

THE PREVENTABLE BENGAL FAMINE

Relevant for: Modern India | Topic: The Structure of the Government and Economic Policies of the British Empire in India, 1757-1857

As the first half of the 20th century fades from public memory, countries devastated by the Germans in the Second World War, like Poland and Greece, are becoming more strident in their demands for massive compensation from Germany.

Behind the ongoing spat between the Koreans and the Japanese is Japan's refusal to atone for the humiliations it inflicted on the Korean people through the first half of the 20th century.

In sharp contrast, there is hardly a voice, let alone a movement, in India to hold the British accountable for the greatest tragedy that befell the country in the 20th century under their watch — the Bengal famine, which was at its worst through 1943.

The famine took half as many lives as the Holocaust did. Sadly, it continues to be perceived as a tragic occurrence and not an atrocity. Unlike Jallianwala Bagh, it doesn't have a remembrance day or a noteworthy memorial.

The Bengal famine was gruesome. Everyday thousands of emaciated dead had to be removed from the streets of Calcutta by police and government-funded corpse disposal organisations. As more of the starving poured into the city from the devastated countryside, the best the Chief Minister of Bengal, Khawaja Nazimuddin, could come up with was to write to the Governor that he proposed to have them removed from the city by force.

It is good copy to hold the U.K. Prime Minister Winston Churchill solely responsible for the occurrence of the famine while ignoring the fact that enough food was available within India to have prevented its occurrence. As the Earl of Huntington observed, in a parliamentary debate in the House of Lords on October 20, 1943, while loss of the Burma rice and the cyclone of 1942 were strong "contributory factors" to the famine, the fact remained that "these losses were largely made good by the exceptional crop in Northern India in the spring of 1943".

Voluminous official records from that period available in the India Office Records section of the British Library also establish that the famine was not the outcome of a lack of foodgrain. Rather, political machinations, greed, hoarding and bureaucratic bungling on a massive scale stymied efforts to procure and transport grain from where it was available — Punjab and the United Provinces — to starving Bengal in quick time.

Even the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, acknowledged this in his letter of September 27, 1943 to the prevaricating Governor of Punjab Sir Bertrand Glancy. He demanded that Glancy act decisively to procure and move grain, charging "that the Punjab ministers and the Punjab cultivators are engaged in blackmailing the starving peasants of Bengal so as to make inordinate profits at a time when they have already made very substantial profits indeed".

Even as the famine began to abate in 1944, the Intelligence Bureau was alerting government of the possibility of its recurrence, if adequate measures were not taken "to prevent hoarding, enforce the orders relating to the maximum prices of foodstuffs and introduce rationing in the larger towns".

A careful reading of official papers establishes that at all levels of British-Indian administration the effort was more to create records and "keep the files healthy", to save 'official' skin at some

future enquiry, rather than to get to grips with the problem through resolute action.

This was confirmed by Lord Strabolgi's spot-on observation in the House of Lords that nothing contributed more to the occurrence of the disaster than "the greatest, the most hidebound, indeed ironbound bureaucracy in the world, that of the Government of India, suffering that fatal disease of bureaucracy, procrastination. They consider too long, they set up too many Committees, they talk too long about what they are going to do, and in the meanwhile this terrible famine was galloping towards them."

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