
Structural Violence and the Bengal Famine of 1943

FELIX PADEL

This book opens doors to understanding many neglected aspects of structural violence in the colonial era, with deep roots in Bengal, and repercussions that continue to colour patterns of violent repression in the state today. It combines riveting stories of the freedom struggle in Midnapore district with a refreshingly clear historical synthesis and analysis of the war years.

In particular, a mass of hitherto unpublished evidence reveals Winston Churchill not just as bigoted on Indian affairs, but blinkered and obsessed to an extraordinary degree, especially on the issue of Bengal, where his intransigent refusal to send urgently requested grain to areas already ravaged by a cyclone and “rice denial” stands revealed as a major cause of the Bengal famine, that probably killed as many as five million people.

This estimate is considerably higher than the published estimates in the Famine Commission’s report on the famine, and is based on a neglected text by the Indian Statistical Institute’s founder, Prasanta K Mahalanobis, “Mortality in Bengal in 1943”, written for the Famine Commission, but never publicised or referred to in the commission’s report.

Evidence collected in *Churchill’s Secret War* proves beyond doubt that Britain’s prime minister knew through numerous intelligence reports that the famine was unfolding, yet wilfully obstructed many officials’ attempts to acknowledge and mitigate it. Equally shocking perhaps is some of these officials’ subsequent collusion in concealing the basic facts, and a scholarly collusion in failing to highlight them till now. The roots of the famine were several, their coming together was foreseen, and it could have been prevented if many concerned officials’ urgent exhortations to the government in London had been acted on.

BOOK REVIEW

Churchill’s Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India during World War II

by Madhusree Mukerjee (*New York and Delhi: Random Books and Tranquebar*), 2010; pp 352, Rs 495.

What makes this book riveting to read is the combination of fascinating historical analysis of India during the crucial years of complex conflicts just before Independence, with firsthand accounts of villagers and Bengali leaders who launched an underground war for India’s freedom in the name of their Tamluk National Government, in Midnapore district. We move between observing Churchill and those in the power structure around him, through sources where they frankly revealed their motives, and the lifestyle of India’s freedom fighters, facing life and death choices during years when life in Bengal combined famine conditions with oppression by a police force that often treated a starving population as hostile territory to be occupied by force.

Deeply significant parallels are drawn in the book between patterns of famine in Bengal, from the first to the last famines which British misrule brought on. The 1770 famine was caused by wholesale financial looting by the East India Company, draining Bengal of its silver and gold, alongside its foodgrains, whose prices were raised beyond the reach of the poor. The 1942-43 famine was also caused by forced extraction of Bengal’s produce, in money as well as foodgrains. Thousands who could not pay their taxes gave up their silver and gold, which the government melted down for the war effort.

The book makes clear the real economy of the Raj: not just blocking Indian manufacturing in cloth, etc, reducing

India to mainly supplying raw cotton for British manufacturers, but also a grain drain in which Indian agricultural exports had become vital for Britain’s economy. During the second world war, Britain’s finance for the war came to depend heavily on borrowing from India – a rising debt that both Churchill and Lord Cherwell, the adviser he relied on for most of his economic decisions, came to resent as if it was a personal affront, trying to find ways to cancel it off.

Frederick Alexander Lindemann, “the Prof” to admirers and “Baron Berlin” to detractors, became Lord Cherwell in 1942, and saw more of Churchill, wielding more influence than anyone else on him during the war. It was his insistence on no famine relief that won out, just as it was his insistence on bomber Harris’ firebombing of German cities that became policy. These two policy decisions alone caused millions to die horribly, in India and Germany.

Gandhi was already warning of rice shortage in January 1941. Churchill’s order for a scorched earth policy in November 1941, to make sure that areas of Bengal exposed to a Japanese invasion would be empty of provisions for enemy troops and boats for access, was a key trigger for the famine: rice and boat “denial”, in which boats as well as grain stocks were often burned, confiscated or dumped in water, with radios confiscated. Bengal’s elected Chief Minister Abul Kasem Fazlul Huq complained strongly about the effects of this policy and the dangers of famine in August 1942.

