 million people, including 2.7 million land-labourers, 1.5 million poor peasants, 1.5 million indigenous industrial workers and 25,000 poor school teachers had to bear the same fate.⁶ According to the Reports of the Settlement Department (1939) and the Census of 1941, almost 7.5 million people of Bengal were dependent on agriculture out of which less than 2 million cultivators had at least five acres of land. But surprisingly, 3 million people did not have any land of their own; they served as sharecroppers (*adhiars*) or as landless agricultural labourers (*khetmajur*). They were the worst sufferers and they became completely dependent on wages.⁷ Besides the demand for labour and the rate of wages were heavily decreased. Bengal which was called the 'granary of the East' was struggling from food production particularly rice. From 1921 to 1946, there was gradual decline in the food output while there was the general trend of population increase. In 1943 the per capita entitlement of rice reached a crisis point due to the complete breakdown of a vulnerable rice marketing system along with uncontrolled hoarding and speculation. The unusual scarcity of food grains and other essential commodities inevitably led to inflation. As a result the price of rice went beyond the reach of the common people. The peasants were compelled to sell/ mortgage their assets including land. 600,000 tenants lost their holdings during 1943 and their cattle wealth going down by 20 per cent in a single year.⁸ All these paved the way for

‘depeasantization’ in different parts of Bengal (including North Bengal) and made the life of the common people more miserable.

There are divergent opinions among the scholars regarding the genesis of the Bengal famine in 1943. Renowned economist B.M. Bhatia in his book entitled *Famines in India: A Study in Some Aspects of the Economic History of India, 1860-1965* categorized the Bengal famine of 1943 as a man-made disaster. He in his research highlighted the War situation and its impact on the common people and gave importance to the decline in the volume of crop production which, according to him, primarily led the people of Bengal into this catastrophe. The production of rice was heavily affected by the cyclone along with torrential rains and tidal waves especially in Midnapore district in October 1942 and there had been a fall in its production to the tune of 2.4 million tons during 1942-43. At the beginning of 1943, most of the South-East Asian countries including Burma were occupied by the Japanese Army and it was apprehended that at any point of time, Bengal would join in that list. In recent past, in order to meet up the shortage of rice, a substantial quantity of rice was imported from Burma to Bengal. But the seizure of Burma by Japan led to the stoppage of the supply of rice to the tune of 200000 tons and paved the way for the influx of the refugees from Burma to Chittagong which altogether enhanced the scarcity of food in Bengal. George Blyn, distinguished economist, in his research work entitled *Agricultural Trends in India 1891-1947: Output, Availability and Productivity* also highlighted the shortage of food. The shortage of rice in Bengal was also mentioned in the Report of the Famine Enquiry Commission. According to the Report, Bengal had 42 or 43 weeks of rice (including *Aman, Ayush* and *Boro*) requirements in 1943 which, according to Prof. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, was not at all a nominal amount to cause the famine in comparison to 39 weeks in 1941 and 44 weeks in 1936 and interestingly both these years (i.e. 1936 & 1941) were free from famine.⁹

The situation in Bengal became more adverse due to the Governmental procurement policy which gave priority to the official and military requirements. As part of the ‘Denial Policy’, the British Government from April 1942 removed surplus rice and paddy particularly from Midnapore, 24 Parganas, Khulna, Bakharganj etc. (from the ‘dangerous zone’, i.e. those districts of Bengal which were likely to be seized first by the Japanese invaders during the course of the Second World War) so that the British forces could easily get the food at wartime and at the same time the British administration could dismiss any chance of getting

any food on the part of the Japanese forces immediately after their penetration. Not only that, more than 26,000 country boats which were the most common means of transport in rural Bengal, were completely destroyed and 20,000 country boats were shifted to other places by the British Government.¹⁰ This resulted in the withdrawal of 70 per cent of the country boats from goods transportation, fishing etc.¹¹ The 'Boat Removal Policy' severely affected the lives of the boatmen of the districts of Chittagong, Noakhali, Tripura, 24 Parganas and Midnapore along with the peasants, weavers, potters and other professionals. Side by side, a large number of steamers and trains were removed which altogether severely affected the food supply in Bengal. The *Census of India 1951* says: "In 1942-43 cyclones and floods reduced the Bengal rice crop by about a third; this, coupled with the absence of exports from Japanese-controlled Burma, and inadequate relief, led to famines, epidemics (malaria, cholera and smallpox), aggravated by widespread starvation".¹² A sizeable portion of the Bengali population also suffered from malnutrition which resulted in the gradual decline of their strength and immunity and increased their susceptibility to various diseases which altogether accelerated the rate of mortality.¹³ From the middle of 1943, thousands of people died in Bengal due to cholera, dysentery & diarrhea, malaria and fever. The widespread outbreak of epidemics during the famine was also pointed out by Amery, the Secretary of State for India, in his statement at the House of Commons that 77,938 people died only due to cholera till the end of November 1943.¹⁴

