

Hungry Bengal:
War, Famine, Riots, and the End of Empire
1939-1946

By
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"Unknown to me the wounds of the famine of 1943, the barbarities of war, the horror of the communal riots of 1946 were impinging on my style and engraving themselves on it, till there came a time when whatever I did, whether it was chiseling a piece of wood, or burning metal with acid to create a gaping hole, or cutting and tearing with no premeditated design, it would throw up innumerable wounds, bodying forth a single theme - the figures of the deprived, the destitute and the abandoned converging on us from all directions. The first chalk marks of famine that had passed from the fingers to engrave themselves on the heart persist indelibly."

Somnath Hore²

¹ Somnath Hore. "The Holocaust." Sculpture. *Indian Writing*, October 3, 2006. Web (<http://indianwriting.blogspot.com/2006/10/03/somnath-hore/>) accessed 04/19/2011.

² Quoted in N. Sarkar, p. 32

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To my father

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Introduction: In Search of Famine

In Search of Famine

In Mrinal Sen's 1980 film, *Ākāler Sadhāney* ("In Search of Famine"), a smart, middle-class film crew from Calcutta descends on a humble Bengali village to shoot a movie on the Bengal Famine of 1943. Sen's film begins with a long shot of a typical country road, edged on either side by arching banyan trees, cutting through the vast Bengali plain. Rice fields fade into the distance, and on the far horizon a diesel engine puffs its single column of thin black smoke soundlessly into the pale blue sky - a mute signal of a distant modernity that punctuates the otherwise timeless landscape. The camera pans to a caravan of vehicles that carry the film crew to their far-flung destination, and as the vans rumble past, a few stragglers who toil along the highway with loads of firewood perched precariously on their heads, or bales of hay piled high on bullock carts, stumble out of the way of the indifferent procession. Accompanying the credits, as they begin to role, is a song by Salil Chaudury, Bengali poet and songwriter known for his gritty rustic themes and his long-lived solidarity with the people:

We know you well
We see you clear
Aren't you the dark-skinned mahout
who drives the white elephant?

We died in millions in fifty¹
When our mothers and sisters lost their honor
We'll not take our rice to somebody else's store
We'll not die of starvation again
We refuse to die²

The scene is thus set against a backdrop of nostalgic resistance. The famine has come and gone; the spirit of Bengal has triumphed over death and depredation. But as the crew arrive

¹ 1350 is the Bengali year corresponding to 1943

² Translation taken from Samik Bandyopadhyay, p. 1

at their filming location, the camera moves in for a close shot of the ravaged face of a wizened peasant who stands by the wayside, wryly tracking the urbanites as they dismount. The old peasant strikes an ironic and ominous note: "The city folk have come to take pictures of the famine. The famine is all over us."³

The script from which the film crew works contains all of the well-worn tropes of the 1943 famine which are firmly lodged in the collective consciousness of Bengal. The setting: a small, nameless village in rural Bengal, riven by starvation and disease. Many of the desperate villagers have left for Calcutta in search of relief. Many more have died. Those who remain, await a similar fate, balancing their options between death and an uncertain pilgrimage to the city. Center stage is a small nuclear family consisting of a father, his son, his son's wife, and their small child. The father is dying of starvation, but refuses to sell his chip of land to the moneylender who travels the countryside preying on the destitute. The old man's son has gone off to work for military contractors, cutting bamboo which will be sent to the war front to build tents for Indian soldiers employed by the British army in their fight against the Japanese. On his return he complains of the insufficient wages he has received. The price of rice has gone out of reach, and the brightly printed rupee notes with which he has been compensated are all but worthless in the face of ever-escalating wartime inflation. The old man dies shortly and the son stubbornly maintains his lost father's resistance to the moneylender in order to uphold the family's beleaguered honor. When he himself is laid low by fever, however, the family situation becomes desperate and dignity cannot be maintained. With her husband bed-ridden and delirious, and their helpless infant crying in hunger, Savitri, the small holder's young wife, leaves one stormy night to strike a deal with Malati, a former housewife who has been driven to prostitution by the death of her own husband. When Savitri returns home with a few cups of rice and cooking oil, her husband flies into a rage, suspecting her of defilement. With the last of his energy the dying man smashes the pot in which the rice is boiling, and raises the infant over his head, poised to smash it as well, in order to end, once and for all, the family's descent into disgrace.

The shooting of this film inside the film runs into some insurmountable obstacles along the way. When Devika, the prima donna actress caste in the role of Malati, arrives to

³ Ibid, p. 2

shoot the crucial scene of Savitri's humiliation with a fashionable bob and plucked eyebrows, the director is irate, "What's this? What have you done? Didn't I warn you not to pluck your eyebrows? Why don't you realize that you have a responsibility? You're not just any woman, you stand for a thousand women, an entire class."⁴ Devika, tired to death with the hardships of working so far from Calcutta in any case, takes offence at the director's reprimand and packs off for the city in a huff. Now the director is faced with the problem of finding an actress to play the prostitute Matali. He approaches a respectable member of the village whose daughter, he has heard, is intelligent and was recently honored in school for her oratory skills. The father, when he hears a description of the role that the director is asking his daughter to play, is furious and, calling the director and his agent "pimps," shows them the door. The director is forced to look elsewhere to fill the role, but finds that everywhere he turns the citizens of the village have already heard of his search for a likely prostitute and have shut their doors against him. Finally, seeing the director's desperation, Haren, an unemployed local who has impressed himself upon the crew as a stagehand in the hopes of earning a few rupees, brings his own daughter to the director in the hopes that he might find her "suitable for the role." By this time, however, the village has been mobilized against the crew and it has become dangerous to remain. And so, at the village headmaster's suggestion, they pack their generators, lights and cameras and head back to Calcutta to finish their work "in the studio."

The underlying theme behind the master narrative is that the famine that the crew has come "in search of" is *everywhere* to be found and leaps out at them at every turn, crowding into the frame from every angle. As the old wizened peasant in the opening shot had foretold: the famine is "all over" the people of the village, and recurrently resists the narrative in which the director tries to contain it. Having ventured to represent the 1943 famine as a circumscribed "event," these well-meaning intellectuals from Calcutta only succeed in *reproducing* the famine in telling ways. The search for an actress to play the role of a woman driven to prostitution by hunger is interpreted by the villagers as an effort to dishonor them, to prey on their poverty, and to "buy" a girl cheap to finish their quixotic project. At one point in the film an anonymous villager complains to a member of the crew, "the price of everything; vegetables, fish, eggs, have gone up like anything, thanks to

⁴ Ibid, p. 27

you. Most of it goes to the city anyway. The little that we used to get has gone beyond our reach. It is all now for the film folk." In another scene, perhaps the most well known in the film, the director plays a "picture game" with his crew. Having dug up pictures of famine from newspaper archives and private collections, the director challenges the crew to locate them temporally:

Director (holding up the first picture of an emaciated body): Tell what period this is from?

Bubu: Should be 1943.

Rathin: '43

Montu: Famine, that's for sure.

Nilkantha: 1943.

Dipankar: May I? (the director nods) 1959.

Smita: How could you guess?

Director: He knew. I told him. There *was* a famine in 1959. A picture from then. One of the hunger marchers.

Smita (Holding up another picture): This one now?

Dipankar: '43

Rathin: '43

Nilkantha: 1959?

Smita: 1943.

Smita (holding up a third picture): Identify this.

Nilkantha: That's '43.

Montu: '43

Jochhan: Once again?

Rathin: This *is* '43.

Dipankar: Well - what is it?

Smita: 1971.

Director: Bangladesh. Don't you remember?⁵

Another picture from the archives baffles one and all - it is a picture of the starving Buddha from a second century Kandahar sculpture.

Through such dialogic and cinematic means Sen is able to complicate both the temporal location and ontological meaning of famine in *Ākāler Sadhāney*. The famine that the crew has gone in search of cannot be framed. Rather it escapes boundaries, resists narration, reverberates in the present, and replicates itself in the contemporary social context. The "story" that the director would like to tell, a story that incorporates all the tropes that are often assumed to encapsulate the Bengal Famine of 1943, is pulled

⁵ Ibid, p. 34-35

apart by the contingencies of social distance, historical presumption and structural continuity. Famine obeys none of the rules of circumscribed representation. The problems that the film crew experience are problems that will remain in any effort to frame an "event" as massive as the Bengal Famine. In my own perhaps even more quixotic search for famine these problems of framing have been, likewise, acute. The distances I have traveled, both geographically and socially, "in search of famine" have dwarfed those crossed by Sen's film crew in *Ākāler Sadhāney*. In this light it would be impossible for me to presume to be able to capture famine in still life. What I am capable of, however, is a further expansion and complication of the frames in which famine has been represented. As such, my aim is to let the monster out of the box.

Framing Famine

As creatively depicted in Mrinal Sen's film, the received association between the particular year 1943 and famine in Bengal is a trope that can be extremely misleading. The period under consideration in the pages to follow, September 1939 - September 1946, is a period that represents an unparalleled epoch of turmoil, upheaval and misfortune in modern Bengal. A central argument that I will be making throughout this work is that the most profound factor influencing the structural, political, social, economic, and communal fabric of Bengal - during this entire era - was *famine*. As such, a primary aim of this work is to de-link famine in Bengal from the year 1943, and to demonstrate the to extent to which hunger, scarcity, starvation and disease remained central to the torturous and volatile socio-political circumstances throughout this seven-year period. Though 1943 was, perhaps, the most graphic and extreme stage of famine in Bengal - particularly in the capital city of Calcutta - famine, as in the words of historian Mike Davis, "is part of a continuum with the silent violence of malnutrition that precedes and conditions it, and with the mortality shadow of debilitation and disease that follows it."⁶ Famine, in this sense, is inextricably woven into the fabric of famine societies, and as a "part of a continuum," as Mrinal Sen has portrayed, leaps out of every frame that is constructed to contain it.

⁶ Davis, p. 21

In the official reckoning of the time, the effort to de-limit famine to the year of 1943 is most pronounced. Denials, indifference, and administrative incompetence led to the highly consequential failure - by default or design - to recognize famine until as late as September of 1943 - once its eruption on the streets of Calcutta could no longer be ignored. In its *Report on Bengal*, the imperially sanctioned Famine Enquiry Commission found, a bit less conservatively, that the Bengal Famine had, in fact, begun "in the early months" of the same year.⁷ This contention was later complicated by historian Paul Greenough, in his work *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal*, which represents the only existent full-length study of the Bengal Famine until now. Writing in 1982, Greenough argues that the Bengal Famine could said to have begun in October of 1942, in the wake of a devastating cyclone which decimated the district of Midnapur, southwest of Calcutta.⁸ However, as early as August 2nd of 1942, the Chief Minister of Bengal, Fazlul Huq, had informed the colonial administration, that "at *the present moment* we are faced with a rice famine in Bengal."⁹ As I will demonstrate in Chapters One and Two of the work to follow, even this early recognition by the Chief Minister was extremely tardy. Reports of famine from the districts of Bengal had been wide-spread since at least two years earlier. Moreover, the abject impoverishment of the Bengal country-side and "the silent violence of malnutrition," that define the long trajectory of famine, had been at least a decade in the making. As early as 1934, Bengali social scientist Satish Chandra Mitter noted in his *Recovery Plan for Bengal* that the rural poor, even at that time, "[could not] but be hunger-stricken and starving."¹⁰

The "end" of famine in Bengal, is a similarly slippery slope. With military aid to the famine devastated province having begun in November of 1943, by December 18th the Food Member of the Government of India could pronounce, "We are now faced with the problem of the future. The food crisis is probably over and I wish and pray that it may never occur again."¹¹ As I will show in Chapter Six, however, starvation, and a myriad of diseases that preyed on the starving population, remained a nagging reality well into 1946. Writing in 1981, economist Amartya Sen came to a similar conclusion in his renowned

⁷ *Report on Bengal*, p. 1

⁸ Greenough, p. 96

⁹ Letter from Fazlul Huq to Governor Jack Herbert, August 2, 1942, reprinted in: Shila Sen, p. 273

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 13

¹¹ *The Statesman*, December 18th, 1943

work, *Poverty and Famines*. In conclusion to his case study of famine mortality in mid-20th century Bengal, Sen notes, "very substantially more than half the deaths attributable to the famine of 1943 took place *after* 1943."¹² In fact, though Sen's effort is essentially one of estimating the total fatalities of famine in Bengal, he writes, "What emerges most powerfully from our analysis is not so much the largeness of the size of total mortality, but its time pattern."¹³ He continues, "if the turmoil of the partition of Bengal in 1947 and the displacement resulting from it make us reluctant to read the impact of famine in the excess mortality figures beyond 1946, we can be conservative and count the excess figures only during 1943-46."¹⁴ Thus, Sen punctuates his accounting of famine mortality with the Calcutta riots of 1946 - which is significant.

My own effort to complicate the chronology of famine in Bengal is less quantitative. In expanding the time frame of famine in Bengal, it is my aim to more accurately and explicitly illuminate the awesome magnitude of famine in Bengal - not in order to count bodies, but in order to demonstrate the extremely *protracted* entailments of famine on the socio-political landscape of Bengal. In this context, it is also a primary goal in this work to investigate another of the most widespread and also widely accepted tropes related to the Bengal Famine - that it was "man-made." Only a month after the English language newspaper, *The Statesman*, had depicted famine in Bengal to India and the international community in images too explicit to be further denied, the public was reminded: "this sickening catastrophe is man made."¹⁵ The Bengal Famine of 1943, as it had already come to be known, had not resulted from any "calamity of Nature," but instead was the result of shameful and prolonged "Governmental bungling."¹⁶ The understanding that the Bengal Famine was "man-made" has, ever since, met with few detractors.¹⁷ In the dozens of interviews that I have conducted with survivors from the 1940s, this explanation was very eagerly and extremely indignantly advanced by almost all. Most scholars of the famine have followed suit. In *Poverty and Famines*, Amartya Sen has famously identified

¹² Sen (1981), p. 215

¹³ Ibid, p. 202

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 200-201

¹⁵ *The Statesman*, "Reflections on Disaster," September 23, 1943

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Although the Famine Enquiry Commission's *Report on Bengal* supported the idea of deficit, and Sugata Bose, in his *Agrarian Bengal*, advances an explanation that comes closer to a theory Food Availability Decline (FAD)

a crisis of entitlements,¹⁸ rather than actual scarcity, as the determining factor leading to famine, lending persuasive theoretical weight to the popularly held contention that the Bengal Famine of 1943 was "man-made." In a much more recent work, *Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India During World War II*, journalist Madhusree Mukerjee has made a compelling and poignant argument detailing the extent to which high colonial policy in London - particularly in relation to the refusal of imports to India during the height of famine - contributed to the *manufacture* of famine in Bengal.

In the present work, particularly in Chapters Two, Three and Four, I aim to detail, on a much more comprehensive scale, the intricacies, agencies, and ideologies that defined the making of the Bengal Famine. It is a truly monumental affair to kill off at least three million people in the short span of (as few as) three years.¹⁹ High colonial policy, of course, usually in the name of the war effort, played an important role, but responsibilities were widespread. Seeking colonial favor, or entrenched in "opposition," the response to famine by Indian politicians in both Bengal and New Delhi, was also guided, often enough, by political interest rather than public welfare. This disconnect between the misery of the masses and the expediency of the elite was even more pronounced in relation to the involvement of large capital interests. In a time of record profits, industrial firms in and around Calcutta played a central role in the extraction of rice from the countryside that effectively left villagers to starve. Partnering with Government, business interests - Indian and European alike - descended on the country-side in repeated and rapacious rice appropriation schemes in the name of feeding industrial Calcutta. With each consecutive effort, prices escalated further, more stocks went into the black-market, and more inhabitants of the province sunk into starvation. It was therefore at least as much *profit* that motivated the rapacity that ravaged Bengal, as it was the colonial creed of racial and cultural superiority. In meticulously detailing the ways and means, as well as the ideologies and prejudices, with which policies leading to famine were enacted, I hope to capture some measure of the outrage and anguish with which so many have reminded me that the Bengal Famine was "man-made."

¹⁸ essentially purchasing power

¹⁹ I use "three million" and "three years" in reference to Amartya Sen's numbers, as I have already argued, famine in Bengal spanned more than three years, and the number of dead also is likely to exceed three million.

A third trope which has come to be almost universally accepted is that the victims of famine, as in the words of eminent historian Sugata Bose, "died without a murmur."²⁰ This idea that famine victims died passively, without resistance, and without a fight, however, is a claim that cannot live up to historical scrutiny. In fact, I would argue, it is not *possible* for millions to die "without a murmur." Rather it is only a replication of the same forces that served to marginalize these same masses to the point of extermination that renders them silent. To attribute this sort of silence and surrender to the victims of cruel and calculated annihilation is only to degrade their lives still further. In fact, and as I will demonstrate in all the chapters included in this work, famine was very much contested *at every stage*. Particularly when the chronology of famine is expanded, it can be seen that active resistance - from the highest echelons of the nationalist leadership to the farthest reaches of destitution - was widespread. From the earliest governmental and corporate schemes to denude the countryside of rice, the boats, lorries, and bullock carts employed in the effort were attacked and looted by outraged villagers who well understood the implications of these efforts at extraction. Government, recognizing the threat, could only move rice and paddy under armed military escort, which is also a clear indication of the resistance they faced. Paddy was also looted from small-scale capitalist who were hoarding stocks locally, even while poor villagers were beginning to die in large numbers.

By the summer of 1942, the nationalist leadership, and Mahatma Gandhi in particular, were also openly contesting the policies and practices that would lead to the further destitution of the Bengal countryside. Policies that directly led to famine - and were understood as promising the same - were, in fact, central to the stand-off between the Indian National Congress and the Government of India, which led to the arrest of the national leadership in August of 1942, and the widespread violence of the "Quit India" movement that ensued. As I will also detail in Chapter Three, central to Gandhi's fast of early 1943 was concern for the "privations of the poor millions." That these acts of protest failed to stem the progress of famine, does not negate the fact that resistance was, in fact, prevalent.

Because the Bengal Famine has all-too-often been de-limited to the year 1943, however, the contention that victims of famine died without protest is mostly founded on

²⁰ Bose (1986), p. 96

the presumption that because victims at the height of famine, in the very last stages of bare life, riven with hunger and disease and de-vitalized to the point of collapse, failed to attack rice shops in Calcutta, they did not "resist." The historiography of resistance, however, has undergone very productive development in the more recent past, particularly with methodologies pioneered by historians of the subaltern school, such as Ranajit Guha and Gautam Bhadra.²¹ With a more subtle eye turned towards the agency of the most marginal citizens of Bengal, in Chapter Four, I will example how famine victims resisted state authority, literally, until their last breath. Famine in Bengal, after all, had not snuck up on anyone surreptitiously. The population of the province well understood the implications of its brutal enemy from long and bitter experience.

War and Famine

The first, and most spectacular, famine under British rule followed close on the heels of the British East India Company's victory at Plassey. Between the years of 1769 and 1771 at least one third of the population of Bengal - then estimated to be 30 million - was wiped out by famine.²² William Wilson Hunter, British civil servant, and compiler of *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*, was also author of one of the few colonial descriptions of the 1770 Bengal famine, in his *Annals of Rural Bengal*, written in 1868. The death from starvation and disease of 10 million or more of the Company's newly acquired subjects, places in new light, Hunter writes,

those broad tracks of desolation which the British conquerors found everywhere throughout the Lower Valley; it enfolds the sufferings entailed on an ancient rural society by being suddenly placed in a position which its immemorial forms and usages could no longer apply; and then it explains how, out of disorganized and fragmentary elements, a new order of things was evolved.²³

That depopulation through starvation had made of Bengal something of a "clean slate," however, was not entirely a surprise. The Famine Commission investigating events leading up to the 1770 famine reported:

²¹ See Ranajit Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1983, and Gautam Bhadra's "Four Rebels of 1857," in Ranajit Guha, ed. *Subaltern Studies IV: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985)

²² See W.W. Hunter, *Annals of Rural Bengal*, also: Brahma Nand, *Famines in Colonial India*, and: Kali Charan Ghosh, *Famines in Bengal*.

²³ Hunter, p. 19-20

In October 1769, very gloomy reports were received from Behar and North Bengal. In November the Collector-General 'saw an alarming prospect of the province becoming desolate' and the Government wrote home to the Court of Directors in the most alarming terms. They resolved to lay up six months' store of grain for their troops and sent in December to Dacca and Backergunj to buy rice...²⁴

Hunter implies, however, that these efforts at martial appropriation of rice were not entirely effective. Even as "day and night a torrent of famished and disease-stricken wretches poured into the great cities:"²⁵

The troops were marched from one famine-stricken part to another, the movement being represented to the king as made for his benefit; and so far from the English administration having laid in a sufficient stock of grain for the army at the commencement of the famine, the peasantry complained that the military wrung from them their last chance of subsistence.²⁶

Hunter goes on to explain 18th century British priorities succinctly, "until 1772 Bengal was regarded by the British public in the light of a vast warehouse, in which a number of adventurous Englishmen carried on business with great profit and on an enormous scale. That a numerous native population existed, they were aware; but this they considered an accidental circumstance."²⁷ The accident of the Bengali population's starvation, then, demanded little reflection. "The utmost that could be expected from Government," wrote the Company's Council from Calcutta, "would be a lenient policy towards the husbandmen whom a bad harvest had disabled from paying the usual land-tax."²⁸ This "relief," as might be expected, proved insufficient, and in subsequent years the Company found that "the remnant of the population would not [even] suffice to till the land." In 1771 the President of the Council in Calcutta mourned to the Court of Directors in London that there had been "such a mortality and desertion among the ryots, as to deprive the (revenue) farmers of the possibility of receiving rents in arrear."²⁹ Ten million were dead, the Council's attempted measures of "relief" had proven lasting, and revenues continued to be moribund. It was only toward this latter casualty of famine that

²⁴ Quoted in Kali Charan Ghosh, *Famines in Bengal*, p. 4

²⁵ Hunter, p. 26-27

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 39

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 34-35

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 23

²⁹ Hunter, p. 33

the Council directed its imagination and began hammering out a "permanent settlement" of Bengal's land tenure in order to guarantee the Company's revenue.³⁰

It is a very sad - and telling - fact that British colonialism in India both began and ended with catastrophic famine in Bengal. The famine of 1770, understandably, remained etched in popular consciousness throughout the colonial period, and by late 1943, comparisons with 1770 were common. That both famines were essentially "man-made" was not lost on commentators, and that at the root of famine, in both cases, lay predatory economic practices related to the colonial enterprise was well understood. Perhaps most striking of all, however, is the extent to which militarization and martial priority determined the course of both famines. In this context, Hunter's words above might just have easily been written to describe the Bengal Famine of 1943, as that in 1770. Throughout this later period, as well; "the troops were marched from one famine-stricken part to another... [even as] the peasantry complained that the military wrung from them their last chance of subsistence."³¹ The structural entanglements of war and famine in Bengal during the 1940s are central to all that follows.