Famine Relief Blocked

Bengal was hit by a terrible cyclone in October 1942 – just after the Quit India Movement had started the previous month. Cyclone relief was distributed alongside repression that often, ridiculously, involved police following families who collected relief food home, and destroying it! This was the context where rice was extracted from the countryside to feed the army and Calcutta “in a replay of the famine of 1770”. At least 13% of Tamluk subdivision of Midnapore

district died in 1943 alone. Simultaneously, rape was being used as a “weapon of war”, with British police and soldiers often behaving as an occupying army. Fazlul Huq was forced to resign in March 1943 by governor John Herbert, for raising police rape as an issue and for publicly admitting there was a famine when official policy denied this.

Famine relief was blocked by the combined intransigence of Cherwell and Churchill, deaf to urgent pleas from the viceroy (first Linlithgow, then Wavell), as well as from Leopold Amery, Secretary of State for India. The story of how this happened interweaves Churchill’s personal hatred towards Gandhi with scrutiny of every link in the command chain that implemented this policy with a view to suppressing the rebellion by Congress.

An extraordinary controversy has raged from the time of the famine until now about the extent of rice shortage. All are in agreement that this famine is a textbook example of a man-made famine, in line with Amartya’s Sen’s main

thesis in *Poverty and Famine* (1983), and that the government’s lifting of price controls in February 1943, while buying all possible stocks for the army, was the famine’s immediate trigger. A “loss of entitlement” to basic food-stocks was instituted in Bengal, while Britain’s entitlement was maintained with a safe margin, and stocks were not as dangerously threatened as Cherwell had made out. But the evidence collected in *Churchill’s Secret War* implies that many factors combined to cause an actual food shortage, which Amartya Sen denies.

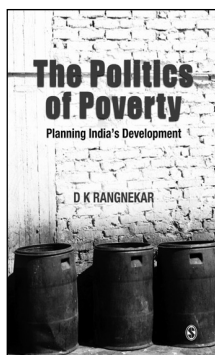
A fierce debate flared about this after a review of Mukerjee’s book in *The New York Review of Books* from December 2010 to May 2011. At issue is the availability of rice. Actually, all parties are in agreement that wartime demand far exceeded supply. But how much was actually harvested? How much was destroyed in the virulent Brown Stain plant disease that ravaged Bengal during these years? How much was destroyed or confiscated in the “rice denial” policy that started in January-February 1942?

How much was destroyed in the terrible cyclone of 16 October 1942? How much was later bought up by the army? And how much was actually being stockpiled by merchants, speculating on the spectacular price rises? Obviously, these figures were not recorded, and in their absence, the figures that Sen relies on for rice production are those in the Famine Inquiry Report, calculated from estimates about cropland multiplied by figures for yield per acre. Evidence supplied by Mukerjee shows that the Famine Inquiry Commission distorted or manufactured statistics, and suppressed a lot of basic information about the famine and the chain of command back to London that had vetoed famine relief throughout the worst months.

In his last response, Amartya Sen lays emphasis on the “Adjusted Current Supply of Rice” figures which the government had relied on in the Inquiry Report. The trouble is – adjusted how precisely? The government, during the famine, was publicly at least, in a state of denial. Desperate requests for foodgrains by

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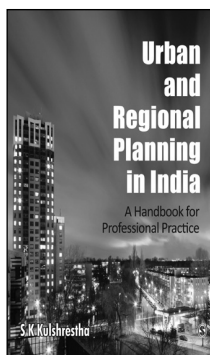
Late **D K Rangnekar**

Dr D. K. Rangnekar was a leading public intellectual who marked his presence as the editor of the *Economic Times* and later the *Business Standard*. This collection brings together a discerning selection of his writings that are organized across four themes: social and political dimensions of development; international context to India’s experiment; planning and budgets; and industrial and economic policy. The writings begin in the early 1960s and end in 1984—at the cusp of

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