During famine a huge number of people lost their traditional livelihood (like agriculture, pottery, carpentry, fishing, public and goods transportation etc.), lost their job security and ownership of earning mechanisms which altogether led them towards paucity, dispossession of food and to the final destination, i.e. starvation. Prof. Amartya Kumar Sen in his pioneer work entitled *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* explained the reasons why a particular class of people suffered from starvation and famine and he came to the decision that it was due to shift in 'exchange entitlements'. He challenged the theory of 'Food Availability Decline' or FAD and raised his doubt on its role behind the outbreak of famines. According to him, the availability of food in 1943 was only 5 per cent less than the average rate of the last five years and it was 13 per cent more than the food availability in 1941.¹⁵ Prof. Sen rejected the theory of 'FAD' and put forward his 'food entitlement approach'. He wrote: "Starvation is the characteristic of some people not having enough food to eat. It is not the characteristic of there not being enough food to eat. While the latter can be a cause of the former, it is but one of

many possible causes. Whether and how starvation relates to food supply is a matter for factual investigation".¹⁶ He argued that 'Bengal famine was not the reflection of a remarkable over-all shortage of foodgrains in Bengal... The crisis was greatly aggravated by gross mismanagement and deliberate profiteering'.¹⁷ Prof. Paul R. Greenough in his book entitled *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943-1944* pointed out the gradual declining trend of the per capita entitlement of rice in Bengal over a long period. He considered the Bengal famine of 1943 as a 'man-made calamity' because 'no drought, flood, or crop failure caused a shortage of rice so great as to make widespread starvation inevitable'. According to him, it was the military activity (but not the scarcity of food) which actually paved the way for the outbreak of the famine.¹⁸

Highlighting the factors which might account for the Bengal famine of 1943, *The Statesman* wrote on 23 September 1943: "Loss of imports from Burma is a big factor no doubt; the rapid growth of population and sudden influx of a very large number of men might have caused internal stresses, but they are just like a drop in the ocean. Moreover they did not happen in a day. The largest factor had outstandingly been a shameful lack of foresight and planning capacity of India's own civil government, Central and Provincial". Mr. V.V. Kalikar said in the Council of State on 20 November 1943 that 'neither the Bengal Government, nor the Secretary of State for India, nor the Government of India detected famine in Bengal in proper time to avert the tragedy. It was an administrative scandal of the first magnitude'.¹⁹ Same sort of interpretation about the Bengal famine was given by the noted historian Prof. Ayesha Jalal: "By May 1943, the specter of famine was stalking the land, caused as much by a failure to organize adequate imports and proper distribution – mainly the Government's responsibility and hence something that could be blamed upon Nazimuddin's Ministry – as by an actual shortage of food. As Minister for Civil Supplies Suhrawardy had in charge of distributing food, and he was better at distributing patronage to the greedy than food to the hungry".²⁰ Suhrawardy was held responsible as he 'did little to alleviate it and possibly aggravated it by favouring his crony, Ispahani, as a government agent for procurement of foodgrains'²¹ and the Ispahani Co. used the opportunity to earn huge profits. According to J.N. Uppal, a reputed scholar, the Bengal Famine of 1943 was 'a man-made tragedy'. He in his research has shown that Bengal had become 'a food-grain speculators' paradise' where "the amount of unusual profits, made on the buying and selling of rice during 1943, was 150 crores" (estimated by the Famine Enquiry Commission).²² He wrote: "It was commonly believed that