While famine itself remained the over-arching reality for the majority of Bengal's inhabitants throughout the period under consideration, it was - above all else - *war* that determined the practices, priorities and ideological orientation of the colonial state at the time. As I will detail in Chapter One, from September of 1939 the exigencies of Britain's war against Axis powers were central to how the colony would be governed. Even before there was any material threat to India, the colony was co-opted into the war effort, politically, economically and ideologically. When war was declared against Germany on India's behalf by Britain, this sharply exacerbated existing resentment over foreign rule. The Indian National Congress, India's primary nationalist party, withdrew from governmental participation, and political alignments became increasingly entangled in the rubric of national "defense." Opposition to Britain, in this context, meant opposition to

³⁰ In his *Rule for Property on Bengal*, Ranajit Guha traces the earliest impetus for a Permanent Settlement in Bengal to the 1770 famine. "The first two advocates of Permanent Settlement both regarded the famine as the most conclusive evidence of the worthlessness of the existing economic policies and the best reason that could be there for seeking an alternative in terms of a more stable and comprehensive land settlement." p. 16

³¹ Hunter, p. 39

the war effort, which, in turn, meant complicity with the "enemy." The colonial state, in this context, lent its support to the Muslim League, who they understood to be more loyal to the British cause, and did their best to cast the "rebellious" Congress as a Hindu-centric organization, a policy which greatly contributed to mounting communal animosities in India.

War also strengthened the tenor of colonial oppression, justifying the impunity with which the recalcitrant population could be dealt. In Bengal this entailed the mobilization of hundreds of thousands of native, "loyalist" forces who would be deputized to do the bidding of the colonial state - in the name of war-time "order." These same "troops," however, were used, not to "defend" the population against enemy attack, but - throughout the period - to police society according to colonial dictates. War with a foreign enemy, in this sense, was used to justify martial law domestically. It was also used as an excuse to circumvent the nascent democratic process. The Government of India Act of 1935, which had established the principle of "Provincial Autonomy," allowed for the election of a Legislative Assembly in each province, at the head of which was a Chief Minister. This set-up represented the first real concession to democratic rule in British India. In Bengal, however, war and famine were used repeatedly to side-step the measures of self-determination that were laid out in the 1935 Act, and in Chief Minister Fazlul Huq's words, Provincial Autonomy became only a "mockery" of self-determination. Twice during the period the Ministry in Bengal was dismissed and "Emergency Rule" allowed the province to be governed by executive fiat from the Government of India in New Delhi and His Majesty's Government in London. Throughout the period, moreover, the supposed exigencies of war were repeatedly cited by the Government of India as necessary grounds to enact drastic policies, such as "denial," which contributed significantly to famine, without any consultation with elected, provincial authority

With Japan's entry into the war in late 1941, and its quick succession of victories in Southeast Asia, India became increasingly central to the Allied effort, and the threat to India became less abstract. When Burma fell to Japan in early 1942, Bengal became the Allied front, and Calcutta was centralized as the industrial capital of war in Asia. Keeping Calcutta's industries running at full capacity, in this context, became central to

the rhetoric of "defense". The fact that enormous profits were also being made in and around Calcutta at the same time, lent influence to arguments that the city needed to be maintained at any cost. It was not in the name of profit, however, that the countryside of Bengal was pressed into the service of Calcutta, but in the name of "defense." As commercial agents, backed by government authority and martial force, scoured the countryside for rice, prices skyrocketed, stocks disappeared from markets, and the existing trade infrastructure broke down. Meanwhile, that Calcutta and its industrial workforce were deemed "essential" to the war-effort, justified all means - as well as all consequences. Any resistance to governmental schemes was understood as a threat to the war effort, and, as such, could be met with overwhelming force. "Defense" thus served as the ideological cover by which means the poor of the province were disadvantaged to the point of mass starvation. When starvation could no longer be contained in the countryside, and waves of famine-stricken villagers began collapsing on the streets of Calcutta, it could only, and again, be recognized in relation to the threat this spectacle entailed for the war effort.

When the city was bombed by the Japanese in 1943, as I will detail in Chapter Five, however, the colonial state's rhetoric of "defense" was revealed to be extremely hollow. Calcutta was, in fact, almost entirely undefended, and Japan was able to mount a large-scale attack, in broad daylight, unopposed. Meanwhile the industrial laborers of Calcutta, whose "priority" had been so central to the economic policies which had precipitated famine, were also revealed to be of less than vital importance to either the industrial firms that relied on their labor, or the colonial administration, which had long cited the welfare of Calcutta's labor force as central to their economic policies in Bengal. In the wake of the bombing, in fact, the bodies of dock workers were left unidentified and untended, and afforded little more concern than the hundreds of thousands who had died of hunger that year. In this sense, the skepticism with which Britain's war effort was received by much of the population of India, proved well-founded. In short, the colonial state, at the tail end of its long tenure, used World War II to justify - and indeed amplify - the brutality and rapacity with which it clung to power.

Meanwhile, it was still famine that continued to shape the socio-political environment of the colonized. In the wake of 1943, as I will show in Chapter Six, the

famine became only more deeply enmeshed in the structures and collective psyche of Bengal. The countryside lay in ruins, with the social fabric of rural society torn to shreds by disease, dislocation and death. Whole villages had been wiped out, and hardship continued to take a devastating toll. With an "end" to famine declared in official circles, however, the relief efforts begun late in 1943 were rolled back and imports to ward off further catastrophe were withheld from London. Provincial politics, meanwhile, became increasingly acrimonious, revolving around the highly charged issues of famine and the continuing hardships that citizens of Bengal faced. With the Muslim League in control of the Ministry, moreover, the debate became increasingly more entrenched in communal rancor. Accusations of bias in private relief, contentions about the communal make-up of rationing schemes, and dire predictions of a looming "second famine," became ever more dangerously entangled in opposing claims of "Hindu" versus "Muslim" interests. These communalized contentions reverberated in national politics, and lent a dark and elemental tone to negotiations in Delhi as well.

Also contributing to the entrenchment of communalist ideology during the period were the physical bodies of the dead. As the toll from famine mounted, so too did the corpses that government and society needed to process, materially, politically, psychologically and socially. The sheer enormity of the devastation wrought by famine inured society to death, amounting to a collective "brutalization of consciousness"³² that was deep and abiding. In the countryside, bodies lay where they had fallen and rotted in the sun, or were torn apart by wild animals. In Calcutta, which had its international image to maintain, however, corpses need to be removed from public view, categorized and disposed of in orderly fashion. But because famine victims were the most marginal citizens of empire, the record kept of corpses collected by the authorities in Calcutta was extremely limited. In fact, the sole criteria used to classify the dead, as in the case of the bombings, was religious affiliation. In some definite sense, that the state only recognized these nameless corpses as "Hindu" or "Muslim," was merely an extension of the simplistic binary which they were want to categorize the population more generally. That *corpses* were thus understood, however, lent a certain *biological* "proof" to the long

³² A term used by Suranjan Das to describe the psychological effects of famine on the people of Bengal. In Das (1991), p. 162

advanced discursive argument that this distinction, alone, was paramount in understanding the Indian population. Together with the cheapening of life that famine and war entailed, the contention that communal affiliation adhered to the very *bodies* of the citizens of Bengal represented a dark foreshadow of the violence to come.

Among the population of Calcutta there was still, however, a remarkable solidarity of purpose which was expressed in anti-colonial demonstrations that rocked the city in late 1945 and early 1946. The citizenry understood that their fate was shared, and their case for equity and justice was a collective, rather than sectarian cause. The furor of these disturbances also demonstrated the tremendous anxiety that had built up after years of extreme adversity. The main political parties, Congress and the Muslim League, however, were busy jockeying for position in a future independent India, and so distanced themselves from the political will of the people and continued to angle for a more narrowly "disciplined" constituency that would do their political bidding. But famine was, again, complicating the picture. The harvest of 1945 had been a bad one, and again newspapers were running headlines that millions were doomed to die of starvation in the coming year. The political leadership, however, still had its own interests in mind. A high level Cabinet Mission had been sent from London to negotiate a final settlement for a transfer of power, but had broken down around the intractable issue of Pakistan. With Bengal again careening into starvation by the summer of 1946, violence erupted in Calcutta on an unprecedented scale - and this time it was directed, not at the colonial state, but at fellow inhabitants of the city, Hindu and Muslim. Before saying more about the Calcutta riots, however, some background to my stake in this story is warranted.

Background

Having grown up in Lansing, Michigan in the 1980s, the realities of Bengal in the 1940s were distant and vague. My father himself made little attempt to keep in contact with his own roots. Having immigrated to the United States from Calcutta in 1956 - before the large wave of Indian immigrants who came after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 - he had little opportunity to associate with other Indians, and, in fact, had little desire to do so. As soon as he became an American citizen, he carried with him, at all times, his United States passport. When asked what nationality he was, he

would often reply "American," and present his passport to demonstrate this fact. That he had an accent was something that I didn't even recognize until after he had died and I saw a video-tape of a lecture he had given years earlier. Because he married an American woman, of half Irish and half Hungarian decent, no Bengali was spoken at home, and very few cultural ties to Bengal were maintained. There were occasional phone calls to Calcutta - agonizing affairs that generally accompanied some catastrophe across the ocean - such as my aunt's death in 1974 - but the phone lines were unreliable in those days, and after several hours waiting for a connection, the call itself would usually last only a few short minutes before breaking off. On these occasions my father was always highly overwrought. When the call had finally gone through, he would bark a few words, choked with tears, into the receiver in a language that I could not understand. For this reason I imagined for a long time that Bengali was just a language that people wept in.

What I knew of Calcutta, or Bengal, was limited to the few stories that my father had told me about his own childhood. Amongst these memories there were even a few that were pleasant. These mostly involved life in the village of Bahadupur, in what is today Khulna, Bangladesh. Several times during the turbulent times that comprised his youth, he, like so many other middle-class children of his generation, had been removed to the countryside to avoid the uncertainties of war-time Calcutta. The village was a lush and adventurous escape from the precariousness of life in Calcutta. The rivers and ponds were full of fish and the surrounding jungle full of mystery and natural danger that kept a child's imagination rapt. In the village my father could be a child, and as such his memories of life in Bahadupur were rather uncomplicated and tranquil. But the retreats to the ancestral village, although providing an idyllic refuge from city life, were rather ill-timed and provided him no security from the tribulations of childhood in a war zone. He was back in Calcutta when Japanese bombs fell on the city in both 1942 and 1943, and the memories that he had of these bombings were profound and persistent. Yet they were not quite distinct.

As my father was only eleven years old during the bombings, and at the height of the famine, his recollections of both were more a product of affect than precision. The bombings had terrified him, and he had never forgotten the sound of the planes or the earth shaking impacts of the explosions, but few specifics remained. His memories of the

famine were, likewise, somewhat abstract. Sound, again, took precedence. He, like so many others I have spoken to who lived through the famine, remembered, above all else, the plaintive moans that rent the air night after night in Calcutta, "*Phan Dao, Ma, phan dao. Amra ar bachbo na.*"³³ He also remembered that the dead bodies piled up so fast on the sidewalks of the city that the authorities could not remove them before they began to rot. Stacked corpses remained a persistent memory throughout his life as well. "Like that game we play - pick-up sticks, just skin and bone, stacked in heaps." But specifics were few. Scenes of famine, like the bombings, had left a deep and nagging impression on the child's mind, but the memories themselves were imprecise.

My father's memories of the Calcutta riots, on the other hand, were vivid and distinct.³⁴ On the night of August 17th, 1946 the family house at Mommenpur was attacked, several of its inhabitants were killed, and the rest were dislocated for many long years to come. Tensions in Calcutta had been building for months and mass demonstrations and civil violence had become part and parcel of daily life in the city. On the 16th of August, the day of the Muslim League's call for "Direct Action," unprecedented riots had broken out and the city had quickly descended into anarchy. On the following night a Muslim mob attacked my father's sister's house two doors down. All the men in that house were killed and my father's sister was bludgeoned over the head with a steel rod. Bleeding profusely, she ran to my grandfather's house for shelter. The mob followed her, and subsequently laid attack to my grandfather's house in the late evening hours. It was a crowd bent on slaughter, many thousand strong with blood of my father's sister already on its hands. Chants of "Allahu Akbar!" filled the air, the house was quickly surrounded, and within a few minutes the crowd was pressing in, clambering up the walls, and breaking in the doors below. They had already gotten hold of those too slow to make it up to the rooftop, which could be secured by means of a steel door. On his way up the stairs my father turned to see the beheading of a wiry little man whom he had known well his whole short life; the family cook who would slip him sweets

³³ "Give us the water in which you've boiled your rice (*phan*), Mother, we are dieing."

³⁴ What follows is a narrative reconstruction of my father's memory of the riots. This narrative is written partially in the present tense to lend emphasis to the immediacy that these events maintained, in his memory, throughout his life. It is, as such, a necessarily subjective account of a Muslim attack on one Hindu family's house. Attacks on Muslim houses by Hindu mobs were also frequent during the riots, and were likely indexed in similar binary terms.

whenever there is anything in the larder to spare. "His head," my father told me many times, "was cut clean from his body." On the rooftop there was only the terror of grim expectation.

The street below is now a solid sea of murderous faces. They are hurling bricks and steel rods - they will not be satisfied until the entire family above is exterminated. The heat from the fire they have lit below is beginning to sear the flesh of those who have made it to the rooftop wherever that flesh touches the concrete floor - the same floor that bears the cracks that the bombs, dropped three years earlier, had rent. The young boy (my father) is hiding beneath a table with his equally terrified younger brother. Their elderly and unfit father is apoplectic. The boy too knows that he will die - and all the rest, thirty-some in all, all his flesh and blood. His sister is still bleeding from her head. Her husband and his brothers have already been killed and she is shrieking. She has likely been raped as well as bludgeoned - the tone of her lamentation is tinged with madness. But the boy's older brother, twelve years his senior, has begun firing a gun, an old, rusty rifle that had been commissioned to him during the war. He is firing into the street, reloading the gun in a blood-red rage, and firing again. He will not let his family be slaughtered. His body is scarred by the bricks and rods that have struck him, but the crowd below is quickly dispersing.

The chants and calls for bloodshed are fading into the near distance. The boy is still trembling, uncertain whether, in fact, he has even survived or not. His sister's sobs have gotten more pronounced and sharper still - her long mourning has only just begun. His father sits in a puddle of hot urine, weeping into his upturned palms like a fever-stricken child - everything is lost. His older brother, still clutching the rifle firmly to his chest, paces the rooftop urgently searching for some means of escape from the fire below. Finally a rescue truck arrives from somewhere and the survivors climb down a thin and rickety ladder to the street below. Once rescued from the rooftop, they are shepherded into a waiting van and shuttled to a crowded and grief-choked port of provisional refuge. And thus begins many long years of displacement, uncertainty, and desperation, and still more shadows without number, piling up in the darkness and compounding the mass-less weight (quite contrary to all the accepted laws of physics) that would forever threaten to extinguish him.

From a very early age, I had a somewhat inordinate fascination with these events and with the Calcutta riots in general. I was not a morbid child, and had no particular interest in violence. What a "riot" even consisted of, in fact, I had scarcely a clue. My life was otherwise preoccupied by sports and fitting in with a foreign sounding name at school. Neither my sisters nor my mother took any particular interests in my father's stories of things that had happened a long time ago and far away. Even my father, if the truth be told, had little inclination to recount these events unsolicited. It was rather at my request, for the most part, that he would, again, tell the tale of the Calcutta riots. It may have been the poignant intensity with which he told the riot story that moved me, or it may have been the sheer drama of the events, but my fixation on the riots remained unique and abiding.

I myself had a secret that over the years I began to believe explained my interest in the riots better than any more rational explanation. Though an otherwise well-adjusted child, with little to complain about, I was subject to a peculiar inner tension that would arise without warning, last for a few minutes at the most, and then dissolve again into the mysterious depths from which it had emerged. This tension seemed to have little relation to external events or circumstances. It might arise while I was waiting for the school-bus, or it might arise while I was lying in bed at night drifting off to sleep. It generally came upon me when I was alone, but this was not a rule. I have no recollection of when it started, though I do know that it began from a very early age. It was, by any means, a persistent phenomenon of my mental life throughout childhood that seemed to have no objective cause or connection. The tension consisted of a recurrent kind of auditory hallucination that is extremely difficult to describe: a cacophony of indistinct human voices, a chaos of staccato exclamations and appeals, a quarrel, maybe, but riven with acute anxiety and desperation. Nothing at all concrete could be deciphered: a tumultuous and rather tortured chorus of indistinct anxiety. Surprisingly, it did not frighten me or seem like cause for concern. I learned to live with it as if it were completely normal.

It wasn't until I was in my 20s that I began to question what was at the root of this phenomenon. It had not affected my life in any negative way and was not something that I imagined needed correction. In fact, I had grown to appreciate the odd energy of this inner tension, and knew that it kept me centered in an inexplicable way. As with all

secrets, it was something that was mine alone, and as such remained part and parcel of my own doggedly defended sense of individuality. It was in this context - as an extraordinary object of Self - that I began to wonder more about what was at the root of this psychological anomaly. There was no "Ah Ha!" moment, and I can't even say how the thought took hold, but over the course of time I came to conclude, and began to firmly believe, that the cacophony that occasionally visited me - as insufficiently described above - was an indistinct, and incomprehensible, geo-temporal echo of the Calcutta riots.

At length, I became convinced that this auditory tension that I had long experienced was a "memory" of the Calcutta riots. The ways and means by which memories are conveyed - particular in close and intimate relations - are, after all, complex and mysterious. Stories, of course, are the most well understood. But there are also the mute suggestions of gesture, the silent implications of character, and even the hidden insinuations of voice. In close contact with a person whose memories of a given incident are particularly intense and remain particularly entangled in that person's psyche, who is to say what portion of that experience can be transmitted? Somehow, I began to believe, in this case, it had been substantial, and even imagined that it was something akin to genetic memory. I should say that since that time I have spent many years in Calcutta and have witnessed many things, including impassioned domestic disputes, riots in the streets, and abundant fractious demonstrations, and the tone, tenor and timber of the Bengali language used in heated conflict does have an uncanny resonance with the auditory tension that I have described above - but there is no one but me to judge.

I include this personal (and somewhat embarrassing) anecdote to note the fact that when I went to Calcutta for the first time, in 1999, my primary goal was to investigate the 1946 Calcutta riots - not famine. I had looked in vain for a better understanding of the riots from my far remove, but came up empty handed. Although the riots have been widely understood as seminal to the catastrophic violence of India's partition, in most historical works only passing reference is made to the actual event. I decided, at length, that I would go to Calcutta and investigate the riots myself, in conversation with those who had survived them. In Calcutta, I was able to find traces everywhere, but at the frayed end of each and every lead that I followed, what I found was *famine*. In as much

as the riots emerged from a specific socio-political context in Calcutta during the 1940s, the over-determining social fact - for the vast majority of the population of Bengal - of this same period was famine. My search for an understanding of the Calcutta riots, then, has been unavoidably transformed into a "search for famine."

In the final chapter of this work, I examine the Calcutta riots from this perspective - as the culmination of a period of cumulative violence that is punctuated by calamitous internecine fury. All existing scholarship on the riots has focused on the "communal" nature of the outburst, giving primary consideration to the divisive political environment in which they erupted. This explanation, however, cannot account for the full extent of the violence that visited Calcutta in 1946. Participation in the riots was extremely widespread, motivations were highly diverse, and enactments multifaceted. In first detailing the tortured socio-economic, ideological, as well as political context that preceded the riots, I demonstrate, in Chapter Seven, that the Calcutta riots emerged from an extremely complex confluence of anxieties, animosities and contentions that were dominated, above all else, by the entailments of war and famine. As such, the understanding of the Calcutta riots as merely a Hindu/Muslim battle for political place, is woefully incomplete.

Perspective

Because I came to this research from the perspective of personal experience, it has been, also, the personal experience of these times that has long been my primary interest. Along with the many relatives with whom I have spoken at length about this period, I have interviewed dozens of survivors from these times in Calcutta. When I began this journey, it was their stories that I had intended to tell. But, for many reasons, the effort to locate particular subject-positions within the complex nexus of destructive and violent structural forces that defined Bengal in the 1940s, is one that was doomed to failure. While the events that I will examine can be historically situated and structurally analyzed, the exact impact of these same events on any given, particular witness escapes meaningful reconstruction. As such, the primary effort to reconstruct individual experience has devolved into the more academic exercise of detailing the anatomy of this historical period through access to archival, literary, and remembered narratives. In

short: the secondary goal of trying to paint an adequate picture of the event - in which to later locate the individual - has become primary. The compromised conclusion of such an endeavor is to admit the very indeterminate nature of the impact of structural violence on individual identity - while perhaps succeeding in theorizing something of its impact on collectivities. These were nearly impossible times to live through. To tell the story of any individual's passage, before the story of the context is told, would be to set an inconceivably despairing voice afloat in the world, without reference to the extraordinary circumstances that defined that passage. And yet the story told is the necessary pretext to understanding the individuals who taught me the meaning of these events. Above all it was a sense of injustice and disbelief that grounded their understandings. They themselves were endlessly interested in the facts. As such, this remains *their* story and it is told for them. I begin here, however, with a short family history that will also bring the remaining narrative up to date. Ramakrishna Mukherjee is my grandfather. Kalinath is my father. The rest is self-explanatory.

In the wake of the devastating famine of 1866, the idea of partitioning the province of Bengal began making administrative rounds.³⁵ At the time Bengal was a vast and unwieldy province encompassing 189,000 square miles, with a population of 78.5 million. Famine was most acute in modern day Orissa, which at that time was still part of Bengal. Parts of modern-day Bihar and Assam were also included. Famine brought home the difficulties of administering a province of this size, particularly with Calcutta, then the seat of British imperial power, the only industrial and commercial center in the region. Debates about the administrative wisdom of partitioning Bengal circulated for the next several decades, receiving impetus from increasing political and governmental difficulties in Bengal around the turn of the century. Discussions were finalized in 1905, spurred by the desire to reduce the influence of Bengal's educated, largely Hindu, elite, but justified in the name of administrative efficiency. East Bengal, with Assam, became a separate province of its own, with West Bengal encompassing the remainder.

³⁵ In his work *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal*, Sumit Sarkar traces the debate about partition to the 1866 Orissa famine.

The 1905 partition was greeted with alarm by the educated, Hindu elite of Bengal, who quickly began organizing demonstrations against partition. The loss of eastern Bengal was both an economic and psychological affront. The east represented both the nostalgic homeland, as well as the agricultural heartland of Bengal. A boycott of British goods and the re-vitalization of native industry comprised the central platform of the *swadeshi* movement that crystallized around discontent with partition. The *swadeshi* movement, it has been argued, was the first Nationalist mass mobilization in British India. Though the movement has also been represented as the birth of non-violent resistance to British rule, however, "terrorist" elements became involved from early on. Far from achieving a representative "mass," moreover, the core of the movement remained mainly Hindu, middle-class, and urban throughout. Meanwhile, in the newly created province of East Bengal, Muslim majority rule was greeted with enthusiasm by many. In 1906 the Muslim League was founded at Dacca in order to consolidate and develop the political autonomy gained by Bengali Muslims after 1905.

Despite limitations, however, the *swadeshi* movement represented a significant and novel critique of the colonial system, and in 1911 partition was withdrawn and Bengal was reunited. Such an outcome might have been cause for celebration, but by this time the *swadeshi* movement had lost its legs, and had been overtaken by its radical elements that now engaged the colonial government in more open expressions of dissent; assassinating police officers, sabotaging transportation and communication lines, and amassing stockpiles of stolen weapons to mount armed attack on the colonial state. In 1912 the British withdraw their administrative apparatus from Calcutta and settled in to Delhi. At the inaugural ceremony there, a bomb exploded near the Viceroy's entourage, narrowly missing the Viceroy himself. The bomber was, somewhat predictably, a Bengali - a fact which could only have further disenchanted the British to the city and province that they had left behind.

The advent of World War I brought more difficulties. In Bengal terrorist activities were still rife and internal security was less than satisfactory. War had been declared by Britain on India's behalf, without consultation or popular support. India's "defense spending" increased by 300 percent.³⁶ Revenue demands spiked.³⁷ Financing

³⁶ Bose and Jalal, p. 127

the British war effort proved tricky. The currency in circulation nearly tripled from Rs. 660 million in 1914 to Rs. 1540 million in 1919.³⁸ Inflation, war profiteering and curtailment of shipping, fueled shortages and scarcity that further embittered the population. But internal "disorder" could not be tolerated in the context of war. As such, "the British met the war-time threat by a formidable battery of repressive measures - the most intensive since 1857 - and above all by the Defence of India Act of March 1915."³⁹ The Defence of India Act - which remained in force until the end of colonial rule in 1947 - described a broad range of "emergency" powers, including an expansion of capital offences, provisions for extra-judicial detention, and guidelines for military action against the civilian population.

In Bengal, however, the British were finding it difficult to commandeer a native police force to maintain order. In 1911 a Special Branch to obtain intelligence on "terrorist" activity was formed, but recruitment into the Calcutta police remained frustratingly lack-luster.⁴⁰ The same year, because of a general lack of morale stemming from poor working conditions, 255 police recruits resigned from service and many others simply deserted.⁴¹ An inadequacy of training facilities, it was decided, was part of the problem. In 1914 a new training center was sanctioned at Dalanda, a former lunatic asylum on the outskirts of the city, and in 1916 the Police Training School at Dalanda was put into service to attempt a resuscitation of the force. The training center occupied only one corner of the old asylum, with another wing designated to the Special Branch for its interrogations of "terrorists" rounded up under the Defence of India rules. "All types of revolutionaries - those who confessed fully, those who partially confessed and those who survived the process without making confession - would all come to Dalanda house."⁴² Though some died of "interrogation," and several more committed suicide, Dalanda continued to serve dual law-enforcement objectives until the 1920s.

In 1916 Ramakrishna Mukherjee came to Calcutta from the village of Bahadupur in the Satkira sub-division of Khulna district to join the training cohort at

³⁷ Metcalf and Metcalf, p. 161

³⁸ Bose and Jalal, p. 127

³⁹ Sarkar, Sumit (1983), p. 149

⁴⁰ Chattopadhyaya, Tapan, p. 125

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Ibid, p. 132

Dalanda.⁴³ Bahadupur was a frontier region, carved out of dense jungle by enterprising Bengali landlords given unclaimed - or depopulated - plots to clear and cultivate by the British administration.⁴⁴ Plots varied in size, but the labor involved in clearing the jungle in order to cultivate the land, limited the arable portion. By 1938, 84% of land-holdings in the district consisted of less than five acres.⁴⁵ The size of the land holding of Ramakrishna Mukherjee and family is difficult to discover, but is likely to have been less than ten acres. Paddy fields, worked by Muslim tenant farmers, surrounded a central "U" shaped compound defining a protected courtyard, typical of Bengali rural architectural style. The land was ideal for paddy cultivation, on the northern fringe of the Sundarban forest - a tropical, riverine band of mangrove jungle, in the vast deltaic expanse that spans the Bengal coastline from Midnapur to Chittagong. But for the Hindu middle-class, by the early twentieth century, economic conditions were poor.

The Bengal middle-class had been subject to a long trajectory of impoverishment throughout the colonial period. The "permanent settlement" of land rights on a class of traditional rent-collectors in Bengal did little to advance the long-term economic welfare of the, mostly Hindu, "middle-class" (*bhadralok*.) The rights that *zamindars* were granted by the British established them only as the "top rung of the revenue collecting ladder."⁴⁶ The actual occupation of land was the providence of the (primarily Muslim or lower-caste Hindu) *chasi*, or peasant, who cultivated it and paid rent, often in kind, to the, typically town-dwelling, *bhadralok*. By the turn of the twentieth century, due to inflation and the fragmentation of estates through inheritance, the social prestige of the mostly Hindu "middle-class" throughout rural Bengal was based at least as much on their *status* as upper-caste Hindu landlords, as it was on their financial capacities. Increasingly the *bhadralok* were economically dependent on white-collar employment in Calcutta - which continued to be in short supply. By 1915, according to one official report "it [was] well known that the number of unemployed amongst the

⁴³ The story of Ramakrishna Mukherjee (my grandfather) and family is comprised of information gained from extensive interviews with Mukherjee's sons, Narendra Krishna, Kalinath (my father) and Somnath Mukherjee, as well as interviews with Dolly Mukherjee, Narendra Krishna's wife.

⁴⁴ See Bose (1986), p. 15

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 23

⁴⁶ Bose (1986), p. 4

bhadralok is large and that the circumstances of many families are pitiful and their sufferings very great, in some cases falling little short of death by slow starvation."⁴⁷

Ramakrishna Mukherjee himself, though educated in an English medium college in Khulna, was a rustic figure: tall and severe, a devout Hindu whose practices tended towards the tantric. A Brahman by birth, Ramakrishna performed sacrifices and fire rituals to the goddess Kali on the family premises, drawing enthusiastic crowds of minority Hindus from surrounding villages on festival days. But his hardships were increasing. The yield from the land was incidental, revenues were poor, and the status of landholder meant increasingly less in material terms towards the turn of the century. Frequent floods, a lack of connectivity to urban centers, and the unpredictability of frequently shifting deltaic rivers made the prospects of prosperity further complicated. The dream of moving into a proper, middle-class, urban position, however, remained illusory.⁴⁸ World War I only straitened circumstances further.⁴⁹ Sometime around the turn of the first decade of the twentieth century, Ramakrishna's older brother, Ponchanon, had left the village and found a place in the Calcutta police. Ramakrishna, with three children of his own and moribund fortunes in the countryside, followed suit in 1916.

In Calcutta Ramakrishna found the success that had proven unattainable in the village. Having finished his training at Dalanda, he was issued a Calcutta High Constable's uniform and a place of promise in the Detective Department of the Calcutta Police. Work in the Detective Department proved lucrative, as well as interesting. Ramakrishna had a particular penchant for establishing contacts in Calcutta's infamous underworld. These contacts helped the young officer crack important cases, as well as advance his own financial interests. His friends included figures like Ladoo, who had a neat, skin-grafted pouch sewn into the far-back of his throat, which was deep enough to secrete an object as big as a sun-ripe plum, not to mention a braided gold necklace, and Altu, who, like a perfect circus performer, could - absolutely noiselessly - walk through narrow alleyways on bamboo stilts two stories high and drop through open windows or

⁴⁷ Chatterjee, Partha (1984) p. 22

⁴⁸ See, for instance, Indivar Kamtekar's *War Dance*, p. 208 on the lack of middle-class jobs in early twentieth century Bengal.

⁴⁹ Partha Chatterjee's *Land Question*, p. 120 "The end of the War...brought increasing difficulties for the predominantly Hindu middle-classes of Bengal - rising prices, shrinking real incomes from rent and the lack of employment opportunities."

air-vents as stealthily as any agile and city-bred tomcat; who stopped by the officer's house to discuss happenings in the city. By the early twenties Ramakrishna had earned the title of Sergeant in the Detective Department, and by dint of his less official services to the citizens of Calcutta, had received generous "gifts" from grateful patrons in the form of brightly printed rupee notes that he kept in large bundles, stuffed into the drawers of the family almira.

The wealth of the family, however, did not stay liquid long. In the late twenties, looking to parlay his fortunes, Ramakrishna entered into a number of speculative land deals in Calcutta which eventually became taxing on both his mental and financial health. Through connections in the police and the underworld, the Sergeant bought up scattered properties in several different slum districts of Calcutta, most with rather complicated deeds that the Sergeant felt confident he could straighten out by resort to his carefully established connections. One such property was the ill-fated residence at 8A Mommenpur Road, which became the family's dwelling place in 1921. The large, two-story house at Mommenpur Road was a short distance from the busy Kidderpore docks, and just a bit further from the Garden Reach industrial area. The house was a solid, brick and mortar construction, situated in the heart of a sprawling, and mostly Muslim, slum. Though the location was anything but prestigious, the structure was an impressive and extravagant dwelling for a man of the Sergeant's means. He had gotten it cheap and had no compunction spending the extra time and money that would be required to ensure that it was made officially his through a clean deed of ownership.

In 1936, when Ramakrishna Mukherjee retired from the Calcutta Police, his fortunes were already dwindling. Lathi in hand, the former policeman would patrol his slum properties in Kidderpore and Park Circus, trying to shake down recalcitrant Muslim tenants of the few rupees rent that they owed him. More capital was lost in several business deals, such as a tobacco shop in central Calcutta, that went quickly sour. The meager pension he was due from service in the police was also tied up in litigation, even as the cash maintained in the family almira continued to dwindle. Still Ramakrishna stuck to his rustic ways, doing rituals to exorcise the spirits that stymied his endeavors and making sacrifices to Kali for assistance. By 1940 the well was all but dry and the few bits of gold that his wife had brought into their marriage provided the necessary

capital to maintain his legal affairs. Ramakrishna's oldest son, Narendra Krishna (N. K.), who at this time was 21 years old, bore the tremendous responsibility for the family's survival - in difficult times. Prices were rising, the country was at war and the patriarch was well past his prime.

Having earned a degree with honors from Calcutta University, N.K. was able to secure a job in a trading firm, but as a junior employee, his wages were minimal. In the house at Mommenpur, there were mother and father, two brothers, Kalinath and Somnath, three sisters (of nine) who were approaching marriageable age, his oldest, childless sister and her husband, the hands who tended the cows, and the servants who cleaned, cooked, and kept the compound running. When preparations for war began, and the call for Air Raid Precautions (A.R.P.) officers was made, N.K. signed up. With his father's connections, as well as with his own educational background, he was able to secure the remunerative position of neighborhood warden of the A.R.P. It was an important job, as Mommenpur backed onto the Kidderpore docks - assumed to be the primary target of enemy attack -and as such carried with it a certain prestige as well as responsibility.

When Japan attacked the United States at Pearl Harbor, and Britain at Rangoon a few weeks later, Ramakrishna made the decision, like many others, to secure his family in the countryside at their village residence. All but he and his oldest son, made the difficult journey across several rivers, and south into the Sundarbans to Bahadupur. Kalinath, Ramakrishna's second son was, at this time, eleven years old. He was a promising and intelligent boy. In preparation for the trip to the village he manufactured a "radio" so that he might be able to follow the news from Calcutta in the village. From a magazine that he had come by, he painstakingly cut from cardboard the exact designs for all the components that were pictured in an illustration of a crystal radio. With equal precision, he hand-painted every component so that it looked identical to the illustration. The reproduction was so effective that he was not the only one surprised when he turned the switch on and no sound came. Nevertheless, he carried his radio to Bahadupur, crossing the wide river at Taki, and sailing by launch from Satkira through Budhhata and on down to the village from where his father had come. Life in the village, as mentioned earlier, was among the only fond memories that Kalinath would have of his war-torn

childhood. The peace that he found there was transient, and the realities of his youth were far from idyllic.

A passage from a popular children's magazine, published in the early forties, describes the circumstance that the children of Bengal faced, encouraging them to keep faith in frightening times - as Bengal confronted war:

My Dear Little Brothers and Sisters!

A new month has come, and the old has gone.
In this way many more months will come and go.
And what do I have new to tell you?
The earth itself is being soaked in blood,
The sky has gone dark.
Bombs and gunpowder are piled in heaps.
All of India has been watching this war closely,
Knowing that we too are never far from peril.

Now the flames of war have come close to our land. The jaw of Calcutta is veiled in darkness. Bengal has been proclaimed what they call an 'essential area.' Civility and culture have been stricken to the root. And yet, I see, so many of our young boys and girls remembering their faith are speaking from their hearts, narrating dreams of happier days to come - even while the earth is stained with blood, even amidst the cries of distress and fear. You are like white lotus flowers, blooming in the sunshine, surrounded by the light of heaven, in harmonious strains - from the depths of this ignorance and darkness - singing of deliverance, praying for the gifts of logic and wisdom. I pray that your prayers will be answered...

Didi-bhai,
Magh 1348⁵⁰

⁵⁰ This passage is extracted from the Bengali monthly children's magazine, *Rangmashaal*. The magazine was published bi-monthly according to the Bengali calendar. Magh 1348, corresponds to January 1942 by the Gregorian calendar. The section "letter box," from which this passage is taken, was a regular feature. *Didi-bhai* means "big sister." No other reference was given to determine who *Didi-bhai* was. This section begins every issue with a communication to "my dear little brothers and sisters," relates the news of the day, and then goes on to answer questions sent in by readers the previous month. (The translation is mine.)

Chapter One: War

On December 30th 1940, in an industrial suburb of colonial Calcutta, an imitation Nazi aircraft circled low over a small formation of native huts erected in the shadows of the sprawling jute and cotton mills that line the banks of the river Hooghly. Across the river, in Calcutta proper, stood the grand, if now somewhat weatherworn, Victorian buildings that formerly housed the central administrative apparatus of the British Raj in India. As the plane came into view, according to the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* of the following day:

Lighting restrictors who were tasking people of the peaceful hamlet over which the enemy aircraft was spotted flying met with opposition from a group of villagers who flashed their torch lights for locating their huts. Following this bombs were hurled by the bomber plane demolishing a number of huts and as a result fire broke out in the locality. The entire personnel of the A.R.P. [Air Raid Precaution] organization handled the situation promptly, extinguished fires, demolished dangerous structures, rescued people from underneath debris, rendered first aid, and removed cases to Hospital in ambulance cars.¹

The A.R.P. services had performed admirably in this test of air-raid preparedness: "all the different parties, the messengers, the lighting restrictors, the reconnaissance party, the gas decontamination party, the fire extinguishing party and the first aid party all worked together in complete harmony as soon as the sirens were sounded on spotting the enemy aircraft."² If only the public could be educated to the necessities of maintaining order and desist from their oppositional indiscipline.

In subsequent press releases, and over the All-India Radio airwaves, guidelines laid down in Sections 2 and 3 of the Bengal Air Raid Order were reiterated to the public. On the sounding of the warning sirens, a series of five second blasts from street-side and factory "hooters:"

¹ *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, "Air Raid Precaution," 24 December 1940

² Ibid

- 1.) Any person who has no duties and is within a building shall remain.
- 2.) Any person who has no duties and is in the open shall take nearest cover.
- 3.) All vehicular traffic shall pull to the left and stop.
- 4.) All animals drawing vehicles shall be unyoked and tied to the nearest post.
- 5.) Only police and Civic Guard vehicles, ambulances, fire engines and lorries, Rescue Party lorries, authorized Air Raid Precautionary staff vehicles, and defense service vehicles shall be permitted to proceed on roads.³

When the sirens sounded again for the second test of civil preparedness on January 30th, however, there was again "opposition." In his notes on this second occasion, A.R.P. controller, N.V.H Symons grumbled, "too much attention was paid to vehicular traffic and little or none to pedestrians. I found trams, buses, cars and lorries all well parked on the side of the road, but pedestrians were wandering all over the place under the very noses of the police."⁴ To add insult to injury; "draft animals were not unyoked... large numbers of the public stayed under verandas and in doorways instead of going into houses... too many people, amongst whom women were noticeable, were gazing out of windows...and on the whole [police] constables were very lazy...they frequently were found standing about doing nothing... they need more instruction as to the reasons for all these orders and as to how to enforce [them] by reasoning with the public and polite requests rather than shouted commands."⁵ Training would be needed to temper the authoritarian tone. Laborers were found to be less lethargic, if just as lacking in discipline, "in Strand Road, North, coolies were still loading jute onto carts at 3:50 P.M...and near the Talla Bridge a gang of men were found pumping water."⁶

This exercise, a second test of war-readiness in Calcutta, had been a failure. Great Britain was at war - and with it India - and yet, in Calcutta, the putative "second city" of Empire, the general public remained unconcerned. Urgent work was needed to "train the general public in their duties."⁷ Even the sirens were deficient, Symons noted, they "are very faint, and might easily go unnoticed in a rain storm...there is nothing about

³ WBSA, Intelligence Branch, W-72/41

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

them to startle anybody into a realization that danger is imminent."⁸ In order to rouse the public from their apathy, vigorous measures would need to be undertaken. A.D. Gordon, Inspector General of the Bengal police, also felt that the realization that danger was imminent needed to be "dinned into their minds by constant propaganda."⁹ The fact that Nazi Germany was, in fact, an extremely remote "enemy" to colonial Bengal, did not temper official consternation with the public's apathy. Britain was at war, and, as such, all its subjects needed to digest the ideology of imminent danger. Resources limited imagination, however, and measures taken to "discipline" the recalcitrant public were fanciful. "As to date," Symons wrote in early 1941, "we [have] discussed the question of politically educating the public by gramophone records played in cinema halls, eating houses, social gatherings, and on the radio as well as from the publicity vans."¹⁰ The majority of the population of Bengal, however, was beyond the state's rhetorical reach, and would remain that way throughout the period. The acuteness of their material concerns did not allow them frequent visits to cinema halls or eating houses. The publicity vans, on the other hand, would have their own limitations.

Food Security

In London preparations for war were rather less ad-hoc, with food security, rather than public order, or propaganda vans, taking precedence. As early as 1936 plans for assuring the nutritional health of England in case of war were already underway. Winston Churchill, for one, had long experience with the role that the food supply could play in wartime. As England's First Lord of the Admiralty during World War I, he had overseen the British naval blockade of Germany, which - as he himself later wrote - had "treated the whole of Germany as if it were a beleaguered fortress, and avowedly sought to starve the whole population - men, women, and children, old and young, wounded and sound - into submission."¹¹ For his role as the architect of such blockades, he had earned the nickname "the famisher" in France.¹² (His involvement in "famishing" the population of Bengal during World War II will become apparent in what follows.) British war-

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Baker, p.2

¹² Ibid, p. 280

planners, in any case, knew well that hunger was still a working weapon in the arsenal of modern warfare and that food security remained a top priority in preparation for war. By the mid-1930's war was again on the horizon, and pragmatic steps were promptly taken to ensure the public welfare.