some of the commercial firms concerned with food grains business notorious for shady practices enjoyed his (the minister of Civil Supplies Suhrawardy's) patronage".²³ Much of the wholesale trade and some retail trade in essential commodities (including the food-grains) were in the hands of the Marwaris. A large number of hungry people were boarding trains (without tickets) in search of a suitable place for food and shelter²⁴ and Calcutta was the automatic choice of many of them. The Nazimuddin Ministry failed to pursue a proper and effective policy of import along with a systematic and genuine distribution of rice. According to Herbert, the then Governor of Bengal, "In this matter of food supplies and other respects, Nazimuddin has been definitely weak in controlling his colleagues and imposing coordination on them".²⁵ Not only that, the people of Bengal also suffered from 'cloth famine' which according to Richard Gardner Casey (who became the Governor of Bengal on 22 January 1944), was 'in the hiding in the hands of the Marwaris'. He pointed out that 'black marketing was rampant' with the possible indulgence and connivance of a Minister.²⁶

The famine of 1943 spread to almost every nook and corner of Bengal and brought disastrous consequences throughout Bengal including its northern part. The topography of 'North Bengal' consists of Darjeeling Terai and Hills, Jalpaiguri Dooars and the vast plain areas including Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Dinajpur and Malda. Rangpur (also known as 'Rongopur' for its indigo cultivation) which is presently located in the north-western part of Bangladesh also formed an important part of undivided Bengal. The famine of 1943 had its tremendous severity mainly in the three districts of North Bengal, viz. Dinajpur, Rangpur and Jalpaiguri and it had comparatively lesser virulence in the districts of Malda and Darjeeling and also in the 'Princely State' of Koch Bihar or Cooch Behar which was finally ceded to the Union of India by an agreement dated 28 August 1949 (w.e.f. 12 September 1949). Later it was merged with the province of West Bengal on 1 January 1950 as its new district.

Dinajpur

Dinajpur which was a great center of peasant and tribal uprisings and nationalist movements including the 'Quit India Movement', went through a massive famine. It had adverse consequences in its seven Police Stations (out of thirty), viz., Peerganj, Baliadangi, and Atowari (in Thakurgaon Sub-Division) and Tapan, Patnitala, Porsa and Dhamoirhaat (in Balurghat Subdivision) which altogether covered an area of nearly 900 sq. miles.²⁷ Dinajpur which was a great center of rice

production, saw 25 per cent to 39 per cent decline in rice production during 1942-1943. Here the local markets were absolutely controlled by the jotedars. Thakurgaon and Balurghat Sub-Divisions were strong centers of the Muslim League and the local markets of the former were absolutely under the control of the Muslim jotedars. The League Ministry thoroughly executed the British policy of crop procurement in the district of Dinajpur and seized many rice-godowns in order to supply food grains uninterruptedly to the British military forces during the Second World War. It has come to us by recent researches that the famine did not occur in the seven Police Stations as a result of food shortage but it actually happened due to the 'conspiracy' hatched by the League Ministry, jotedars and moneylenders.²⁸ Soleman Mian, a very influential jotedar of the Thakurgaon Sub-Division and an active supporter of the League, had a very healthy relationship with Suhrawardy, the then Minister of Civil Supply Department. Soleman Mian came into limelight by purchasing a huge amount of paddy on behalf of the Ispahani and Co. He forcefully collected huge quantities of paddy from the Muslim jotedars of Shitlai and stored them at Thakurgaon. He also seized the paddy of Bilku Mian, a prominent jotedar of Battalihaat. The local people got excited and they built up barricades, set fire, cut off the roads etc. in order to create all sorts of obstructions in carrying out the seized paddy. The united resistance became fruitful at Battalihaat as the local people succeeded in snatching the paddy from the rice godown. It is to be mentioned here that at Thakurgaon the government failed to dispatch the procured crops and it had no other option but to sell the seized crops at a low and reduced rate to Madholal Agarwal, a Marwari businessman.²⁹ People also protested against the government seizure of 10-12 rice-godowns at Gareya (in Thakurgaon Sub-Division). Priyanath Das Chowdhury, a big Hindu jotedar and owner of rice-godowns of the locality, was ordered by S. Islam, the District Magistrate, 'not to remove the paddy'. The local peasants sent telegrams to both Mr. Harold Graham, Commissioner of the Rajshahi Division and the District Magistrate, requesting them to give up all the seized rice-godowns of Priyanath Das Chowdhury; otherwise they would be compelled to take possession of the seized paddy which would be distributed amongst the famine victims. As the administration did not pay any heed to their telegrams, a large contingent of the peasants under the leadership of Bibhuti Dey, a local doctor, looted the rice-godowns and distributed the booty amongst the poor masses.³⁰ Another interesting incident took place at Mahanpur (in Thakurgaon Sub-Division) where Hemanta Kumar Das, the Manager of the local jotedar, sold 7,000/8,000 tons of rice to Madholal Agarwal. Large number of peasants of Shibpur, N'para, Jayananda etc. and the Santals of Prannagar got united