Early in the summer of 1936 a subcommittee on rationing was formed with Sir William Beveridge, Permanent Secretary to the first Ministry of Food (during WWI) as Chair. Beveridge insisted that to "think out in advance *and as a whole*, the civilian side of the next war is as important as to design measures of military attack and defense."¹³ The result of the discussions held within this subcommittee was the establishment of the Food (Defense Plans) Department in December of the same year.¹⁴ "A comprehensive rationing policy was formulated so that 'every member of the public would be able to obtain a fair share of the national food supply at a reasonable price.'"¹⁵ Nineteen regional divisions were demarcated and 1,400 local food committees organized in order to ensure the necessary administrative apparatus to achieve the "fair share" goal.¹⁶ Detailed schemes for flat-rate rationing of sugar, butter, bacon, ham and meat were drawn up. A "buffer" of bread and potatoes was to be provided for, and subsidized restaurants would be established to bolster the ration scheme and provide variety to the public.¹⁷

The primary priority of the subcommittee, however, was to control bulk purchasing more than it was, even, to directly guarantee availability to all. In its report for October 1936, the committee noted that rationing was necessary "*not merely [to] prevent people from buying more than the prescribed amount, but also to make certain that the prescribed amount is distributed to them. Rationing assumes the control of supply and distribution.*"¹⁸ Bulk purchasing by vested interests and speculators, committee members well understood, could radically destabilize markets during war-time, leading to uncontrollable inflation, and ultimately shortages. This knowledge would be starkly reinforced by the counter-example of Bengal in the years to come. In the context of the homeland, however, detailed plans were drawn up for governmental

¹³ Quoted in Zweiniger-Bargielowska, p. 16

¹⁴ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, p. 14

¹⁵ Zweiniger-Bargielowska quoting Board of Trade, *Report*, 1937, p. 14

¹⁶ Zweiniger-Bargielowska, p. 14

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Report of the Sub-committee on Rationing, 5 Oct. 1936, Quoted in Ibid, p. 16 (emphasis mine)

appropriation and storage of large quantities of essential food supplies to offset the potential of private interests manipulating markets. The pace of these preparations was accelerated after the Munich Crisis of September 1938, at which time, "additional food stocks were being purchased, details of transport and storage policy were under discussion, and legislation to implement for control was being drafted."¹⁹ As further guarantee that the preparations made by the Food Department would meet with a smooth transition into operation in the advent of war, it was agreed that a second Food Ministry would be established immediately so that "within hours of the outbreak of hostilities" war-time controls could take effect.²⁰

Britain's second Ministry of Food was thus established almost immediately upon the declaration of war against Germany on September 3rd, 1939. Ration books, which had been printed in advance, were distributed and the rationing of sugar, butter, ham and bacon began in early January of 1940. Meat was included in March and tea, margarine and cooking fats, in July. Early in 1941 preserves and cheese were rolled in, and rationing of clothing was also begun. Differential access to non-rationed foods created some discontent, however, and so a "points-rationing" system was introduced in December of 1941 for the purchase of items like canned fish, dried fruits, rice, and biscuits that did not necessarily comprise an "essential" diet in Britain. Although the supply of milk and eggs was unreliable, a "quasi-rationing" system was worked out in 1941 to ensure equitable distribution. In 1942 a separate scheme for rationing chocolate and confectionaries was also launched, and by the end of that same year "rationed and controlled foods accounted for more than half of total food expenditure."²¹ In the industrial sector heavily subsidized canteens were set up, increasing in number from 1,500 before the war to 18,446 by 1944, and agricultural workers were given a supplementary ration of cheese.²² Daily meals served to schoolchildren similarly increased from approximately 160,000 before the war to 1.6 million by 1945. Children under five were guaranteed free fruit juices and cod-liver oil. The Ministry of Food also

¹⁹ Zweiniger-Bargielowska, p. 16

²⁰ Ibid, p. 14

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid, p. 33

implemented vitamin fortification of flour, which would go to subsidized bread for all - all with great success.

The results of such foresight and initiative were remarkable, "the wartime system of rationing and food controls reduced long-standing class and income differentials in food consumption and nutrient intake... thereby contributing to *improvements in public health*."²³ The Ministry of Food, also pleased in retrospect, noted: "general health was good throughout the period of war [and the] fitness of babies and school children was particularly striking."²⁴ Despite the fact that food imports had fully halved during the war from 22 million to 11 million tons,²⁵ average per capita spending on foodstuffs, due to the success of the rationing system, actually declined.²⁶ In short, historian Zweiniger-Bargielowska concludes, "The Second World War represented a major turning-point in the history of British diet. The rise in consumption of brown bread, milk and vegetables, coupled with food fortification resulted in a healthier diet and no social group fell short of basic nutritional requirements."²⁷ British citizens in other parts of the empire, however, did not fair so well.

With the lack of any similar initiatives in India, the only real guidelines for administrative management of the food supply in Bengal was the Bengal Famine Code, first published in 1897, updated once in 1905, and then lastly in 1913. The Bengal Famine Code was the product of Britain's long experience with starvation in India. Since 1770, there were no fewer than twenty-five officially recorded famines in colonial India, with those of 1783, 1873-4, 1866, and 1896-97 (the largest since 1770), all effecting Bengal in varying degrees.²⁸ It is in this context that the Bengal Famine Code was developed and first published in 1895 following the recommendations of the Famine Commission of 1880. Famine had been recurrent, entailing nagging administrative difficulties as well as embarrassing PR in relations to Britain's claim to efficient administration in India. Some guidelines were needed.

²³ Ibid, p. 12 (emphasis mine)

²⁴ Quoted in Zweiniger-Bargielowska, p. 44

²⁵ Ibid, p. 36

²⁶ Ibid, p. 53

²⁷ Ibid, p. 44

²⁸ See Brahma Nand's appendix "Famines in Colonial India, 1750-1947" in *Famines in Colonial India*, p.60-4

The Bengal Famine Code is an encompassing document, outlining detailed plans for identifying and ameliorating famine. Central to the "duties of officers and local government in ordinary times," is to watch for and promptly report on any "rise in prices above 20 percent over normal rates." Instructions on bi-weekly reporting of crop conditions, rainfall, "the health of the people" and the "existence of any scarcity or distress" are given. Statistical compilations of records that can be used to determine "normal rates" for prices are sketched in detail. If these normal rates fail to apply a report should be made, and in the event that prices continue to remain abnormal, prompt reporting of early signs of impending famine are required. They include:

- 1.) The contraction of private charity indicated by the wandering of paupers.
- 2.) Contraction of credit.
- 3.) Feverish activity in the grain trade.
- 4.) Restlessness shown in an increase of crime.
- 5.) Unusual movements of flocks and herds in search of pasturage.
- 6.) Unusual wandering of people.²⁹

When any number or combination of these occurrences are observed, a Famine Commissioner should be appointed and District Officers should open "test works" to determine the extent of need. The nature of the "test works" (essentially labor-camps for the hungry) is outlined in detail. If such test works attract labourers in large numbers, the Code stipulates, famine should be officially declared and various schemes of famine relief should commence at once. The "test" has proved positive. As will be demonstrated in the pages to follow, all of these indicators were multiply in evidence throughout the period under investigation.

The administrative apparatus deemed necessary to deal with famine was also outlined in detail in the Bengal Famine Code. At the local level, guidelines are given for the establishment of District Boards: "each district affected shall be divided into relief circles, the boundaries of one or more of which shall be coterminous, as far as possible, with territorial divisions made for purposes of administration (such as subdivisions or thanas.)³⁰ Each "circle," it goes on, should have an Inspector of Relief Operations who

²⁹ Bengal Famine Code, Revised Edition of 1905, p. 54

³⁰ Bengal Famine Code: Revised Edition of December 1895, p. 16

reports directly to the District Magistrate. Moreover, although relief was to be administered through local channels, there was also the recognition that famine entailed distinct extra-local, as well as extra-provincial, responsibilities. In this context, the Code stipulates that local officials should notify their superiors, and their superiors should notify the Government of India promptly of:

- 1.) The extent to which Imperial aid is likely to be required... if there is any reason to believe that the Provincial funds will prove insufficient to meet the exigencies of famine.
- 2.) The extent to which suspension or remission of land revenue may be considered necessary.
- 3.) The extent to which the Provincial staff requires to be increased by drafts from Imperial departments or otherwise.³¹

Famine is thus to be understood as a central governmental - and even Imperial - concern, which, again, should be kept in mind in relation to all that will follow. The remainder of the Bengal Famine Code is an elaboration of relief operations, running to three hundred and thirty-two pages in all. In short, the Bengal Famine Code is a comprehensive document, with detailed and sophisticated instructions on how to identify and ameliorate famine. I include it here because, as I have said, it was the only guideline for food security available in Bengal during the period under consideration. It is, however, a rather moot point: famine was never declared and the Bengal Famine Code failed to apply. As K.C Neogy, Bengal MLA, in representation of the Indian Association (one of the earliest nationalist organs), testified to the Famine Enquiry Commission in 1944, moreover, the Bengal Famine Code, long before the period of mass starvation in Bengal, had been, in any case, out of print.³² A "Famine Manual" stamped "for official use only" had been drafted in 1941, but was not readily available, even to members of the provincial administration. Neogy himself could only get a hold of it "surreptitiously." Neogy revealed at the Famine Enquiry that the manual itself began: "This Manual is intended *not* to displace the Bengal Famine Code but to indicate how its leading principles ought to be applied." This despite the fact that Neogy, when he asked about the implementing the Famine Code, had been told by the Revenue Minister of Bengal,

³¹ Ibid, p. 12

³² Testimony of K.C. Neogy in *Nanavati Papers*, p. 1287

some months earlier, that it had been "superceded since Provincial Autonomy."³³ Neogy was suspicious.

Enforcing Morale

Short of a comprehensive plan to secure the public welfare in terms of the food supply, then, Government went forward with plans for securing public safety by enthusiastically supporting organizations such as the A.R.P, the Civic Guards and the Bengal Home Guard. The conglomerate of these forces, eventually comprised of several hundred-thousand Bengali civilians, would constitute a somewhat ad-hoc native, and loyalist, police force that - as will be seen in abundant detail - served the colonial regime in diverse and creative ways, many having an only tenuous relationship to the "war effort." These forces would also sow seeds of contention in society at large, and create deep divisions among the population of Bengal, that they would be then called on to police.

In July of 1938 a committee was established to sketch out a plan for the A.R.P. organization in Calcutta and its surrounding suburbs; the docks at Kidderpore and the industrial belt spanning both sides of the river Hooghly - the factory districts of Howrah and Hooghly across the river, and the 24 Parganas adjoining Calcutta proper to the north and south. The Commissioner of the Presidency Division (comprising all the districts involved) was appointed Chair of the coordinating committee, with the District Magistrates for Howrah, Hooghly and the 24 Parganas responsible for development in their respective jurisdictions. The municipality of Calcutta was to be managed by the Commissioner of Police. This last allocation of authority, however, did not please members of the Calcutta Corporation.³⁴ The Corporation, always a hotbed of political contention, objected to infringement on its jurisdiction, arguing that the Mayor of Calcutta, appointed himself by the Corporation, should be in charge of the Calcutta A.R.P.. Concessions were made, but at length the Corporation condemned the scheme as

³³ Ibid

³⁴ The administrative body of "self-rule" in the city, established by the Calcutta Municipal Act of 1923.

"unscientific and puerile,"³⁵ and refused to take part, discounting, furthermore, the likelihood of any "enemy" attack on Calcutta.³⁶

Operating, then, according to the initial plan, "the whole of 1940 and 1941 saw the expansion and development of the Air Raid Precautionary measures...[and] during this period an intensive propaganda campaign for recruitment of volunteers was undertaken."³⁷ Recruitment in Howrah and the suburbs went well, but in Calcutta it did not.³⁸ It seems that the rift with the Corporation had damaged the reputation of the A.R.P. in the city from its very inception. The Corporation's strong affiliation with Congress and its program of "non-cooperation," specifically in relation to the war effort, compromised the situation further. Additionally, "it was no easy task educating the public. There was a common belief that once recruited in the A.R.P. they would be sent abroad as fighting forces."³⁹ On December 10th of 1941, however, a system of pay was introduced and recruitment picked up. With rapid inflation taking hold and increasing scarcity beginning to bite, a remunerative position of local authority in and around Calcutta became increasingly more attractive, despite any political misgivings. By the time of its demobilization at the end of 1945, in addition to at least 66,000 volunteers⁴⁰, the paid A.R.P. ranks numbered over 26,000 members, nearly 14,000 of whom were engaged in "administrative" work.⁴¹

Given that the Indian Army itself, as late as mid-1942, was "starved of money and poorly equipped,"⁴² the A.R.P. had its work cut out. Along all the main thoroughfares of Calcutta, as well as throughout the residential and industrial districts, "slit trenches" were dug to serve as shelters in case of bombing.⁴³ The slit trenches were protected by "baffle walls" made of local brick, and reinforced with sand bags. Baffle walls were also constructed at the entrances to governmental and residential buildings in the downtown area that would also serve as public shelters. A Mosquito Control Officer was appointed

³⁵ Chatterjee, Pranab Kumar, p. 104

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Sen, P.K., p. 4

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Casey Diaries, Feb 9th, 1944

⁴¹ WBSA, Home Confidential, Confidential Fortnightly Report on Bengal, Second Half December, 1945

⁴² Bayly and Harper, p. 72

⁴³ All information following is taken from WBSA, Home Confidential, W-551/41

to ensure the cleanliness of the trenches, and a store of bleaching powder was stockpiled by the A.R.P. for the same purpose. Fearing the possibility of an enemy attack on the Corporation water treatment facility, arrangements were made to sink 2000 deep tube wells (at an average depth of 250 feet) and 500 shallow tube wells (averaging 70 feet in depth.) In Calcutta, 20 hospitals were also selected and asked to reserve 100 beds on their premises for A.R.P. purposes. After the initial failure of the warning systems, resources were allocated for an increase in the number of "hooters," and the system was augmented by gongs and conch shells, that would carry the warning into the adjacent countryside.

In addition to the labor that such extensive measures necessarily involved, A.R.P. officers were appointed to serve as local Wardens, and managers assigned to various work crews were commissioned to oversee and execute lighting restrictions, fire fighting, rescue and demolition, medical treatment, gas decontamination, and corpse disposal. The question of the scope of the A.R.P. in relation to Mortuary Services was subsequently addressed in a governmental circular, and it was found that their duties in this regard "should not be construed narrowly."⁴⁴ In this context, mass burial pits were dug at Gobra on the northern outskirts of the city to accommodate many thousand of corpses.⁴⁵ The A.R.P. was also made officially responsible for the maintenance of essential services such as sewage, gas, electric, and food supply.⁴⁶ Its role in relation to maintenance of the food supply was not further elaborated upon. In the A.R.P. Handbook "cooperation with military authorities" was also listed as a central responsibility, as was "control of the civil population," this last responsibility according to "special schemes for maintenance of law and order."⁴⁷ These schemes for maintaining law and order were not, however, outlined in any detail. The authority of the A.R.P. over the public was thus left open-ended.

In respect to these various duties, A.R.P. staff were provided with uniforms that would confirm their level of rank. The Controller, as well as Chief Wardens, Additional Chief Wardens, Deputy Chief Wardens, Officers in charge of Services, Assistant Officers of Services, and Instructors were to wear khaki drill tunics ("as worn by officers of the

⁴⁴ WBSA, Home Confidential, W-112/43

⁴⁵ WBSA, Home Confidential, W-351/46

⁴⁶ *A.R.P. Handbook*, WBSA, Home Political, W-551/41

⁴⁷ *Ibid*

Indian Police") fastened with four A.R.P. silver buttons. Slacks or shorts were also to be of a "khaki drill," as were shirts, socks or stockings and neckties. Uniformity was maintained by a mandate of brown shoes, and the whole outfit was topped off with a steel helmet also bearing the A.R.P. insignia. Lesser administrative ranks were deprived of the tunic, but were to maintain the khaki patterns outlined above. And finally, as proclaimed in the A.R.P. Handbook, "All ranks when on duty, and only when on duty, shall wear on the left upper forearm a navy blue brassard on which the prescribed Air Raid Precautions Service Badge shall remain imposed. The brassard and badge will be supplied by the Provincial Government and will remain the property of the crown."⁴⁸ To further ensure the legitimacy of their authority, Ordinance No. IV of 1941, signed by the then Viceroy of India, Victor Hope, Second Marquess of Linlithgow, declared: "No suit, prosecution or other legal proceeding shall lie against the Controller or any member of an Air Raid Precautions service for anything which is in good faith done or intended to be done in pursuance of this Ordinance or any rules made there under."⁴⁹ As such, the A.R.P. were granted pervasive immunity in relation to their nebulously defined civil authority.

In addition to the A.R.P., the central government, pressed by the *ostensive* immediacies of war, began organizing a second mechanism to maintain order amongst urban populations in the provinces. On November 1st, 1941 it was thus announced: "His Excellency the Governor of Bengal [Sir John Arthur Herbert] has, in the exercise of the powers conferred by the Civic Guard Ordinance, 1940, made certain rules for the Civic Guard organization in Bengal."⁵⁰ The report continues,

According to these rules, the Commissioner of Police is responsible for the organization in Calcutta, while elsewhere such responsibility rests on the superintendent of police under the general guidance of the District Magistrate. Recruits shall be formally enrolled with due ceremony on parade and during this ceremony each recruit shall take the oath of allegiance to His Majesty the King Emperor.⁵¹

At the time of this announcement the duties of the Civic Guard were few, but broad in scope. They were:

- 1.) to assist the regular police force in the protection of the civil population

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ WBSA, Home Confidential W-477/42

⁵⁰ *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, November 1, 1940

⁵¹ Ibid

against the forces of crime and disorder

- 2.) to work in close touch with air raid precautions and to maintain and enforce order during black-outs and air raid alarms
- 3.) to perform such duties in connection with the protection of persons, the of property or the public safety as the Provincial Government may, from time to time, assign to them.⁵²

A few weeks later, however, a new resolution was drafted in fear that the importance of the Civic Guard would be "lost if the members of the Civic Guard or public generally think that the organization is only to function within the necessarily narrow limits of [these] statutory rules."⁵³ As such, the promotion of communal harmony, the prevention of "the spread of false rumors and dissemination of subversive literature," and the circulation of "accurate war news" were all amended to the duties of the Civic Guard by this second order. Additionally, it was noted, "Government expect that every member of the Civic Guard will consider himself a servant of the public at all times, and be ready to help, without hope of reward, anybody who is to be found in distress or difficulty."⁵⁴

The lack of reward, however - and again - did seem to inhibit recruitment as well as enthusiasm. In government's quarterly "War Diary" of Summer 1942, A.D. Gordon, Inspector-General of the Bengal Police, writes,

In Dacca city the Civic Guards assisted the police during the outbreak of communal hostilities...in most districts, however, the Civic Guards have been inactive; little progress has been made with training in drill and law, while physical training has been [altogether] neglected...it is hoped that with the posting of Adjutants and Quarter-masters, the issue of new uniforms, *and a scheme of allowances*...the waning enthusiasm will be revived.⁵⁵

These hopes seemed to have been realized. The scheme to pay the Civic Guards bore fruit. By the next year the ranks of the Civic Guard in Calcutta alone numbered close to 5000, and they acted as an effective "special police" in the urban centers of Bengal.⁵⁶ Full time employees of the Guard, by 1944, were earning Rs. 30 per month, with a Rs. 11 "dearness allowance," and part-timers were getting Rs. 7. Keeping in mind that the

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, November 7, 1940

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ WBSA, Home Confidential, W-77/42 (italics mine)

⁵⁶ Casey Diaries, May 7th, 1944

average salary at this same time for a higher secondary school teacher was around Rs. 25 per month without any dearness allowance⁵⁷ - and taking into consideration, also, the additional privileges that can be assumed to have accrued in relation to such a position of Imperially recognized authority during a period of acute scarcity and administrative chaos - it can be ventured that the benefits of membership in the Civic Guard were significant.

Control in the countryside was an even more complex question. With its more than 90,000 villages and 20,000 miles of water communications winding through thick jungle, together with what Sugata Bose calls an "infinite variety of local agrarian structures,"⁵⁸ the province of Bengal proved a governmental conundrum from the earliest days of its incorporation into Empire. From the times of the East India Company, colonial forays into the Bengal countryside were "a journey into the unknown in more than one sense."⁵⁹ With Permanent Settlement, and a transfer of revenue collecting responsibilities to local landlords (*zamindars*), Government was able to maintain a light administrative footprint, extracting revenue and raw product from the countryside through native agents, and intervening directly only as necessary - to enforce order. Order in rural Bengal, however, seemed chronically beyond colonial reach. As late as 1942, even as rebellion gripped the countryside, the vast hinterland of Calcutta still remained something of a mystery to colonial administrators. In his testimony before the Famine Enquiry Commission, Special Officer L.G. Pinnell, in charge of the "denial" program of 1942 defended his less-than-stellar record irritably:

I do hope that some of the members of the Commission will go on tour by the watercourses along the coastal routes of Bengal; if they do so they will appreciate how impossible it is to administer that area in detail with the staff that exists...the whole area is a network of tidal *khal* running between very big and dangerous rivers and your staff consists of the sub-divisional officer, perhaps a couple of circle officers for an area of 600 square miles, and a *thana* staff of a sub-inspector with perhaps one assistant for an area of - I would not like to exactly say.

⁵⁷ Casey Diary, January 27th, 1944

⁵⁸ From this "infinite variety" Sugata Bose is able, however, to construct a working typology of agrarian patterns of land use in his *Agrarian Bengal*.

⁵⁹ Ranjit Guha, *Rule of Property*, p. 13. Guha traces the difficulties that company revenue officials had in sorting out the heterogeneous nature of Bengal's rural land relations based on "tradition recorded only in memory and customs embedded in a variety of local usages [which] wielded an authority equal to that of any written code."

Such environmental difficulties were considerably complicated during the period under study, not only by the threat of external enemies, but perhaps more tangibly by what the Viceroy called "by far the most serious rebellion since that of 1857" - the 'Quit India' movement, to which I will return.

Government, however, could not content itself with civil defense measures that focused on the urban centers alone, which comprised only 10 percent of Bengal's population. In Memorandum No. 1379 of 1942, therefore, the Governor of Bengal, acting under Government of India authority, introduced the Bengal Home Guard, or *Bangya Griharakshi Dal*. The duties of the Home Guard were officially four in number:

- 1.) the preservation of peace and order
- 2.) aiding and assisting evacuees or refugees who may pass through the area
- 3.) raising and stiffening the morale of the people, discounting and denying false rumor and rumor-mongering generally, and;
- 4.) in the areas near the coast and eastern frontiers, watching for and reporting anything of a suspicious nature.

To these was added, it was added, that "if necessary, in times of emergency, they would also be available for maintaining the food supply and similar activities."⁶⁰ No specific plans for this last function were, however, outlined.

The Home Guard would be organized under police supervision and would operate in rural areas only. Circle Officers and Circle Inspectors of Police, acting under direction of District Magistrates were responsible to enlist ranks in the following manner:

within the area of a police station they will co-opt two influential non-officials, of whom one will be Hindu and one Muslim...in consultation with these co-opted members Circle Officer and Circle Inspector of Police will select a suitable local man to be the Captain... the Captain will be entrusted with enrolling a group of...at least 25 effectives.⁶¹

In this way Government would be able to extend its authority, if not its own human resources, into the far reaches of the countryside. Home Guard members, the memorandum goes on to say, would be required to wear an identifying badge "indicating

⁶⁰ WBSA, Home Confidential, W-477/42

⁶¹ Ibid

in Bengali letters the title of the organization." They would, furthermore, be armed with *lathis*, but would receive no pay. Perhaps based on previous experience with recruitment in such volunteer organizations, however, it was added in the initial memorandum itself that, "if the Home Guards prove a success and establish themselves in the esteem and affection of the persons whose services they are enrolled, there is no need to anticipate insurmountable difficulties in the way of providing them with uniforms and possibly other amenities..."⁶² By the end of the war the Home Guards in Bengal numbered close to 200,000.

In addition to the considerable forces mobilized by special governmental sanction, the regular police force in Bengal numbered 38,981, nearly 18,000 of whom were armed.⁶³ Meanwhile a massive build-up of military troops continued apace, with All-India numbers increasing from 225,172 in 1939 to nearly 1.4 million by January 1st of 1943.⁶⁴ With waves of troops passing through the city to be stationed in Bengal frontier districts, and on their way to fortify other strategic locations throughout Southeast Asia, the "defense" of Calcutta became a central goal. Bengal's industrial infrastructure by 1944, moreover, accounted for as much as 80% of munitions production in India,⁶⁵ and textile factories in and around Calcutta fed the voracious appetite for cloth to uniform and shelter Allied armies operating throughout the region, and beyond.⁶⁶ As such, Viceroy Linlithgow well recognized the vital strategic importance of Calcutta, worrying even before Japan's successes in Southeast Asia, that losing the city would be "tantamount to the 'loss of India.'"⁶⁷

Hearts and Minds

For many Indians, however, the involvement of India in Britain's war effort was, itself, a grave injustice. The battle for freedom from colonial rule trumped the battle to ensure Britain's supremacy - particularly in colonial Asia. In 1939 when the Viceroy declared war on India's behalf, without any consultation with Indian politicians, long

⁶² Ibid

⁶³ Bhattacharya, Sanjoy, p. 42 Numbers from second half of December, 1942.

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 24. Actual number for Jan. 1, 1943: 1,382,048

⁶⁵ Casey Diary, February 8, 1944

⁶⁶ In his essay "State and Class in India, 1939-1945," Indivar Kamtekar suggests the verity of the saying that "India clothed the armies east of Suez." p. 195

⁶⁷ Chatterjee, Pranab Kumar, p. 103

standing resentment of colonial rule only sharpened. Radical Bengali nationalist, Subhas Chandra Bose, resigned from the All-India Congress leadership after Mahatma Gandhi refused to launch a mass movement against being co-opted, without consent, into war,⁶⁸ and the Indian National Congress was shaken to its roots. Despite Gandhi's note of caution, however, opposition to the war was widespread, and the risk of rebellion could not be overlooked. On June 1st 1940 the War Cabinet in London thus approved the Viceroy's scheme for a Revolutionary Movements Ordinance, "conferring extraordinary powers [on the Government of India] in the event of civil disobedience."⁶⁹ But as maverick British journalist, Arthur Moore, former Chief Editor of the Calcutta *Statesman*, wrote to incoming Secretary of State for India Leo Amery a few weeks later, "the idea that, with their base in England largely out of the reckoning, the handful of British here can, by invoking a Defense of the Realm Act, keep army and police control and hold the country down, is dangerous madness."⁷⁰

In October, riding the wave of discontent, the Congress High Command decided to withdraw its ministers from the seven provinces that it controlled since the 1937 provincial elections, to protest unrepresentative involvement in Britain's war. Section 93 of the Defense of India Rules was enacted, which gave the imperially appointed Governors of these provinces emergency rule for several years to come. Provincial Autonomy, established in 1935 to diffuse demands for self-governance, was turning out to be something else in practice than what it had been imagined in theory. Linlithgow himself, panicked by the breakdown in governmental order, according to the Secretary of State in London, "was getting very desperate, felt he could do nothing and wanted to resign and come home."⁷¹ Perhaps his sense of dignity could not accommodate the nitty-gritty business of holding an empire together in times of war and rebellion. According to his Reforms Commissioner, Henry Hodson, the Viceroy "was a formidable-looking man. Very tall, ungainly in motion, with a long solemn face like a sad clown that belied his rich humor, he displayed the deterrent reserve of a naturally shy man. As if this were not

⁶⁸ Bayly and Harper, p. 17

⁶⁹ *The Leo Amery Diaries*, p. 606

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p. 605-6

⁷¹ *Ibid*, p. 621

enough to awe an official caller at Viceroy's House, he always sat on a big throne-like chair raised several inches on a dais behind a massive desk."⁷²

War did, however, facilitate what Winston Churchill regarded to be the "bulwark of British rule in India," namely "the Hindu-Muslim feud."⁷³ Communal relations in India, and particularly in Bengal, had grown increasingly tense since the Communal Award of 1932 was realized in the provincial elections of 1937. The question of quotas in government services, in particular, was contentious and divisive, and Hindu/Muslim relations were entrenched in economic inequalities, but alliances were, as of yet, still complicated and fluid. The province at the time was 55% Muslim, and most of the Muslim majority was comprised of poor agriculturists in eastern districts, while the Muslim League continued to garner the bulk of its support from the capitalist elite in Calcutta. In the 1937 elections, populist Fazlul Huq, a Muslim perennially in conflict with the leadership of the All-India Muslim League, managed to form a coalition Ministry in Bengal that garnered support along class, rather than communal, lines, which left the League scrambling to gain a more representative foothold in Bengal. Meanwhile, with the Congress leadership in jail, the Hindu Mahasabha hastened to fortify its own political base. At its 1939 national meeting, held in Calcutta, the Hindu leaders convened with alarm to remedy the imagined realities of a "dying Hindu race." Central to the platform were plans to incorporate schedule castes, tribals, and Sikhs into a newly defined "Hindudom." Vinayak ("Veer") Savarkar in his Presidential address argued that "every person is a Hindu who regards... this land from the Indus to the seas as his fatherland as well as his holy land."⁷⁴ Such rhetoric, however, only belies the anxiety with which communalist organizations such as the Mahasabha greeted the reality of a prevailing *lack* of unity entailed by such categories as "Hindu." Nevertheless, when Congress announced their opposition to India being co-opted into war dissent was officially coded as a "Hindu" phenomenon, and similarly, the Muslim League's support of the British war effort was extended to signify "Muslim" loyalty more generally. In this way, the progress of the war served to concretize previously fluid allegiances in

⁷² Henry Hodson's Autobiography at: <http://www.athelstane.co.uk/hvhodson/hvhbiogr/biogr09.htm> (last accessed 1/20/10, 1:02 PM), Chapter IX, p. 1

⁷³ *The Leo Amery Diaries*, p. 605

⁷⁴ WBSA, Intelligence Branch, file# 822/39

pernicious and catastrophic ways, reifying the rhetoric of communal exclusivity espoused by both the Hindu Mahasabha and the Muslim League, and realizing the simplistic Hindu/Muslim binary in increasingly "official" ways.

Particularly in the early days of the war, however, a majority of the population of Bengal remained skeptical of the colonial government's "defense" measures. On the third air raid test exercise held in May of 1941, despite extensive propaganda, "the public again stood or walked about on streets and in the open and made no effort to take shelter. Buses and trams were not emptied and nowhere was there any indication of instructions...being enforced."⁷⁵ A month prior, the A.R.P. Controller had hesitated to set a date for this exercise because, he explained, the [gramophone] records which [were]...being played on the publicity vans [had] not yet been in circulation long enough."⁷⁶ No doubt the vans would need to continue their rounds now, before the goal of holding exercises "with diminishing and vaguer periods of warning - until they can be held without warning at all," could be realized. And again there were systemic problems contributing to disorder: "the warning system was [again] found to be totally inadequate and revealed defects which were not so prominent in previous tests. The number of sirens...is insufficient and reports indicate that mill hooters are unsuitable for conveying the warning."⁷⁷ As of yet, Air Raid Precautions were something of a farce.

While the imminent dangers of war failed to properly mobilize the citizens of Calcutta, however, the privileges associated with Civil Defense Services membership were gaining a certain, if unsanctioned, currency. During the third exercise, in Sovabazar, not only were "numbers of *bhadralok*"⁷⁸ walking about on their business and ignoring the exercise," but even more alarmingly, "two *chokras*"⁷⁹ aged 13 or 14 were seen wearing A.R.P. armllets."⁸⁰ An investigation was launched and it was found that at least seventeen firms in Calcutta were selling unauthorized A.R.P. brassards and badges to civilians. An order under Defense of India Rules was issued prohibiting manufacture or sale of unauthorized badges, and a directive was circulated stating that "it should be

⁷⁵ WBSA Home Political, W-72/41

⁷⁶ Ibid

⁷⁷ Ibid

⁷⁸ Middle-class, educated "gentlefolk"

⁷⁹ Menials

⁸⁰ Ibid

made clear that anyone found in unauthorized possession of such articles shall be severely dealt with."⁸¹ Several orders followed to detail the exact procedure of authorization and distribution of badges and other identifying paraphernalia related to A.R.P. and Civic Guard membership - to what effect it is difficult to discover.

But in Bengal, where anti-British sentiment had long been sharp, there were also more alarming signs of disorder. Posters were hung in 1940 warning:

The British Empire Is On The Verge Of Annihilation: Don't Be A Recruited Soldier!"⁸²

Leaflets, entitled "Civic Guard or a Treacherous Force?" were circulated, and strident anti-war appeals were openly publicized:

Civic Guard Corps of Government is a Devilish Scheme for Suppression

If the British Agents Would Approach You for War Contributions
Turn them Out!

Do Not Betray Your Country by Enrolling Yourself in the Civic Guard!

Killed by Hitler on the other side of the ocean,
the British Raj has greatly increased repression on us.
Let us get ready to retaliate!"⁸³

Distrust of the British war effort filtered down to the population of Calcutta and took on less overtly political guises as well. In some communities participation in the war effort was considered unseemly, if not treasonous. In the struggle for survival overtly political gestures may tend to become attenuated. In Bimal Kar's novel, *Dewal* - the most insightful and thorough treatment of the era here under consideration⁸⁴ - a small, lower middle-class family moves to Calcutta from a rural village in Bardhaman subdivision of western Bengal. They arrive in Calcutta in 1939. Father, Chandrakant, is convinced to try his luck in the big city by a cousin-brother who has opened a publishing business in Calcutta. The economic life of the countryside is moribund and it is all Chandrakant can do to eek out a living as a schoolteacher in the village. In Calcutta there

⁸¹ WBSA, Home Confidential,, W-477/42

⁸² All the following from WBSA, Intelligence Branch, file #250-40. Translated from Bengali in file.

⁸³ Ibid

⁸⁴ Many thanks to Gautam Bhadra for *insisting* on the importance of this novel.

are *real* opportunities. The publishing, industry, in particular is booming.⁸⁵ Though he has taken pride in his life in the village, the enticement of income wins out. Once in the city, however, his labors are exploited by his relative whose greed and exploitation fuel his cousin's demise. Overworked and out of sorts, Chandrakant dies of a fever, leaving his small family in dire straits. Ritimoy, Chandrakant's widow, is left with their two biological children, Shudha and Basu, as well as a young girl adopted at the time of another relative's death. They cling desperately to Calcutta for survival, knowing there is nothing left for them in the impoverished countryside. Shudha, the eldest child, leaves college and joins a trading firm, earning enough to keep the family precariously afloat amidst rising prices and increasing scarcity. Her brother Basu, an errant and angry young man facing a dismal future, joins the Civic Guard. Shudha reports his enlistment into the Guard to their mother with horror:

Look at your son! Determined to drive out the last trace of dignity that this family has left. Walking the streets like some petty village watchman in the company of a gang of other thieves and miscreants.⁸⁶

Ritimoy asks if he will be sent to war, to which question Shudha responds caustically, "How should I know? Now he's reduced himself to a common constable, I suppose if he feels the need for a few more coppers, he'll take on the job of a sweeper or a crematorium worker!"⁸⁷

Even after Japan's entry into the war, while there was considerable anxiety and uncertainty in Calcutta and the countryside, an undertone of cynicism remained. Significant contributions to the war fund failed to materialize, and withdrawals from post office banks further undermined the finance of the war.⁸⁸ Measures to improve "morale" continued to meet with failure, and repeated calls to "stand to" were met with the contrary inclination to flee. The alarm with which the British looked east from Calcutta, in short, was not shared by many among the population of Bengal. In fact, the vulnerability of the British Empire was greeted with a measure of glee as well as uncertainty. Even as the

⁸⁵ According to the Government of India's "War History of the Labor Department" private presses in India increased from 79,677 in 1939-40 to 1,818,810 in 1942-43. Table reproduced in Sanjoy Bhattacharya, p. 77.

⁸⁶ Kar, p. 39 (Translation mine)

⁸⁷ Ibid

⁸⁸ See Kamtekar 's "State and Class in India, 1939-1945," p. 199 "The Indian public showed no desire whatsoever to contribute to the state's finances."

A.R.P. and Civic Guard paraded in the streets, behind closed doors; in schoolrooms, playgrounds, and in Bengali kitchens, a humorous ditty - that few would forget⁸⁹ - made the rounds:

***Sa-re-ga-ma-pa-dha-ni
Bom phelechhe Japani,
Bomar maidhe keute sap
British bole bapre-bap!***

(Do-re-mi-fa-so-la-ti
A bomb was dropped by the Japanese
In the bomb is a cobra snake
The British shout "For Heaven's Sake!")

As such popular expressions demonstrate: the threats facing British imperialism in Asia during WWII were not easily transferable to the colonized population.

The Countryside

Particularly in the countryside, concern for the war was muted by more pressing concerns of elemental survival that had developed over the last decade. In 1934, Satish Chandra Mitter published a book with the retrospectively (and sadly) ironic title *A Recovery Plan for Bengal*. In his appended, hand typed, appreciation to this work, Rabindranath Tagore calls *Recovery Plan* "the best possible book one can wish for," at a time when "our villages are driven to desolation," and the inhabitants of the countryside "are grown inconspicuous by the deadly pallor of their anemic existence." Mitter himself paints a grim picture of rural Bengal circa 1934. "It is evident," he wrote, "to anyone familiar with agricultural conditions...and with the lives of the cultivators that they exist rather than live, and that the margin between starvation and existence is an extremely small one."⁹⁰ The index of jute prices, set at 100 in 1914, plummeted to 40 in 1934.⁹¹ Jute producers, particularly in eastern Bengal were pushed to the brink. Rice prices, similarly, were perilously deflated, with the value to the cultivator at that point, half that

⁸⁹ Of the many Bengali people surviving from these times that I have interviewed, all remember this rhyme gleefully. It is interesting, moreover, that the *next* generation, those born after the war, also know this rhyme and can recite it - with similar satisfaction.

⁹⁰ Mitter, p. 42

⁹¹ Ibid, p. 5

which it had been five years earlier.⁹² Malaria had depopulated important sectors of the economy, and the fishing industry was in shambles.⁹³ Cattle breeding and milk cows were being slaughtered because of economic necessity, and, with the cost of living standing at 150% of pre-WWI levels, the citizens of Bengal's countryside, by 1934, Mitter cautioned, "[could not] but be hunger-stricken and starving, and eventually insolvent."⁹⁴

Writing many years later, historian Sugata Bose touches upon many of the same themes as S.C. Mitter had, extending his argument into the 1940s. Restrictions on rent increases, mandated by the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885, compounded by increasing pressures of population and diminishing sizes of land holdings among the gentry, made it increasingly difficult for landlords to profit from rent extraction. Rural capitalist turned to usurious credit schemes to augment their diminishing rent returns, which further straitened the already impoverished peasantry.⁹⁵ With increasing commercialization of grain markets and the vicissitudes of a volatile jute trade, "many peasants fell into debt and could only carry on by borrowing seed and grain from year to year; and in course of time, some were reduced to a position close to that of landless laborers."⁹⁶ As such cultivators were trapped in a cycle of debt and repayment that left them on the verge of starvation between crops. Small scale producers (which comprised the majority of agriculturalists in Bengal⁹⁷) were forced to sell their products at deflated prices during the post-harvest glut in order to pay loans taken during the pre-harvest "starvation" season. Interest rates on loans ranged as high as 75%, and so needed to be repaid as soon as repayment was possible. Lack of local storage facilities also meant that peasants lacked the resources to stockpile against annual shortage. By mid-August, yearly, many were, again, borrowing against imminent starvation. This cycle led to the increasing impoverishment of the countryside during the first three decades of the twentieth century.

⁹² Ibid

⁹³ Ibid, p. 23

⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 13

⁹⁵ Bose (1986), p. 102

⁹⁶ Ibid, 31

⁹⁷ Table 1.1 on page 24 of Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal*, taken from the Land Revenue Commission of Bengal, 1940, indicates that in eastern districts of Bengal 84% of families had land holding less than 5 acres, in western and central Bengal 72% held lands less than 5 acres.

During the depression things only got worse. Beginning in the late 20's, there was a precipitous flight of capital from the countryside and the rural credit market totally collapsed, leading to the abject destitution of millions of agriculturalists in Bengal.⁹⁸ Deflation of prices on rice and jute throughout the decade meant unpaid credit balances, which, again, deepened a crisis of liquidity. While "recovery" was seen in the international sector by the middle of the decade, credit relations in Bengal failed to rebound.⁹⁹ The cycle of subsistence and starvation remained. To make ends meet in the absence of ready credit, cultivators entered into usufructary mortgage relations and lost their lands, or managed to hang on from year to year by selling off family ornaments, brass-wear and other moveable possessions. By the turn of the decade moneylenders "had shut their money-chests...[and] the supply of grain had largely been taken out of the orbit of credit and subjected to the convulsions of a wartime product market"¹⁰⁰ The poor of Bengal had been through a perilous decade. By 1940, as such, large segments of the rural population were already deeply impoverished and, indeed, starving.

Due to dislocations in commodity markets as a result of war, meanwhile, by September of 1940 the price of rice had risen 33% in a single year.¹⁰¹ In October, 1940, Mihirlal Chatterjee, member of the All India Village Association issued an appeal to the provincial government in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*:

That the gloom of a frightful famine has cast its shadow all over Birbhum cannot be contradicted by anyone...it is high time that the authorities at the head of the Provincial Government should gather first hand knowledge of the exact situation and do everything in their power to combat the famine. Let it never be said to the eternal disgrace of the responsible ministers at the head of a provincial autonomous Government that, like the bureaucratic administration of the past, they have also studiously refrained from declaring famine when actually that condition prevailed.¹⁰²

Dr. Profulla Chandra Ghosh, ardent Gandhian and future Chief Minister of independent West Bengal, set up the West Bengal Famine Relief Committee to raise relief funds for the "famine-stricken people of Midnapur, Birbhum, Bankura and Murshidabad."¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Bose (1986), p. 111

⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 125

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, p. 140

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 88

¹⁰² *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, October 27th, 1940

¹⁰³ Ibid

Floods during the monsoon season had compounded the difficulties of inflation and scarcity was taking a toll. On the same page a report came out that the A.R.P. would hold its first "black-out" exercise in Calcutta on November 6th, plunging the city into darkness in preparation for attacks from the enemies of Britain, at this time Germany, who might, "imminently" begin bombing the Second City of British Empire. Disinterest in this exercise, given the prevailing economic situation, is understandable.