under the leadership of Kuria Mondal and Jaykrishna Burman and launched a movement against the selling of food grains to Madholal Agarwal. The mob tied Hemanta Kumar Das, snatched away the key, opened the lock of the godown and seized the paddy. The local administration became furious and wanted to take stern action but surprisingly failed to arrest anyone as the local jotedar remained silent on the whole episode.³¹ It is to be mentioned here that the peasants showed good gesture by compensating the whole amount in the next year (i.e. 1944) as there was good harvest.³² Under tremendous financial crisis, many *adhiars* of Western Thakurgaon began to sell their ancestral lands at a nominal price and turned into landless-labourers who ultimately moved towards Bhutan in search of livelihood.³³ The volunteers of the 'Krishak Samiti' extended their help and assistance towards the famine victims. They organized a big meeting at Thakurgaon demanding reliefs for the needy people. The members of the 'Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti' (MARS) also became very active in relief works. Some of its prominent leaders like Rani Mitra, Bina Sen, Aloka Majumdar etc. mobilized nearly 500 local women and gave a deputation to the District Magistrate demanding food and relief for the famine victims.³⁴

Balurghat Subdivision was a great center of peasant unrest and nationalist movements. Here the local administration began to purchase a huge amount of paddy at a very high rate. This created acute food shortage in the entire Sub-Division and particularly in Tapan, Dhamoirhaat, Porsa, Patnitala, Balurghat etc. The scarcity of food, its hoarding/smuggling and its high price along with the exploitation of the jotedars/moneylenders and the repressive measures of the local administration altogether led the poor peasants to launch a movement. The most important anti-hoarding campaign during the famine was initiated by Chiarshai Sekh, a very honest Communist worker of Khanpur (near Patiram) who led a procession of 10,000 poor and hungry people towards Balurghat demanding food.³⁵ From May 1943 the situation became more adverse in the district of Dinajpur as the prices of all essential commodities rose up by leaps and bounds. The following Table would give us an idea about the high price of different commodities in Dinajpur in 1943.

Table 1: List of Commodity and its Price in Dinajpur during 1943

Commodities	Weight / Quantity	Price (Rs. Anna)
Rice (ordinary)	per maund	Rs. 16 – 20
Sugar	per maund	Rs. 6-7
Musur Dal (Pulses)	per maund	Rs. 2- Rs. 2 & 8 Annas
Mung Dal	per maund	Rs. 4-5
Gur (Gaggery)	per maund	Rs. 4-5
Kerosene Oil	per tin	Rs. 11-12
Coconut Oil	per seer	6 Annas - 1 Rupee
Mustard Oil	per seer	Annas 4-5
Milk	per seer	1 Anna
Fish (Big)	5 seers	1 Rupee 1 Anna- Rs. 2
Potato	per seer	Paise 10-12
Salt	per maund	Rs. 1.5-2
Cloth	per pair	1 Rupee
Gold	per bhari	Rs. 35-40
Silver	per bhari	Rs. 5-6
bullock	per pair	Rs. 50-70
Plough	per piece	6 Annas
Tin	per baan	Rs. 35

Source: Dhananjay Roy, *Bis Sataker Dinajpur: Manwantar O Krishak Andolan*, pp. 36-37.

The Communist Party of India (C.P.I.) and its leaders mobilized the peasants against the hoarding of essential commodities and led expeditions against the stock-marketeters. Food committees were formed at different places and *Langar Khanas* (gruel kitchens) were opened throughout the district under the banner of the C.P.I. The volunteers of the 'District Krishak Samiti', 'Artaseva Kendra', 'Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti' etc. also joined their hands in the relief works. The members of the MARS distributed milk, barley, clothes etc. amongst the children and provided clothes, blankets, medicines (quinine) etc. to the needy people. Some prominent members of the MARS who were involved in philanthropic activities in Dinajpur were Snehilata Ganguly, Sabera Khatun, Sabitri Sen, Asha Sen, Ashalata Chakraborty, Dipti Bagchi, Manasi Roy and the like. A few local women like Kanthamani Barmani, Rohini Barmani etc. also joined with them.³⁶ Few good-hearted rice-mill owners like Madholal Agarwal, Nagarmal Agarwal, C.K. Das etc. also extended their help and assistance towards the famine victims and sold huge quantities of rice at a very reduced rate. Under the auspices of Gopikrishnan Daga and Sumal Dogar, two very prominent Marwari social workers of Dinajpur, a good number of *Langar Khanas* were opened throughout the district.³⁷ Among many voluntary organizations, the Ramakrishna Mission played a very important role in providing relief items to the famine victims and also in the cremation of the deceased persons. When the famine was rampant, the district was overburdened with the influx of thousands of migrants from Mymensingh, Khulna, Jessore, Pabna, Faridpur, Rangpur, Bagura etc.³⁸ There were also the occurrences of different diseases and epidemics such as Asiatic cholera, fever, malaria, kala-azar, smallpox, tuberculosis, diarrhea etc. which took away the lives of 14,172 persons in 1943.³⁹ Out of them 4,012 persons died due to the outbreak of malaria in this district.⁴⁰ Till the end of October 1943, cholera also became very fatal in Dinajpur and infected 5451 persons and ultimately took away the lives of 3462 persons.⁴¹ The increase of registered mortality from respiratory diseases after 1943 in Dinajpur was quite exceptional one 'in view of the relative insignificance of such diseases in the overall famine mortality of Bengal as a whole'.⁴²

Rangpur

The district of Rangpur which had a legacy of peasant uprisings, had to face the onslaught of the famine in 1943. It affected its twenty- one Police Stations (out of thirty) and became very acute in the Nilfamari, Kurigram and Gaibandha Sub-Divisions where thousands of people died due to starvation. Almost 1,00000 people (out of its total population of 25,00000), lost their lives in Rangpur due to famine

out of which 50,000 died at Nilfamari Subdivision.⁴³ The cotton weavers and fishermen of Rangpur were mostly affected due to the outbreak of famine and their occupation was at stake. The common people were going through various problems like food shortage, stock marketing, black marketing, price-hike etc. The price of rice rose from Rs. 10/- per maund in November 1942 to Rs. 29/- per maund in late March 1943 and it became much higher at the fag end of 1943 as there was more than 50 per cent decline in rice output in Rangpur in between 1942 and 1943. Interestingly, here rasgullas were more economical than rice and during a conference of the C.P.I. at Gaibandha, huge numbers of rasgullas were consumed instead of rice.⁴⁴ Epidemics like cholera, smallpox, poisonous *naga gha* etc. became rampant throughout the district which altogether increased the mortality rate. Orphanage, Relief Hospitals, *Langar Khanas* etc. were established at different places including Nilfamari Subdivision. Food and Relief Committees (having representatives of all the political parties) were formed at Kurigram. Several relief organizations, medical and cultural squads were formed for providing relief items, medical treatment and also for raising funds for the famine victims. Sita Kabiraj of Laxmitari village formed a medical squad to offer treatment to the patients of smallpox. Gopen Roy, Reba Roy, Mahasweta Devi, Binay Roy, Panu Pal were very well-known members of the cultural squad who raised funds for the purpose of relief by performing different literary and cultural activities.⁴⁵ In Rangpur all the leading political parties were involved in the relief works and surprisingly on this issue the Congress and League volunteers joined hands with the Communists⁴⁶ who ran not less than fifty *Langar Khanas* to feed the hungry people. The Congressites like Bidhan Chandra Roy, Kiran Sankar Roy, Bhupesh Lahiri etc. and different relief/medical organizations like the B.M.R.C.C. also came forward to fight against the disaster and epidemic in Rangpur.⁴⁷