A year later, in September of 1941, the price of rice had risen another 36%,¹⁰⁴ and distress deepened for many in rural Bengal who had lived on a razor's edge of subsistence for years past. In its quarterly diary of war activities the Bengal Government reported:

In the districts the abnormal rise in prices of paddy, rice and piece goods has hit the poorer section of the people very hard. Though the general rise in prices is taken to be an outcome of the war, the failure to exercise any effective control over the price of rice...has been a great disappointment to many.¹⁰⁵

In Noakhali and Tippera, eastern Bengal, with jute prices failing to follow the inflationary curve, the rice-purchasing power of jute cultivators plummeted still further. The Commissioner worried that "economic distress and the high price of rice may lead to organized goondaism."¹⁰⁶ "Test Works" - the primary indicator of famine laid out in the Bengal Famine Code - were opened in both Tippera and Noakhali. Rates of recompense were negligible, but the works drew "considerable numbers."¹⁰⁷ The "test" had proven positive, but no further resources were expended and famine was not declared. Hunger marches were organized to demand relief,¹⁰⁸ and in north Bengal sharecroppers (*adhiars*) and landless laborers looted rice paddy from the storehouses of rich landholders (*jotedars*.)¹⁰⁹ Reports came in from all over the province of widespread distress. Prices of sugar, cooking oil, kerosene and pulses of all varieties were on the rise.¹¹⁰ "The price

¹⁰⁴ Bose (1986), p. 214

¹⁰⁵ "War Diary, Aug. - Oct. 1941," WBSA, Home Confidential, W-60/41

¹⁰⁶ Quoted in Bose (1986), p. 214. A "Goonda" is something like a "thug," "goondaism" is something of a code word during the entire period to refer to demonstrations and/or violence perpetrated against government, local authority, or military.

¹⁰⁷ Bose (1986), p. 215

¹⁰⁸ Ibid

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 261

¹¹⁰ "War Diary, Aug. - Oct. 1941," WBSA, Home Confidential, W-60/41

of yarn hit the hand-loom weavers in the province so hard that they had to suspend business."¹¹¹ And yet the word "famine" failed to appear in any official circles.

In the same quarter "25 important articles on A.R.P., war, war funds, etc. were published [by the Government of Bengal's Publicity Department.] 38 press notes were issued and 22 leaflets, pamphlets, etc. were distributed, and movie tone war news reels and war films, prepared, purchased, or hired, continue to be displayed by the National Welfare Units."¹¹² For this last purpose Government had at their disposal, not only the six publicity vans already mentioned (which moved primarily in urban areas), but also 8 bullock carts, and 4 river boats with which they might be able to penetrate the countryside and spread the word of imminent danger.¹¹³ One can only imagine how such efforts might have been received. According to the Director of Public Instruction, literacy rates in Bengal were not more than 15%.¹¹⁴ According to the Minister of Public Health there were approximately 1,500 doctors working with 6000 available hospital beds to tend to the medical needs of some 58 million rural inhabitants of the province.¹¹⁵ Life expectancy was 27 years. In this context, there is little doubt that knowledge about, not to mention support for, the British war effort was extremely limited. Illiteracy, ill-health and hunger were far more pressing concerns.

Even after Japan's entry into the war, concern in the countryside was focused elsewhere. As historian Sunil Sen wrote in 1972, "The slogan of 'resist Japan' [could have] hardly made any sense to the [impoverished, illiterate and disenfranchised] peasant."¹¹⁶ In a poignant scene in Satyajit Ray's 1973 movie *Asani Sanket* ("Distant Thunder"), in a typical village of central Bengal circa 1942, the population is struggling to survive. Prices have risen prohibitively, the poorest have already begun to starve, and the rest have begun to worry. An educated member of the village reads a newspaper to a gathered crowd. "The British have been defeated! Singapore has fallen to the Japanese!" This news is accompanied by much excitement. One naive member of the audience enquires hesitantly, however, "...but where is Singapore?" The newsreader

¹¹¹ Ibid

¹¹² Ibid

¹¹³ Bhattacharya, Sanjoy, p. 75

¹¹⁴ Casey Diary, Jan. 27th, 1944

¹¹⁵ Ibid, Jan. 23rd, 1944

¹¹⁶ Quoted by Bose (1986), p. 262

pauses to consider, then responds confidently, "not far from Midnapur..."¹¹⁷ Perhaps the "bullock vans" had not made it yet to this particular village...

Establishing Priorities

In the factories surrounding Calcutta there were also acute economic anxieties. From the earliest days of the war, strikes for wage increases, "dearness allowances," war bonuses, and the opening of controlled shops were common. Labor conditions were poor, wages were low, and job security was always tenuous.¹¹⁸ The dominant commercial industry in Bengal, at the time, was jute, employing more than 285,000 workers, the majority of whom were migrant laborers from Bihar, United Provinces and Orissa,¹¹⁹ Labor in jute mills, as well as in cotton mills and other industries, was primarily unskilled, and as such workers remained highly replaceable. Nevertheless, during the war industrial management needed to maintain a steady work force, even amidst rising prices and increasing insecurities. War meant profit, and maximization of profit demanded stable labor conditions. As operations got underway in the Middle East and North Africa, India was supplying as much as 1.2 *billion* yards of cloth per year.¹²⁰ Much of the production of cloth was done in the factories of industrial Calcutta. The inflation that such a boom in industry precipitated, however, tended to impoverish and disaffect an already marginal labor force, impinging on record profits. As such, concessions had to be made.

In November, 1939 a strike involving more than 11,000 workers at the Hukumchand Jute Mill in the northern suburbs of Calcutta drew quick response from the Indian Jute Mills Association (IJMA). Bengal's jute production at the time accounted for more than half the supply of jute world-wide.¹²¹ After a long slump, prices for jute manufactures were showing signs of resuscitation with the advent of war. The IJMA quickly settled the strike at the Hukumchand mill and instituted a flat-rate wage increase of ten percent throughout the industry. In 1941 there were, however, additional strikes in

¹¹⁷ Midnapur is a district 100 miles east of Calcutta, often and again, the center of anti-British "terrorist" activity in Bengal.

¹¹⁸ See Chakrabarty (1989)

¹¹⁹ Chakrabarty (1989), p. 105. Actual numbers for jute mill workers place of origin, 1940: 11.6% Bengal, 43.1% Bihar, 36.4% U.P., 3.4% Orissa, 2.4% other.

¹²⁰ Kamtekar, (2002a), p. 195

¹²¹ Chakrabarty (1989) p. 9

the jute industry around questions of dearness allowance, war bonuses, and related issues. In May, 9000 workers at Baranagar jute mills went on strike, and in July 12,000 workers at the Anglo Indian Jute Mills followed suit.¹²² In September Calcutta Tramways and Calcutta Port Trust workers also began petitioning for war-bonuses, and as early as March, 1940, 20,000 workers of the Calcutta Corporation; street cleaners, sewage workers, and other menial laborers, went on strike. The strike ended with police firings and small wage concessions. Earlier, the President of the Bengal Labor Association moved a resolution in the legislature asking for the grant of a 25% war-bonus to *all* factory and mill labor.¹²³ The resolution was defeated, but two things were made apparent: 1.) that even early in Britain's war effort, inflation had begun to pinch industrial labor seriously and labor would use its leverage to survive in times of acute scarcity, and 2.) that industry had both the means and the will to take the measures necessary to keep the wheels turning, and would do so to maintain production. This dual dynamic defines labor relations throughout the period under consideration.

If industrial interests were initially reluctant to grant the war-related demands, however, and labor in Calcutta was not easily mollified. The appeal of remaining in oppressive mills and factories, and run the additional risk of being targeted by "enemies," began to pale just as labor requirements were increasing. In this context, in February of 1941, the Essential Services Maintenance Ordinance was authorized by the Government of India. The Ordinance defined as "essential" war industries, not only cotton and jute mills, armament factories, engineering firms, paper mills, and printing facilities, but also tobacco factories and gin presses, as well as food service workers, stone masons and employees of municipal, provincial or central governments.¹²⁴ All of these workers, because they were deemed "essential" to the war-effort, were put under extraordinary restrictions:

The ordinance makes it an offence punishable with imprisonment for a term which may extend to one year and with fine, for any person [covered under the ordinance] to abandon such employment or absent himself without reasonable excuse. The fact that a person apprehends that by continuing in his employment

¹²² Chatterjee, Pranab Kumar, p. 84

¹²³ Ibid p. 77

¹²⁴ Bhattacharya, Sanjoy, p. 85

he will be exposed to increased physical danger does not constitute a reasonable excuse.¹²⁵

In declaring the workers, essential, in another sense, the government was also signifying them as "priority" citizens. Such a designation would have a significance in the coming years that was of primary importance - as the differential "priority" of citizens of Bengal became a measure of life and death.

The process of "making essential," as Bernard Cohn has famously argued, was in fact part and parcel of the colonial project of control. To order and prioritize the colonized into objectified (and thus "knowable") categories was a central strategy of colonialism in India from the start. The imposition of classificatory schemes such as the census, caste matrices, and language groupings, gave the British a sense (if illusory) of jurisdiction over the complicated and often fluid loci of identifications that comprised the diverse and intricate indigenous social fabric of South Asia. With the advent of World War II, the hunger for "order" became only more acute. Though the German threat was distant to India, the insecurities gripping Europe reverberated throughout the Empire. The British were also facing disconcerting governmental difficulties in India, stemming from an increasingly vocal independence movement, as well as from increasingly contentious fracture lines running through Indian society itself. In this context previous classificatory schemes needed to be re-evaluated under "emergency" conditions. The Intelligence Branch, therefore, shifted into high gear, redefining, clarifying, and prioritizing residents of India according to the new criteria of war. Enemies lurked everywhere and might cloak themselves in any disguise. The true identification of Indians and "foreigners" alike could not be taken for granted.

As urged in a secret note prepared by the Intelligence Bureau in August 1940, "a country's danger does not commence with the first sound of the iron-shod tread of the armed invaders."¹²⁶ Rather, a host of "camouflaged helpers," however haphazard their allegiances may appear, are lying in wait to facilitate and assist enemy attack:

Germany utilizes all available material - her own nationals, refugees who are made her possibly unwilling tools, nationals of occupied countries who are blackmailed, bribed or coerced, political parties of the home country sympathetic

¹²⁵ Quoted from Home Political Files, GOI 218/42 in Sanjoy Bhattacharya, p. 41

¹²⁶ WBSA, Intelligence Branch, "Alien Danger in India," file #729/40

to the Nazi ideology or antagonistic to their own Government on account of special grievances, youth movements... and other indigenous elements, according to opportunity and, very often, *regardless of the fact whether they know they are helping Germany or not.*¹²⁷

Files were started to monitor nationals of Germany, America, Latvia, Brazil, Romania, Belgium, Mongolia, Egypt, Russia, Yugoslavia, Japan, Nigeria, France, Italy and Sweden (to name a few.¹²⁸) After "further reconsideration" the Government decided it would be "unsafe to continue the former lenient policy of leaving so many [enemy nationals] at liberty," and the Intelligence Bureau suggested, "the likelihood that the great majority, if not all, [would] soon be either in internment or in parole centers."¹²⁹ Primary suspects were listed as "refugees, missionaries, women, and those who have cloaked their original enemy nationality under naturalization or in any other manner." "Do not accept a Jew as a Jew because he has a 'J' passport," the report goes on, "or a Pole as a Pole because his travel documents say so."¹³⁰ In effect, all prior means of identification would have to be abandoned, and the State alone would command the power to stamp any individual an "enemy" or "ally."

The attitudes of political parties to the war were also assessed, and separate files were opened to monitor the disposition of all the major parties in Bengal.¹³¹ The dangers of "whispering penetration" were likewise addressed: "bad speeches, intemperate talking, the spreading of alarmist talk and rumours...all come within the purview of the police and on them devolves the duty of ensuring that none goes unnoticed who breaks the country's laws."¹³² Nor could peasants be exempt from suspicion: "A farmer ploughing his field is an ordinary sight, but in some European countries fields were ploughed and crops were cut in such a manner that guidance and indications were given to the enemy."¹³³ Imported cans of sardines might contain bombs. House fires could be "signals." And furthermore, "repeated suspicion has fallen on the cosmopolitan cabaret artists and artistes, not only

¹²⁷ Ibid (emphasis mine)

¹²⁸ In the Intelligence Branch files for 1939 there are at least 39 files (representing 39 countries) opened in the same year to monitor the activities of "foreign nationals" in Bengal.

¹²⁹ WBSA, Intelligence Branch, file #729/40

¹³⁰ Ibid

¹³¹ WBSA, Intelligence Branch, file #571/39

¹³² WBSA Intelligence Branch, file #729/40

¹³³ Ibid

here but in other countries."¹³⁴ In short the enemy might be anywhere and society at large needed to be mapped and monitored with extreme vigilance.

Such hysteria, even in the early days of the war, led to a redoubling of efforts to classify and categorize. "Caste Hindus," not to be equated with *bhadralok* Hindus (who were largely opposed to war being declared on India's behalf), should be enlisted into the armed forces, and might do well in motor units.¹³⁵ Scheduled castes should also be employed according to their capacities, and thus prioritized. The "Namasudras of east Bengal (particularly Dacca and Faridpur) [would] do very well for coastal defense battalions."¹³⁶ The Rajbangshis of north Bengal, on the other hand, would be suitable for labor battalions and as "camp followers generally."¹³⁷ Muslims, though considered loyal to Britain, at least in relation to Hindus, could not be taken for granted either. The Auslands Organization, a cleverly disguised German cultural club, was corrupting even their fidelity: "in India, although our knowledge of the organization is still too meagre to show exactly the lines on which the party is working, it has been reported that it aims at fostering anti-British feeling among the martial races, i.e. Moslems."¹³⁸

At this stage, however, the war itself seemed ephemeral to most. The British themselves, though they had mobilized a native police force of close to 300,00 in Bengal, appear to have been rather less than well-organized on the military front. In his *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War*, Bisheswar Prasad admits, "till the end of 1941 no effective measures for the defense of Burma or India on the eastern side had been adopted."¹³⁹ For all the fanfare, the Empire's second city was largely unprotected. "There were virtually no anti-aircraft guns, air-raid flood lights, or radar sets, and the Royal Indian Air Force could only deploy 8 'serviceable Mohawks' to defend Calcutta."¹⁴⁰ Historian Eric Stokes, who himself had served in the British forces in India during the war, places further doubt on the urgency of British preparedness. Bayly and Harper note:

¹³⁴ Ibid

¹³⁵ WBSA Home Confidential, W-221/41 (A)

¹³⁶ Ibid

¹³⁷ Ibid

¹³⁸ WBSA, Intelligence Branch, file #358/38

¹³⁹ *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War*, p. 145

¹⁴⁰ Bhattacharya, Sanjoy, p. 19

Throughout the war India Command's fortnightly situation appreciations conventionally began with an account of operations on the North West Frontier in which British officers pursued shadowy Mullahs over the hills and frustrated the plots of obscure tribal insurgents. Stokes felt that the Faqir of Ipi, a Muslim rebel [in Waziristan] and long time thorn in the imperial flesh, seemed to loom as large in their minds as Tojo and Hitler even when the Japanese stood at the gates of India.¹⁴¹

Nobody's Home

Attitudes and priorities, both administrative and popular, underwent a radical change when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941. The bombing of Rangoon began later in the month, and the importance of Calcutta in the expanded war effort became central. The last eastern industrial frontier of the British Empire, war production in, and troop movements through the former capital of the British Raj became critical in the pushback against Japanese advance. Labor and services in and around Calcutta did, indeed, become increasingly "essential" to Empire. However allegiance to Calcutta proved a slippery problem. The British, much to their chagrin, quickly found out that though they had built it, and the people had come, Calcutta was not yet "home" to those who had migrated there in search of employment or education.

Between the mid-nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth the population of Calcutta had mushroomed from approximately 400,000 to over 2,000,000. Economic pressures, and lack of opportunity in the vast hinterland throughout this period drove waves of immigrants into the city in search of means of survival. Laborers from Bengal itself provided the bulk of the industrial workforce early in the 19th century, but by late-century the demographics were changing fast, and cheaper, semi-transient laborers from Bihar, Orissa and the U.P. began to outnumber Bengalis. In the jute mills, by 1941, Bengalis comprised less than 25% of the labor force.¹⁴² In textile mills and other factories the demographics were similar. The Bengali population of Calcutta consisted primarily of Bengali *babus* (clerks) and *bhadralok* who had left the countryside in search of educational and white collar employment opportunity. As the saying goes, Calcutta was their *basa* ("nest" - temporary dwelling) but in their districts of origin were their *barhi* (homes.) Marwari traders, with roots in Rajasthan, had also come to the city in

¹⁴¹ Bayly and Harper, p. 72

¹⁴² Chakrabarty (1989), p. 9

increasing numbers late in the 19th century, and by the mid-twentieth were the primary Indian capitalist class in Calcutta. By 1940 they controlled major shares in the jute and textile industries,¹⁴³ and were deeply entrenched in the grain trade as well. Their speculation, or trading in *fatka* shares, in commodity markets was legendary and could influence prices sharply.¹⁴⁴

When Japan attacked at Pearl Harbor, and a few weeks later began their blitz of Rangoon, a crisis of confidence ensued and the immigrant-dependent mosaic of labor, industry and administration began to unravel. On December 18th, 1941 Calcutta and its suburbs were declared a 'dangerous area,' and despite all calls to stand-to, residents of Calcutta began to flee the colonial city in numbers. The war had at last entered into popular consciousness, and clinging to Calcutta had risks outweighing the penalties established by the Essential Services Maintenance Ordinance. Non-Bengali laborers boarded trains and congested roads, heading for their native provinces.¹⁴⁵ Defections from the Ishopore Rifle Factory and the Cossipore Gun and Shell Factory were cause for alarm.¹⁴⁶ On January 1st, 1942 the Mayor of Calcutta issued an appeal, calling on laborers to remain at their posts, but the exodus continued.¹⁴⁷ "Marwari businessmen in Calcutta were selling their stocks at reduced prices, closing down their businesses and moving in large numbers to central and north India."¹⁴⁸ This meant immobilizing of a significant sector of Calcutta trade, including in rice. The air was rife with rumors of Britain's imminent defeat. "Black-outs" were observed every night, and the Bengali middle-class fled to their native districts in numbers, leaving only earning members, as necessary, to face the risks of clinging to a city that had never quite become "home."

The British themselves were making hasty plans for retreat. While Londoners were gritting it out back home, playing cards in bomb shelters and toughing out the German blitzkrieg with stoic resolve, Calcutta emptied out. I.C.S. Special Officer, L.G. Pinnell, whose assorted appointments by the Government of India would have deep implications for Bengal, hustled off to Darjeeling with his family even as he wondered at

¹⁴³ Ibid, p. 50

¹⁴⁴ See Chapter 4 of Ann Hargrove, *Communities and Public Culture*, and Charabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History*, p. 53-60

¹⁴⁵ Chatterjee, Pranab Kumar, p. 105

¹⁴⁶ *Forgotten Armies*, p. 193

¹⁴⁷ Chatterjee, Pranab Kumar, p. 105

¹⁴⁸ Kamtekar (2002b) p. 87

the Indian exodus. "Before Burma had actually fallen," he testified later, "the trains leaving Calcutta were crowded beyond capacity with people trying to get away...and to get their valuables away. Large numbers of merchants and traders left and I was told that ordinary shop commodities in Calcutta could be bought for nothing."¹⁴⁹

A scene in Bimal Kar's *Dewal* depicts the chaos of exodus more intimately:

Burdened down with any belongings they can carry, people are boarding taxis, and lorries, horse-drawn buggies and ox-carts and *moving on*. Their faces are dark and lined with worry. Small children stare dully and cry. Girls, abandoning their accustomed modesty, push desperately onto fly-swarmed railway cars, tearing their saris or falling into strangers' laps. Feverish babies cry and vomit. Old folks gasp for breath, more dead than alive. Men are running in every direction, withdrawing money from banks, handing out bribes for favors, and falling at the feet of taxi drivers to beg them for consideration. Yesterday's fare of five rupees has become twenty-five today.¹⁵⁰

Those left behind, mostly those without the means to flee, dwelt in a city depopulated, houses were boarded up and dark, the streets desolate, and the mood apprehensive. Kar's small family were among those who remained, having lost connection to the countryside with Chandrakant's death. In a telling scene, Shudha shivers in the desolation of abandoned Calcutta, remarking bitterly to her friend that "even if the shadow of death haunts them in the city, outside it they will find no food or shelter."¹⁵¹ Observing the exodus she ponders, "once people came to Calcutta from the districts (*mofussil*) to save their lives, now they flee from Calcutta to the districts to survive."

The war had revealed that loyalty to the city was entirely contingent, and Calcutta itself, now 150 miles from the front, was revealed to be an unfixed and transitional urban space, a place of alternating alienation and belonging, refuge and flight - nobody's home. And there was cause for abandonment. Britain was proving highly vulnerable, and residents of the cities they left behind - in fast and repeated defeats - did not fare well.

The Fortress Falls

¹⁴⁹ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of L.G. Pinnell, p. 547

¹⁵⁰ Kar, p. 94-95 (translation mine.)

¹⁵¹ Ibid p. 99

Britain's defense strategy for its colonial possessions in South and Southeast Asia hinged on the presumed invulnerability of 'Fortress Singapore.' Originally under the administrative ambit of the Bengal Presidency, Singapore became a crown colony in 1867 and gained increasing importance as a trading port throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries. By 1930, 23% of all British trade passed through Singapore.¹⁵² The naval base built at Sembawang (on the northern coast of the island) at the outbreak of World War II boasted the largest dry dock in the world and the southern coast was fortified with a battery of huge artillery guns poised to repel naval attack at long range - but, importantly, only if that attack came from the south. In late 1941, however, there were no large warships docked at Sembawang and Singapore lacked any anti-infantry capability. As the course of events proved, the "Gibraltar of the East," as Winston Churchill called it, was less a "rock" of invulnerability than it was a shaky pillar of imperial hubris.