Jalpaiguri

Jalpaiguri, a 'Non-Regulated' district having an area of 3050 sq. miles, also witnessed the severity of famine in 1943 which spread over 700 sq. miles.⁴⁸ It became very acute in the five Police Stations viz., Panchagarh, Boda, Tetulia, Debiganj and Patgram. The district suffered from a 25 per cent to 39 percent deficit in the volume of rice production during 1942-1943. The people here faced a lot of problems like food-shortage, hoarding and smuggling of essential commodities, price-rise etc. which altogether made their life miserable. A good number of people died due to starvation particularly in Jalpaiguri Sadar (100), Debiganj (10), Panchagarh (7) and Boda (5).⁴⁹ The price of essential commodities became a great

headache for the common people. For example, paddy was sold at the rate of Rs. 36-37/- per maund whereas the government rate was Rs. 15/- per maund. Peoples' protests and the official measures on behalf of the local administration altogether helped to reduce its price (Rs. 25/26/- per maund) at Panchagarh.⁵⁰ During the famine days, Debiganj and Boda were declared as 'deficit' areas due to the shortage of foodgrains. The whole district was cordoned and nobody was permitted to dispatch any commodity outside the district or to bring any commodity from outside the district. It caused a huge problem to some rice-traders of Jalpaiguri who used to bring rice from the *haat* at Gareya (located in Dinajpur). When the police began to seize the purchased/imported rice, a large number of peasants protested under the banner of the 'Krishak Samiti' against the seizure. They decided to use their traditional *bangkua* (which were mainly used for carrying rice from its two sides) against the police personnel to regain their much coveted rice.⁵¹ Surprisingly in this district the supply of cheap-rated mustard oil from the Railway Grain Shop was stopped. Thousands of railway workers and labourers assembled before the District Railway Office at Domohani and placed their demand for having that item in an affordable price.⁵² The famine caused unbearable poverty and unemployment in Jalpaiguri and led many of its residents to sell their children (including the girls), increased prostitution and forced a section of people to migrate elsewhere. It is to be mentioned here that the 'All-Party Relief Committee', 'Famine Fighting Squad', *Langar Khanas*, milk-supply centers etc. were formed/opened at different parts of the district. A *Langar Khana* was opened in the office of the Domohani Railway Workers' Union where daily hundreds of hungry people used to get their food. The volunteers of the 'Calcutta Peoples' Relief Committee', the 'Red Cross' and the 'Railway Mahila Samiti' etc. spontaneously participated in social services like the distribution of dress materials, medicines (mainly vitamin), milk etc. amongst the distressed children.⁵³ The adverse situation in Jalpaiguri caused by the famine, forced the government to initiate some benevolent measures (like the opening of the 'Auxiliary Hospital') but peoples' requirements were much more.

Darjeeling

Darjeeling, a 'Non-Regulated' district of undivided Bengal, did not get rid of famine in 1943 which became very devastating in the areas like Darjeeling Sadar, Siliguri, Kharibari, Naxalbari etc. The hungry people launched protest movements at different corners of the district against the repressive measures of the British Government as well as against the gross failure of the League Ministry to handle the crisis. They stood against all the malpractices like hoarding of foodgrains,

black-marketing etc. They demanded regular supply of food, ration, wood charcoal, potato seeds etc. in order to fulfill their appetite, to generate warmth for fighting against excessive cold (particularly in the hilly region), to continue their age-old potato cultivation respectively. Different welfare organizations were formed in the district for initiating benevolent activities and providing some relief materials to the famine victims. The 'Tarai Mongal Samiti' (Terai Welfare Association) was one of them. Its members strongly opposed the 'Rice Removal Policy' and also the British land revenue policy. They put forward their demand before the District Magistrate for the supply of different articles like rice, salt, oil, pulses, cloth etc. at a controlled rate. The Samiti members sometimes gave legal assistance to the poor peasants cum famine victims to get back their lands which were given in mortgage.⁵⁴ The volunteers of the C.P.I. launched campaigns against black-marketing, illegal hoarding of goods etc. They organized processions in different areas and showed posters against the corrupted jotedars and moneylenders of the locality. Likely 75 volunteers under the leadership of Ratanlal Brahmin, snatched away the stored items from the godowns at Chauk Bazar (in Darjeeling Hills) and they sold the booty amongst the needy people at a fair price.⁵⁵ The tea plantation workers were also highly affected by the famine of 1943 and many of them went through havoc financial crunch. Not only that, 20 percent of the total tea-garden workers suffered from starvation and became vulnerable to many diseases like tuberculosis.⁵⁶

Malda

Malda, the gateway of North Bengal and very famous for its mango orchards, silk and cotton- textile industries and a great center of nationalist movements, also felt the blow of the famine in 1943 which became very acute in the areas like Harishchandrapur, Bamangola, Habibpur, Kharba etc. The procession of the poor and hungry people for a piece of food was observed at Nachole, Shibganj, Bholahaat etc. (in English Bazar Police Station) and it became a common phenomenon.⁵⁷ Apart from rice, there were scarcities of sugar, mustard oil, kerosene oil etc. Peoples' sufferings were multiplied with the hoarding of articles, smuggling, black-marketing etc. Not only that, poor and hungry people were also attacked with various diseases like malaria, cholera etc. In Malda the maximum malaria deaths occurred in January 1943 and the district also witnessed two cholera mortality peaks - one in November 1943 and another in November 1944.⁵⁸ The scarcity of essential commodities led to massive price-hike throughout the district. The following Table would give us an idea about the high price of different commodities in Malda during 1943.

Table 2: List of Commodity and its Price in Malda during 1943

Commodities	Weight (per maund / per seer)	Price (Rs. Anna)
Rice	per maund	Rs. 40 – 50
Sugar	per maund	Rs. 40
Potato	per seer	1 Rupee 6 Annas
Salt	per seer	1 Rupee
Mustard Oil	per seer	Rs. 2
Milk	per seer	12 Annas

Source: *The Gourdoot*, 17 August 1944

The residents of Malda also suffered from a massive ‘cloth famine’ which is clearly been reflected in the *Gourdoot*, a local newspaper. The articles like yarn, dyer etc. which were used by the weavers almost disappeared from the local market. The dearth of clothes in Malda became so acute that in many places the common masses had no other option but to use paper.⁵⁹ This was absolutely shocking and embarrassing for the womenfolk which led a few local women to commit suicide. Two such unfortunate and shameful incidents took place - one at Kaliachak and another at Samsi.⁶⁰ The Malos (a fishing community) were also in great distress as they were asked to sell their fishes at a fixed price in the English Bazar Municipal area. On the contrary, the fishing items of the Malos including the boats and the boat-repairing materials (i.e. nails, pitch etc.) became very costly and the price of these items was increased by almost four- five times. For example, the boat which was earlier sold at Rs. 30-32/-, became Rs. 100-125/-.⁶¹ The Malos also went through a great crisis as there was sharp increase in the value of the fen. The fen which was earlier auctioned at Rs. 2,000/- rose to Rs. 10,000/- Rs.15,000/-.⁶² The silk weavers of Malda were also passing through a very deplorable condition. Meanwhile, the ‘Bengal Silk Control Order’ was passed in accordance with the Defence of India Act which asked the *basnis* (silk-worm producers) and the *ghaiwalas* (hand-reelers) to sell all their cocoons to the Government at a fixed rate

which was much lower than the usual price. The *basnis* and the *ghaiwalas* were highly disappointed with the Order and raised their protest in different parts of the district.⁶³ The local administration took ruthless measures to suppress their agitation. Likely, a powerful village headman of Malatipur was arrested in charge of provocation against the Government Order. The police forces went through large scale searches of households at Gayeshbari and arrested twenty persons. As a result the village was converted almost into an empty one.⁶⁴ The wretched condition of the common people throughout the district was thoroughly and vividly portrayed in the creations of local balladists, bards and folk artists. During famine many songs (known as *gombhira*) were composed which were popularized among the masses by Gobinda Sheth, Dharani doctor etc. The tremendous impact of these songs persuaded the British Government to put a ban on the public performance of Gobinda Sheth.⁶⁵ It is to be mentioned here that the people of Malda as a whole did not go through a severe food crisis during 1943-44 mainly due to large-scale availability of mangoes as well as their consumption.