In 1940, Japanese officers on a reconnaissance mission to the area informed their commanding Colonel, Masanobu Tsuji, that Singapore was indeed vulnerable to attack from the Johore Strait to the north.¹⁵³ Later the same year, when the British commander of Malaya, Lieutenant-General Lionel Bond, surveyed the situation, he similarly concluded that the defense of Singapore remained contingent on the defense of the Malay peninsula to the north and that preparations against this eventuality were necessary. Yet only symbolic measures of defense were taken. Bond had suggested that a minimum of 336 first-line aircraft were needed to secure the peninsula. By December of 1941, however, Malaya was defended by only ninety antiquated "Brewster Buffalo" aircraft, rejected for service in Europe. The seas were patrolled by the ad hoc 'Force Z,' consisting only of the battleships HMS *Prince of Wales* and HMS *Repulse*, backed by four destroyers. There were no aircraft carriers within range, and not a single tank on the ground. In November of 1941, when approached by "frantic" Australian generals, Churchill pointedly declined to reinforce the Southeast Asia defenses, citing the urgency of war in the Middle East.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² Bayly and Harper, p. 106

¹⁵³ Ibid

¹⁵⁴ *The Leo Amery Diaries*, p. 722

Several hours before the attack on Pearl Harbor, Japan launched an ambitious assault on the northern coast of Malaya at Kota Bahru, raining bombs on unprepared aerodromes and landing infantry battalions on unguarded beaches, marshaling 125,000 men, 534 aircraft and 79 tanks.¹⁵⁵ The British were caught completely unawares. Sixty Allied aircraft were destroyed in their hangars. The Indian troops of the 1st Hyderabad fought to defend the railhead, then in disorganized retreat shot and killed their British commander.¹⁵⁶ Force Z steamed from Singapore on the afternoon of December 8th and, without air support, engaged the Japanese naval force off the northern coast of Malaya. The *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* were quickly sunk and Admiral Phillips and 840 of his men were killed. Word of this startling defeat shook the Empire. The following day in the House of Commons, Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty in WWI, mourned, "in my whole experience I do not remember any naval blow so heavy or so painful as the sinking of the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* on Monday last. These two vast, powerful ships constituted an essential feature in our plans for meeting the new Japanese danger as it loomed against us in the last few months."¹⁵⁷ Kota Bahru was abandoned by the British, and Japanese forces, landing in Thailand, pushed south to reinforce the invading army.

Japanese divisions, each equipped with 6,000 bicycles and light tanks, advanced down the Malaya peninsula rapidly, following in the wake of the III Corps of the Indian Army, who blew bridges and scorched the earth behind them. Several lines of defense were hastily erected, but fell quickly to the swift advance of Japanese troops. At Jitra British/Indian defenses were consolidated, but collapsed in fifteen short hours. Retreating soldiers left behind vast stores of tinned food, petrol and other military supplies that fell into the hands of the enemy. Japan, meanwhile, had almost complete air superiority and pummeled British staging grounds at Panang and Singapore. The majority of Brewsters had been destroyed and the remaining planes in the region were equally outdated and ill-equipped. The Japanese navy, similarly, met with minimal resistance after the sinking of the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse*. The colonial administration hastened to evacuate Europeans from the lines of fire, leaving Malaysians

¹⁵⁵ Ibid

¹⁵⁶ Bayly and Harper, p. 116

¹⁵⁷ Winston Churchill, *Complete Speeches*, p. 6532

and Indians to their own devices.¹⁵⁸ A last line of defense was attempted at Johore across the strait from Singapore, but this too was overwhelmed by Japanese advance, and by January 27th, 1942 Malaya was surrendered and Allied forces, demolishing the bridge behind them, retreated to 'Fortress Singapore.'

Singapore itself had been under attack since the 8th of December, and many of its European residents had already been evacuated. When Malaya fell, retreating and reinforcing troops flooded into the bomb scarred city. The big guns on the southern coast were silent, useless as they were against Japanese infantry pouring in from the north. The Japanese air force redoubled its assault, blanketing the island from high altitudes. Communication lines were knocked out. The hospitals overflowed with wounded soldiers and civilians alike. Rumors of gas attacks circulated through the besieged town and as menial labors began to flee in mass, civic services collapsed. The remaining Europeans gathered in luxury hotels and country clubs and guzzled whiskey from basement casks. In the Asian quarters, corpses rotted on street corners. The fall of Singapore as of yet, however, could not be countenanced. Churchill telegraphed his regional Commander in Chief, Archibald Wavell, on the 10th of February:

There must be at this stage no thought of saving the troops or sparing the population. The battle must be fought to the bitter end and at all costs... Commanders and senior officers should die with their troops. The honor of the British Empire and the British Army is at stake.¹⁵⁹

Churchill's orders, however, were met with skepticism from commanding officers. The governor himself argued for capitulation. Allied troops, demoralized by defeat, looted city shops and threatened their own officers with revolvers.¹⁶⁰ Surrender came on the afternoon of February 15th, 1942. In all the British Army had lost as many as 130,000 troops to death or capture, many of them Indian forces, in their failed attempt to defend Malaya and Singapore. Churchill called the defeat "the worst disaster and the largest capitulation in British history."

Burmese Days

¹⁵⁸ Bayly and Harper, p. 120

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 142

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 143

The subsequent debacle in Burma was a heavy dose of salt poured into imperial wounds. Giving priority to the defense of Singapore in early 1942, Burma was left perilously vulnerable. Reginald Dorman-Smith had been appointed Governor of Burma in May of 1941, even while admitting his pervasive ignorance of the territory: "my knowledge of Burma was precisely nil," he later wrote, "I knew approximately where it was on the map, that its capital was Rangoon and that the Irrawaddy flowed through it, but my knowledge did not extend beyond this."¹⁶¹ Three bitter wars fought to secure British control over Burma in the 19th century had established only a complacent colonial administration with fragmentary control over a resentful Burmese population. With colonialism had come a large immigrant population of Indians, over one million by 1931¹⁶², who served at the lowest and highest levels of society. From Bengal and Orissa waves of mostly Muslim immigrants had come to find work as sweepers and "coolie" laborers. Upper caste Hindu Bengalis were imported to serve as functionaries in the colonial bureaucracy, and from trading communities in the Punjab and Gujarat, Marwari and Chetiar businessmen had come to turn profits in lucrative agricultural and piece goods markets. The success of these immigrant populations created considerable resentment among the Burmese population. Throughout the 1930s Burma had seen anti-Indian riots and pogroms that left simmering ethnic tensions in their wake. British defeat would only further highlight existing colonial disparities.

When Japan began bombing Rangoon in the last week of December chaos broke out immediately. The Burmese population fled the city in droves, retreating to monasteries and homes in the countryside. The majority Indian population of the city¹⁶³ "simply scattered in terror."¹⁶⁴ Rumors of violence against Indians circulated widely. The British began evacuating all their own non-essential personal and prepared for a long siege. With success in Malaya well in hand, however, Japan turned more of its military might in the direction of Burma and the fissures in the British system opened further. Inexperienced and disaffected British troops put up only sporadic and uninspired

¹⁶¹ From Dorman-Smith Memoirs, quoted in Bayly and Harper, p. 86

¹⁶² Kamtekar (2002b), p. 83. In his footnote on the same page Kamtekar quotes Ma Mya Sein, "The Indian population in Burma according to the 1931 Census was 1,017,825 of whom 630,000 were born outside Burma. This formed 6.9% of the total population..."

¹⁶³ Ibid

¹⁶⁴ Bayly and Harper, p. 157

resistance to Japanese land advance. Indian troops, paired with Burmese recruits, fought better, but were hampered by language difficulties that plagued their bi-national battalions. American volunteer forces, in Burma to secure the Burma Road that represented the main supply line into Chungking China, were openly critical of British military prowess, going so far as to burn lend-lease vehicles rather than allow their use by British forces.¹⁶⁵ British heavy artillery, though impressive in theory, was unsuitable for jungle warfare, becoming easily bogged down in the Burmese mud. Dorman-Smith reported with dismay that Japanese troops were able to simply "walk around" British defensive positions, sunk deep in mud, as they made their way towards Rangoon.¹⁶⁶

As Japanese forces approached the city, life in the capitol deteriorated precipitously. Disease spread as sweepers fled in terror. In the chaos Dorman-Smith learned an important lesson that would also haunt Bengal in the years to come; life in a colonial metropolis, he confessed, "begins with the sweeper. That lowest of all human beings who holds in his hands the difference between health and disease, cleanliness and filth."¹⁶⁷ Nightly bombing raids left fires burning all day. The British army itself withdrew large contingents of troops to the north in order to regroup, while the US consul departed for Chungking. The bombings continued. Telecommunications broke down and looting was rampant. The docks were overwhelmed by frantic refugees looking for passage to safer harbors. Evacuations were, again, starkly inequitable, with moneyed Indians and Europeans squeezing out less fortunate immigrants who would begin a long and perilous land journey into India in coming weeks. By the 21st of February defeat was certain, if not yet admitted. The official report of the same day records: "The docks during the night were in a state which it is hardly believable could have existed in any British possession... I do not think there was a single sober man anywhere. The crews of the boats alongside and the troops had looted liquor and were rolling about the place in last stages of drunkenness."¹⁶⁸ Conditions only deteriorated further before Japan moved into a largely deserted and decimated city after Allied surrender on March 7th. Waves of Indian refugees had followed the British troops north and, as Japan pushed passed

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 158

¹⁶⁶ Ibid

¹⁶⁷ From Dorman-Smith Memoirs, quoted in Bayly and Harper, p. 163

¹⁶⁸ 'Report on the Burma Campaign' in Dorman-Smith Papers, quoted by Bayly and Harper, p. 162

Rangoon on their heels, these dispossessed refugees began the long and excruciating journey across the mountains and into Bengal.

It is estimated that at least 600,000 Indian refugees fled Burma after Japanese invasion, with at least 400,000 forced to travel the 600 miles of perilous mule tracks and cart-roads across high mountain passes and thick jungle, in eastern India, most passing through the villages and by-lanes of rural Bengal.¹⁶⁹ There were few, if any, provisions along the way, and only the most persevering survived at all. As many as 80,000 died on the trail. Evacuation began in December, with tens of thousands of Indian residents of Burma crossing the hill tracks from Rangoon to the Bay of Bengal, where they could board coastal ships bound for Calcutta and Chittagong on the far eastern coast of Bengal. The first refugees landed in Calcutta on January 19th of 1942.¹⁷⁰ Those who got out early were the lucky ones, and most often the wealthiest. Fearing an exodus of labor from Rangoon, British officials blocked the escape routes to the Bay, issuing orders for local police to turn back people seeking to cross the river to access the port.¹⁷¹ Further regulations were established banning Indians from boarding any ships out of Burma as deck-passengers, effectively excluding all but wealthier Indians from sea passage. While these measures limited options considerably, even before the fall of Rangoon, a mass exodus of Indians of every social class was underway. Those without resources or connections (the vast majority) pushed north into the Burmese hills, fleeing Japanese advance, at times targeted by local Burmese, and squeezed by British regulation. The British themselves were, meanwhile, evacuating all their "own" non-essential personnel in starkly discriminatory fashion. The evacuation route into Assam was barred to Indians, because there were no canteens along the way serving 'Indian food' - only 'European food,' and as such Indians would have to remain behind. But remaining in Burma was not an option, and so they found their way further north and began the long and deadly journey through the mountain passes of Northwest Burma, via Manipur into Bengal.

Along the way there was no shelter, no medical aid, and little or no food. People traveled with whatever possessions they could carry, and left their dead on the side of the

¹⁶⁹ Tinker, p. 1-15

¹⁷⁰ Kamtekar (2002b), p. 84

¹⁷¹ Tinker, p. 5

road as they pushed on. British caravans, complete with local porters and pack animals, edged starving families to the side of the road as they hurried past to safety.¹⁷² At improvised encampments, dysentery, small pox and malaria flourished.¹⁷³ When the rains came the road itself was washed away in places and the refugees had to make their way on their knees through mud and along perilous precipices. The Government of India sent no help. They had now conceded Burma, and the fate of the British Indian citizens stranded in that country was not a priority. Those who survived the journey, according to a British Army Brigadier who witnessed their arrival in Bengal, were in a state of "complete exhaustion, physical and mental, with disease superimposed...all social sense lost...they suffer from bad nightmares and their delirium is a babble of rivers and crossings, of mud and corpses...emaciation and loss of weight are universal."¹⁷⁴ But even in India, there were few provisions available, and so these bedraggled refugees began filtering into the villages of Bengal, begging at the bazaars, and telling stories of Japanese atrocities and British callousness and capitulation, and also providing a (barely) living example of colonial priorities.

Provincial Politics and War

No doubt the black-outs and A.R.P. exercises now gained a relevance that had been entirely lacking earlier, but the alacrity with which Calcutta was abandoned can also be understood to demonstrate a continuing skepticism of British security measures and priorities. Allegiance to Calcutta, residents knew, meant association (if only by proximity) with British power. In the past, this had meant economic survival. The shock of Britain's defeats, however, had perilously eroded the appeal of such association. The evidence of the disregard with which they had abandoned their colonial citizens further undermined morale. Finally, Britain's enemies were not necessarily the enemies of the India people. Alliances across the sub-continent remained complex and fluid, and Bengal politics were, as always, especially complex and fragmented.

Radical Bengali nationalist Subhash Chandra Bose, jailed for his uncompromising insistence on self-rule in India, had escaped confinement in January

¹⁷² Bayly and Harper, p. 183

¹⁷³ Tinker, p. 12

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 13-14

1941, and a year later was in Berlin advocating immediate independence for India over the airwaves of Radio Berlin. From Nazi Germany he would shortly travel to Japan, and with Japanese assistance organize the Indian National Army with the explicit aim of driving the British from Indian soil by force. Bose had resigned as president of the All-India National Congress in 1939, advocating a militant movement in opposition to the war that Gandhi, for one, was unwilling to countenance. Bose broke from Congress to form the Forward Bloc, campaigning for immediate independence from British rule and advocating active sabotage of the British war effort. Congress itself, meanwhile, also remained in bitter opposition to Indian involvement in the war. Together these two parties could claim a significant, if mostly Hindu, following in Bengal. The declaration of war on India's behalf had been greeted bitterly in 1939, with Germany a distant and inconsequential "enemy." The threat of Japanese invasion did little to instill a sense of allegiance to the colonial state among Congress or Forward Bloc followers, rather it appears to have only further galvanized opposition to the dictates of an imposed authority that put its colonized subjects at unwarranted risk.

For many Muslims in Bengal allegiances were still more complex.¹⁷⁵ Though the All-India Muslim League leant provisional political support to the British war effort, the battle for Muslim hearts and minds in Bengal rendered loyalties contingent. Throughout the period, the Muslim League struggled to gain a more representative popular foothold in the province, employing increasingly communalist rhetoric to counter the various claims on Muslim political sympathies that circulated widely. Fazlul Huq, in particular, proved a thorn in the League's side on numerous occasions. By the 1930s Huq was already a well-seasoned politician with a wide base of support in Bengal. He had been a founding member of the Muslim League in 1906 and had served as its president from 1916 to 1921, but he had also served as joint secretary to the Indian National Congress during the same period, and never fully embraced the League's political agendas. Throughout his career he was decidedly anti-communal, and the League's increasingly divisive communal idiom did not sit well with him. Prior to the 1937 elections Huq canvassed and consolidated the *Praja Samitis* ("peasant organizations") of eastern

¹⁷⁵ Too complex, in fact, to do it much justice here. Muslim politics during the period under study has been dealt with in considerable detail in other works. In the context of Bengal see Shila Sen's excellent monograph: *Muslim Politics in Bengal, 1937-47*.

Bengal, establishing himself as the leader of the newly formed Krishak Praja Party (KPP), which opposed League candidates directly.¹⁷⁶ The KPP campaigned on a platform of tenants' rights issues, arguing for the abolishment of Zamindari land settlement, fixation of rents, debt settlement boards, educational reforms and other populist issues.

The existing *praja samitis* provided a ready network for canvassing rural support, and the KPP gained fast traction throughout the countryside. In response to the League's call for 'Muslim Unity,' Huq and the KPP raised the slogan of '*dal bhat*' ("pulses and rice"), promising food security and fair opportunity to all.¹⁷⁷ Such a message had broad appeal among the impoverished masses of Bengal - Muslim and Hindu alike. Scheduled caste tillers joined fellow Muslim peasants in support of the KPP as the election approached. The Muslim League, with its urban, elite base, struggled to counter, accusing Huq of currying Hindu favor. Huq stuck to his message: "It is not all a civil war in the Muslim community but it is a fight in which the people of Bengal are divided on a purely economic issue...the problem of '*dal and bhat*' and some kind of coarse cloth to cover our nudity is the problem of problems which stares us in the face and which must be solved immediately."¹⁷⁸ Further engaging the League's attacks, Huq and KPP campaigners noted that considering that 90% of Muslims in Bengal were peasants, the causes that they were advancing *were*, indeed, Muslim causes, as such.¹⁷⁹

The results of the 1937 election, the first provincial elections since the communal award had greatly enhanced Muslim representation in Bengal, proved a disappointment for the Muslim League. Muslims of Bengal had failed to "unify" as a political unit. Though the Muslim League narrowly won more assembly seats than the KPP, Huq's party won 31.5% of the popular Muslim vote to the League's 27%.¹⁸⁰ Perhaps even more telling is that independent Muslim candidates beat out both parties, winning 43 seats in the assembly compared to 39 for the League and 36 for the KPP. Congress took the most seats of all competing parties, but entrenched as they were with landed interests in the province, failed to come to terms with the KPP. Instead, a rather awkward alliance was

¹⁷⁶ Bose (1986), p. 202

¹⁷⁷ Shila Sen, p. 80

¹⁷⁸ Quote from a campaign speech printed in *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, December 16, 1936

¹⁷⁹ Shila Sen, p. 85

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid*, p. 88-89

struck between the Muslim League and the Krishak Praja Party, and Fazlul Huq became the first Chief Minister of Bengal under provincial autonomy. Given the bitterness of the election and the qualms that All-India Muslim League President Muhammad Ali Jinnah, in particular, had about Huq, it was a unlikely alliance, and one that war, among other things, would severely test.

The All-India Muslim League's support for the British war effort was received equivocally in Bengal from the start. In 1939 when Congress withdraw its ministries in protest of the war, Jinnah was jubilant, announcing a "Day of Deliverance" to celebrate relief from "Congress oppression."¹⁸¹ Members of the Bengal Provincial Muslim League, however, were less sanguine. Abdur Rahman Siddique, one of only three Bengalis on the Working Committee of the All-India League, resigned in protest of Jinnah's announcement, calling it "an insult to national prestige" and a "flattery of British Imperialism."¹⁸² Anti-colonial sentiment ran deep in Bengal and such open contempt for principled opposition to British rule could not be countenanced along lines of communal affiliation. Furthermore the All-India Muslim League's position on war support was, itself, equivocal.

Fazlul Huq, though he had fought bitter political battles with League candidates in 1937, became a member of the All-India League's Working committee following the ministerial detente. As Chief Minister of a divided house, he struggled to balance his populist KPP election pledges with the more narrowly communal considerations of the Muslim League. The war situation strained his efforts to the breaking point. The League, in fact, while publicly supporting the war, had disagreements with Linlithgow's Government when the Congress Ministries resigned. Jinnah felt disappointed that the Viceroy established emergency rule in the formerly Congress provinces rather than inviting the League to form ministries. Furthermore Britain's militarism in the Middle East had angered many Muslims.¹⁸³ In June of 1940 the All-India Muslim League Working Committee passed a resolution barring Muslims from participating in war

¹⁸¹ Shila Sen, p. 126-27

¹⁸² Ibid, p. 127, footnote 1

¹⁸³ In the Government of Bengal's "War Diary" for August-October 1941, it is noted: "Muslim reaction to campaign in Iran were undoubtedly uneasy...an undercurrent of dissatisfaction and distrust which principally takes the form of criticizing Great Britain for actions which, in its methods, is represented as being exactly like that of Nazi Germany." WBSA Home Political File W-60/41

committees.¹⁸⁴ Jinnah felt that unequivocal Muslim support for the war was a bargaining chip that he needed to keep in hand. At the Viceroy's invitation, however, Fazlul Huq agreed to serve on the newly formed National Defense Council, and traveled to Delhi in August of 1941 to represent Bengal's interests in war-planning. Jinnah was enraged by Huq's indiscipline and the Working Committee convened to demand Huq's resignation.

Huq resigned from both the All-India Muslim League Working Committee and the National Defense Council, and penned an acerbic letter to the League's Secretary, Liaquat Ali Khan, defending his decision to represent *Bengal* in Delhi. In somewhat legalistic language Huq argued against Jinnah's accusation that he had contravened the Working Committee's prohibition against "Muslims" serving on war committees. Defending himself and the Chief Ministers of Assam and Punjab, who also happened to be Muslim, Huq noted that "despite the President's declaration that we were selected as Muslim representatives, I maintain that we were selected as Premiers. From this point of view membership of the Defense Council does not involve violation of League principles and policy."¹⁸⁵ In more direct language Huq squarely condemned the "unfair and unconstitutional" policies of "political dictators" who sought to gain "omnipotent authority" over Muslims in India.¹⁸⁶ Huq further denounced as "baseless" Jinnah's suggestion that in accepting a representative post outside of the League's political jurisdiction, he was creating a "split in ranks of Muslim India." Rather, Huq went on to suggest, Jinnah and other League leaders coming from Muslim minority provinces, were subverting democratic representation in their efforts to suppress the political expressions of leaders in Muslim majority provinces.