Cooch Behar

Cooch Behar, a Princely State, was not set free from the famine in 1943. As there was not any sharp decrease in the volume of rice production (which declined around 24 per cent during 1942-1943), the famine did not bring disastrous consequences throughout the State. But it became quite acute in Jamaldaha, Uchal Pukhari, Baldiahati (all in Mekhliganj Sub Division) and Adabari, Okrabari, Gomanimari (all in Dinhata SubDivision).⁶⁶ Maharaja Jagaddipendra Narayan (1922-1949) who adorned the throne at that time, was well aware of the catastrophe. He ordered his bureaucrats and officials to be very cautious about the calamity and to take all precautionary steps to tackle the situation. In Spite of his instruction and vigilance, the price of essential commodities rose in Cooch Behar. For example, the price of rice increased and it was sold at 4 Annas per seer; salt which was earlier sold at 12 Annas per seer, went up to 1 Rupee & 2 Annas per seer.⁶⁷ Apart from rice cultivation, the people of Cooch Behar were largely involved in the tobacco cultivation which became very popular in the areas like Adabari, Okrabari, Gomanimari etc. But the tobacco cultivators in this State suffered a lot because of the imposition of export duties at the rate of 3 Annas per maund from 1941 which invariably increased its price.⁶⁸ It dealt a heavy blow on their income and the situation became more critical with the outbreak of the famine. Not only that, due to famine the Princely State of Cooch Behar had to bear a huge burden of migration especially from the contiguous areas of Rangpur.⁶⁹

When the famine was very rampant throughout Bengal and shattered the life and livelihood of millions of people, the members of the Bengal Legislative Assembly met on 5 July 1943 to discuss the overall situation on the floor of the House. The latter half of the July session became a hotbed of exciting debate on the Bengal famine and not only the distinguished members sitting on the Opposition Bench (like Fazlul Huq, Syama Prasad Mookerjee and so on) but also some members of the Treasury Bench (the Leaguers) severely criticized the Government for its failure in tackling the serious food crisis in Bengal.⁷⁰ The Opposition moved before the House 19 special motions on food shortage out of which 9 were accepted for discussion.⁷¹ Participating at the debate of the House on the ‘food situation in Bengal’, Syama Prasad Mookerjee severely criticized the new Ministry under Nazimuddin for its complete failure in handling the situation and accused particularly H.S. Suhrawardy, the Minister of Civil Supplies. In his lengthy speech, he also attacked the anti-people ‘Policy of Denial’ of the British Government in the name of War and criticized the smuggling and hoarding of foodgrains by a firm owned by Ispahani, a patron of the League. The September session (1943) of the House also became very exciting on this issue. During the general discussion on the budget, the food situation naturally figured prominently and the Opposition Bench referred to the mounting death toll in Calcutta and mofussil areas due to starvation. At the floor of the House, Syama Prasad Mookerjee gave a firing speech and moved a Special Motion on ‘Food Situation in Bengal’ on 17 September 1943 wherein he totally accused the Nazimuddin Ministry: “The Ministry has failed to discharge the elementary responsibility of any civilized Government by its failure to save human lives and to procure for the people essential commodities for their bare existence”.⁷² As the Nazimuddin Ministry still enjoyed the support of the European Group (under David Hendry), it succeeded in defeating the Special Motion (moved by Syama Prasad Mookerjee) by 128 to 88 votes.⁷³ The next two Budget Sessions of the Assembly (which commenced in the months of February and June 1944), became very exciting and eventful as the Opposition members of the House pointed out complete failure of the government in combating the Bengal Famine. Even some members of the Treasury Bench were not happy with the activities of the Nazimuddin Ministry and surprisingly eleven (11) members of the ruling party crossed the floor on 20 June 1944 and joined the hands of the Opposition.⁷⁴ This made the next Budget Session (which took place in March 1945) very interesting. Under the influence of Mr. Huq, 21 Muslim League members of the Treasury Bench crossed the floor and joined the Opposition on 28 March 1945.⁷⁵ Increasing its strength, the Opposition got rejuvenated and Dharendra Nath

Dutta, the Deputy Leader of the Official Congress, opposed the Agricultural Budget and read out his cut motion. Nalinaksha Sanyal, the Chief Whip of the Congress, argued that there was no other option but to put the motion into vote.⁷⁶ Due to the absence of the European Group, the cut motion was defeated by 106 to 97 votes.⁷⁷ This is for the first time after the death of C.R. Das, a Ministry in Bengal was defeated by direct voting.⁷⁸ Thus the disastrous consequences of the famine (1943-1944) in both South Bengal and North Bengal and the overall failure of the Nazimuddin Ministry in tackling the crisis, generated tremendous repercussions, decreased the acceptability and popularity of the Ministry and decided its destiny.

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