Such attacks were not well received by Jinnah. The All-India League leadership threw their weight behind more faithful Bengal members, two influential Ministers in Huq's cabinet: Home Minister, Khwaja Nazimuddin and Minister of Commerce and Labor, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy. On September 11th 1941, Suhrawardy held a meeting on the Maidan condemning Huq's letter. Huq's followers retaliated in the legislature, joining with Hindu members to table a resolution against Suhrawardy on the

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 127, footnote 2

¹⁸⁵ Fazlul Huq's letter to Liaquat Ali Khan, September 8, 1941. Printed in Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics*, Appendix IV, p. 265.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 267

16th of September. On the 29th of November no-confidence motions were advanced against both ministers. A few days later the Muslim League members of Huq's cabinet resigned and the ministry was dissolved less than a week before Calcutta would be thrown into panic by the bombing of Pearl Harbor and invasion of Malaya. Huq, the consummate politician, struck a hasty deal with Congress leader Sarat Chandra Bose (Subhash Chandra's brother) and Hindu Mahasabha leader Shyama Prasad Mookerjee. Bengal Governor, John Herbert, delayed just long enough for Sarat Bose to be arrested. On the same day Herbert sanctioned the Second Huq Ministry, which consisted now of the highly unlikely partnership of a stalwart Muslim populist and a polarizing, *bhadralok* Hindu Nationalist, Shyama Prasad Mookerjee.

Where ordinary residents of Bengal stood in relation to the war, however, is difficult to assess. It is unlikely that the bitterness and chaos of provincial politics in Bengal did anything to shore up confidence. Given that 90% of the rural population were peasants, progressively impoverished by the long shadow of economic and social injustice in Bengal, it is reasonable to assume that the quarreling and uncertainty of ministerial politics only disoriented and disillusion many. Franchise was, in any case, extremely limited, and the rural peasantry, as well as the urban poor, had little say in electoral politics. In this context, again, the "panic" that gripped the Calcutta is difficult to understand in political terms, except to the extent that large segments of the population felt un-represented and unprotected. Exodus from Calcutta, and the panic that accompanied it is better understood as a de facto vote of no confidence in the overall political structure. Flight was a matter of personal expediency, rather than political expression. The city had drawn migrant populations from its vast hinterland for many years. The promise of high wages and abundant opportunity had lured factory workers and middle-class workers alike from the economically stagnant countryside. In short, residents of Calcutta had immigrated in order to survive. With the advance of Japanese forces and rumors of the collapse of Singapore and Burma rife, they fled now in numbers with a similar impetus of self-preservation in mind. The city of refuge for several million economic refugees from the impoverished *mofussil* had become a city of flight. In the countryside, however, things were coming unraveled at an alarming pace.

Chapter Two: Denial

"Confusion" in the Countryside

In the districts, L.G. Pinnell testified before the Famine Enquiry Commission, "there was little panic...but there was a great deal of confusion."¹ By December of 1941, the price of rice had risen by nearly 75% since the beginning of the war.² Wheat prices had risen still more sharply, and as such rice was in high demand across western India and Ceylon as a hedge against wheat - which precipitated a drain of rice from eastern India. The export from Bengal of 45,000 tons of rice in January of 1942 represented a quadrupling of exports for the same month in the previous year,³ and rice continued to leave the province in record numbers. In February exports increased again to 60,000 tons, in March to 61,000 tons, and in April, 66,000 tons were exported.⁴ Additionally, the influx of Calcuttans into rural districts, with their relatively substantial economic resources, was stressing commodity markets further, as poor villagers were now forced to compete with rich city folk for increasingly dear provisions. Local shortages of sugar, coal, matches, raw cotton, cotton yarn, piece goods, paper, and cooking fuel were making life that much more difficult for many millions. As the situation in Burma continued to deteriorate, moreover, and the likelihood of losing important imports from across the bay further escalated the value of Bengal rice, life for the rural poor of Bengal, already suffering from acute scarcity for many long years, grew still more uncertain, and "confusion" mounted.

With war fueling inflation and threatening the economic stability of India as a whole, the Viceroy convened a "Price Control Conference" in New Delhi to discuss what

¹ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of L.G. Pinnell, p. 548

² Appendix IV of the Famine Enquiry Commission's *Report n Bengal*, p. 217, indicates that the price index for rice, pegged at 100 for the week ending August 19th, 1939, reached 172 in December of 1941.

³ *Report on Bengal*, p. 28

⁴ Ibid

policy to adopt. It was, in fact, the *Fourth* Price Control Conference, the preceding three having accomplished little to stem the rising prices of a wide range of essential commodities. The war was going poorly in the East and inflation was only picking up steam. In this context, nineteen representatives of the Government of India, together with thirty-one representatives of provinces and princely states, met in Delhi on February 6th to assess the situation. At this time the Government of India had no Food Department, however, and so the question of civilian food supply fell under the auspices of the Commerce Department. The Supply Department, on the other hand, was responsible only for the purchase of food for the armed forces and essential services.⁵ The idea that civilian food security remained under Commerce (rather than Supply) created something of a tautological outcome to the Conference.

No price control was adopted. Instead it was concluded that facilitation of "free trade" - essentially the enabling of corporate private purchasers - would solve the problem. As for the more immediate "scramble for supplies, rising prices, competitive buying, reluctance to sell, and speculation,"⁶ the president of the conference advocated a "process of tightening up the belt."⁷ The question of how tight the belt already was for so many millions of India's poor was not addressed. Free trade entailed a pervasive decentralization of authority over the purchase and movement of foodstuffs. Provinces were encouraged to lift bans on exports and allow foodstuffs to move freely about the nation with the idea that this would cause prices in deficit provinces to stabilize. It was also concluded that transportation was the primary difficulty. Accordingly, a Central Transport Authority was established under the auspices of the Commerce Department to see to the unimpeded movement of civilian food supplies. In the coming months food *did*, in fact, begin to move. Major General Wood, in charge of military supply transport, testified before the Famine Enquiry Commission that he himself "was procuring and moving a considerable amount of food all the time, and in 1941-42 commenced to wonder why."⁸ That the Major-General himself was uncertain why such quantities were being shifted is telling. What was less mysterious was that foodgrains were, in fact,

⁵ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of Nalini Ranjan Sarker, p. 278-79.

⁶ Knight, p. 47

⁷ Ibid, p. 49

⁸ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of Major General E. Wood, p. 503

moving *out* of the hands of those who needed it most - the rural poor - and into the warehouses of large capitalists, the military and the government. In this context, the deregulation of the movements of foodgrains, Major-General Wood argued, was "the most significant single factor that led to the food crisis."⁹

Meanwhile, though exports from Bengal continued apace, transportation of foodstuffs *into* Bengal would remain a central problem for years to come. When Burma fell to Japan exactly one month after the Price Control Conference, imports into India as a whole suffered a 5-6 % decline.¹⁰ In Calcutta it was now clear that rice had become a central strategic necessity in the increasingly complicated chessboard of war in Asia. War-related labor actions, as detailed in the preceding chapter, were nothing new, but now that war production was in full gear, the government and industrial employers were quicker to grant demands for wartime concessions in order to keep services and manufacturing functioning without interruption. Calcutta Corporation workers, whose strike in March of 1940 for wartime "dearness allowances" had ended in police firings and minimal wage concessions, again threatened a strike for access to subsidized foodstuffs in February 1942. In response this time, however, the Corporation opened food stores to sell rice and other staples to its employees at concession rates.¹¹ This kept sweepers, waste workers and other essential city services working throughout the period, an outcome well known to be necessary to the prosecution of war. But labor unrest was widespread. In January, 4,400 thousand workers of the Hastings Jute Mills went on strike, and in February 15,000 workers of the Andrew Yule Mills walked out, demanding "dearness allowances" and preferential access to rice.¹² On March 3rd of 1942, the Government of India, fully cognizant of mounting difficulties, advised the Bengal Chamber of Commerce that "industrial concerns should adopt the practice of making themselves responsible for feeding their employees."¹³ Toward this end it was recommended that industrial firms should keep three months of food grains in stock at all times.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 47

¹¹ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of Mr. Barman of the Calcutta Corporation, p. 1276

¹² Chatterjee, P.K., p. 84

¹³ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of Representatives of the Bengal Chamber of Commerce, p. 1404

This injunction, according to D.C. Fairbanks of the Bengal Chamber of Commerce, was not a warning based on a shortage of supplies, but rather was a precautionary measure related to A.R.P. planning. "Maintenance of the food supply" had, indeed, been a cardinal responsibility listed in the A.R.P.'s handbook published the previous year,¹⁴ but the organization had no real means of controlling either prices or supplies. What it did have at its disposal was access to a growing propaganda network to spread the central government's word throughout the city and down into the countryside. Apart from its uniformed foot soldiers and publicity vans, the A.R.P. also had the resources of the Publicity Department at its disposal, which oversaw the publication of a government sponsored "Bengal Weekly," issued in both English and Bengali, with a circulation of as much as 38,000.¹⁵ As such, injunctions made by the A.R.P. could now reach a relatively wide audience, even while the organization, itself, had limited functional capacities. When the Government of India began exhorting big business to stockpile food supplies, then, the A.R.P. was enlisted to advertise the call.

Beginning in March this appeal was broadened to include the general public and ordinary citizens were also advised by the A.R.P. to keep three months of stocks at home.¹⁶ This warning, according to the Calcutta Municipal Corporation, had "extremely adverse" effects on the food supply, and widespread hoarding soon began by both industrial interests and private citizens alike.¹⁷ Azizul Haque, first speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Bengal after the 1937 elections, and at this time High Commissioner for India in London, also pointed to the deleterious effects on the food supply that the injunction to stockpile had entailed: "if a Government asks its people publicly to hoard stocks for three months," he noted, "the tendency [will] be for everybody to store up stocks for six months or more, and to that extent the stocks are immobilized."¹⁸ Which does seem to be exactly what happened. With record exports draining available supplies of rice, and increasing demands from the military and industrial firms putting further pressure on prices, the injunction to stockpile sparked panic. There were already reports of famine in several districts and the influx of moneyed

¹⁴ WBSA, Home Political, file W-55/41

¹⁵ Casey's Diary, p. 63

¹⁶ Nanavati Paper, Memo of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation, p. 197

¹⁷ Nanavati Papers, Memo of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation, p. 197

¹⁸ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of Azizul Haque, p. 435

Calcuttans fleeing an imperiled city had put poor villagers at a distinct competitive disadvantage in local markets. Now the A.R.P., without any real authority to guarantee or control supplies, was issuing urgent warnings to individuals and industries alike to prepare for their *own* survival in uncertain times. Hoarding, with official sanction, now began on a large scale, and by June the price of rice had risen an additional 30%.¹⁹

Concurrent with the A.R.P.'s call for the stockpiling food, were intensive negotiations at the national level. Sir Stanford Cripps, sanctioned by the House of Commons in London, arrived in Delhi in March to attempt to broker a political solution to the impasse between India and Britain. The Cripps Mission has been written about extensively elsewhere, and so there is no need to detail its failure here. For the purposes of this study it is enough to say that negotiations with the Indian National Congress broke down around the all-important question of war support. Congress demanded immediate concessions towards self-government in exchange for backing the war effort, and the colonial representatives promised independence only after the war - if Congress agreed to cooperate in the meantime. Government of India Reforms Commissioner, Henry Hodson, discussing the failure to reach agreement noted that, "Linlithgow's opinion of Indian character and political sense was," in any case, "not high."²⁰ Nor did his office seem to have any understanding of the difficulties that the Indian population was facing at the time. While in London and New Delhi war was determining the parameters of political debate, on the ground in India, food security was increasingly the over-determining problem of the day. A telling anecdote by Hodson illustrates the disconnect, and is worth quoting at length:

A grand charity ball was announced to take place at Viceroy's House in New Delhi during the visit of Sir Stafford Cripps in March 1942. When it was cancelled I assumed that Cripps himself had protested, but the *Times* resident correspondent told me that he had been responsible. He had warned the Viceroy's private secretary that demonstrations against the ball were planned, denouncing the scarcity and high price of food and mocking the lavish supper menu that had been published in the press; his advice that this would do great harm to the image of British rule at a critical time had been reluctantly accepted.²¹

¹⁹ Greenough (1982), p. 102

²⁰ Henry Hodson's Autobiography at: <http://www.athelstane.co.uk/hvhodson/hvhbiogr/biogr09.htm> (Last accessed 1/20/10, 1:15 PM) Chapter IX, p. 3

²¹ *Ibid*, Chapter XII, p. 5

The ultimate failure of the Cripps Mission was disappointing, but Linlithgow was pragmatic, "We can carry on easily enough," he told Hodson, "so long as the war lasts and people are afraid of stirring up too much trouble."²² War, in this sense, was understood to be an expedient means of controlling a recalcitrant colonial population.

Denial

Under the mandates of the Government of India Act of 1935, which had established "Provincial Autonomy," governmental authority was de-centralized in novel ways that also facilitated tighter control. As of the 1937 elections, Ministers of the provincial Legislative Assembly had been given a wide range of administrative responsibilities that comprehensively limited the central government's *accountability* in regards to regional affairs, but the real limits of the power allocated to elected officials in the provinces proved to be surprisingly contingent. The Governor - appointed by the King and officially a representative of the Government of India - retained certain broad "discretionary powers," including the authority to suspend ministerial authority altogether and enforce emergency rule in accordance with Section 93 of the constitution. Furthermore, in the "special circumstances" related to the prosecution of war, particularly in Bengal, the breadth of the emergency powers available to the Governor - even without Section 93 - proved rather expansive, and the latitude given to the Governor "to exercise individual judgment" under the 1935 Act proved extremely far-reaching. Bengal's Governor, John Herbert, moreover, seems to have been particularly reluctant to include his Indian ministers in decisions that fell under the ever-expanding rubric of "defense," and made liberal use of his discretionary powers at several critical junctures. Events in Bengal, in this sense, revealed the policy of "Provincial Autonomy" to be something of a farce.

By early 1942 Japanese victories in Southeast Asia had, ostensibly, enlivened military authorities to the dangers of attack on Bengal. Sometime toward the end of March, Governor Herbert was instructed through central government channels to begin a scorched earth campaign in the province. The vast deltaic coastline of Bengal, until this

²² Ibid, Chapter IX, p. 4

time, had been left almost entirely undefended by the British military.²³ The recommendation was, however, not for a concerted effort at organizing military defense, but rather for an ad hoc campaign of "denial." In their landings in Malaya and Burma, Japanese forces had made expedient use of existing resources on the ground to facilitate their advance. In Bengal, no doubt, they would utilize a similar tactic in the event of invasion, appropriating resources from the local population and commandeering all available means at their disposal to advance on Calcutta. If - the logic went - the colonial government itself could make a preemptive strike and denude the coastal region of the resources that might enable invasion, they would be able to discourage attack without unnecessary expenditures on defense. "Denial," was the term used for the various measures undertaken by the Government of India to deprive invading Japanese forces of the means of sustaining an advance on Calcutta by means of naval landings along the undefended coastline of Bengal.

Without informing Fazlul Huq (or any other Ministers of the Legislature), Herbert appointed British civil servant, and former Personal Secretary to the Viceroy, L.G. Pinnell, "Special Officer" in general charge of "denial" operations. Shortly thereafter, Herbert summoned the Joint Secretary of the Commerce and Labor Department, M. K. Kirpalani, a member of the Indian Civil Service - also appointed by the Governor himself - and assigned him the more specific task of implementing the policy of "rice denial" in three districts; Midnapur, Barisal, and Khulna. Kirpalani estimated that in these three extremely productive districts there would be a surplus of 123,000 tons of rice, but to remove of that much rice from the far-flung backwaters of coastal Bengal and move it two to three hundred miles into the interior presented an estimable challenge.²⁴ Kirpalani later testified that because he "was asked to get this done almost immediately by the Governor,"²⁵ he had no time to consult Huq or his cabinet, who were out of session for

²³ In his testimony before the Famine Enquiry Commission Special Officer L.G. Pinnell, in charge of denial policy, suggests: "I don't think anybody has been able to explain why the Japanese did not invade us...there was nothing whatsoever to prevent the Japanese from coming whenever they wanted." Nanavati Papers, p. 544

²⁴ M.A. Ishpahani's testimony: "When I met the Commerce Secretary he said that they found it difficult to remove rice and paddy from the coastal area to about 200 to 300 miles in the interior." Nanavati Papers, p. 631

²⁵ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of M. K. Kirpalani, p. 779

the Easter recess, and so proceeded immediately and without informing the elected Ministry. Before they had returned from recess operations were already underway. Kirpalani approached M. A. Ishpahani, whose firm had considerable experience in the rice markets of Bengal, though they had limited experience in any of the districts involved. More alarmingly in certain circles, Ishpahani was a staunch supporter of the Muslim League with intimate ties to Muhammad Ali Jinnah. As such his appointment was sure to draw fire from Huq, Mookerji and Congress supporters. Ishpahani himself recognized the potential for political conflict if he was directly contracted, and so suggested that the commission be given, in name, to an agent of his, Mirza Ali Akhbar, while Ishpahani Ltd. would guarantee standing accounts.²⁶ Because the Governor was anxious to get the work done at once, the Joint Secretary advanced 2 million rupees to Ishpahani's man to expedite the process.²⁷ The purchases did begin, but when the Ministers got word of the plan already underway there was, indeed, a "hue and cry" in the Assembly. Fazlul Huq accused Herbert of having acted "as if the Government of India Act in Bengal had been suspended, and [the Governor] was at the head of an administration under Section 93 of the Act,"²⁸ and members of the ruling coalition decried the Governor's appointment of "political opponents" who would use the platform of "denial" to penetrate the countryside in order "to make political propaganda there."²⁹

The protests were loud enough to force the Governor's hand. Four other agents were appointed; one, H. Dutta, was a Hindu MahasabHITE put forward by S. P. Mookerji, another, B. K. Poddar, was advanced by the Scheduled Caste Ministers, a third, Ahmed Khan, was a Congress man, and lastly, Ashutosh Bhattacharjee, made the list by dint of his commercial connections.³⁰ Appointments were thus allocated by "community," demonstrating the government's understanding of how to placate charges of abuse of power by colonial agents. As long as "Hindus" and "Muslims," in particular, were

²⁶ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of M.A. Ishpahani, p. 631

²⁷ In his letter of August 2nd, 1942 to Governor Herbert, Fazlul Huq writes: "The Joint Secretary says that when he was arranging to carry out your orders, you grew impatient and gave him definite directions to arrange for removal of excess rice from three districts within 24 hours...The Joint Secretary, in his haste and hurry to oblige you, advanced twenty lakhs of rupees to a nominee of a friend to begin the work." Huq's letter was widely circulated and the allegations here never denied by either Herbert or Kirpalani, which tends to lend them credence. The letter itself is reprinted in the Nanavati Papers, p. 743.

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of M. K. Kirpalani, p. 780

³⁰ Ibid

equally represented, impunity could be safely maintained. The contentious political nature of these appointments, however, together with the inexperience of several (three of the agents (Poddar, Dutta, and Khan) had no experience at all in the rice business³¹) contributed greatly to the pervasive chaos and corruption that characterized the whole "denial" scheme.

Rice:

In Bengal there are three seasons of rice paddy production: the *boro* crop planted in the winter and harvested in spring, the *aus* crop, planted in early spring and harvested in July or August, and the *aman* crop, planted in late spring and harvested in the winter months. Because the *aman* crop is planted just prior to the monsoon season, and receives rain-fed irrigation throughout its maturation, it is the most consistent and abundant of the three crops, accounting for at least 75% of the total paddy production in Bengal.³² Once the *aman* crop had been consumed or marketed, however, a long season of hardship often followed. According to Ishpahani, "the Bengal cultivator, [even] before the war, had three months of feasting, five months of subsistence diet and four months of starvation."³³ "In an average year," Azizul Haque similarly explained, "the cultivator in Bengal had been living on a starvation diet."³⁴ The *aman* crop, harvested between the end of November and the beginning of February, for this reason, was desperately anticipated in the "starvation" months of August, September, October and November. In these same months, most cultivators would be forced to take loans in order to survive. The merchants (*paikars*, *beparis*, or *farias*) who bought their paddy were often also moneylenders, who would advance them cash or paddy towards the next harvest. During these lean months, the price of rice and paddy would increase, sometimes precipitously, so that a loan, whether in cash or kind, taken at this time was a disproportionate burden to pay off. With the *aman* harvest, an abundance of paddy made its way to the market and prices would again sink. The indebted cultivator, however, had to square his accounts, and so was forced to hold less rice for consumption and sell at deflated prices - starting

³¹ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of representative of the Bengal Rice Mills Association, p. 1211

³² Harris-White, p. 5

³³ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of M.A. Ishpahani, p. 639

³⁴ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of Azizul Haque, p. 63

the cycle of feast and famine yet again. The relationships that cultivators were able to forge with merchants and creditors, therefore, were of vital importance to their very survival. Furthermore, in Bengal there were tens of thousands of petty traders who bought from cultivators,³⁵ and as such relationships were highly personalized. A memorandum drafted by the Bengal Rice Mills Association describing these relationships circa December 1941 is worth quoting at length:

In Bengal, as probably in many parts of the world, the trade is not carried out as a single unconnected transaction. Most of the *beparis*, *paikars*, merchants, etc. have got an undefined but fairly rigid area of operation, for each and every person in the trade has got his own sellers, *beparis*, *paikars* and mills which he has been in trade association with for many years. Frequently this association has not merely meant the sale and purchase of the goods year after year for many years...such transactions have frequently been carried out as partly cash and partly credit transactions on the basis of a running account. The association has been in many cases one of several generations. Mutual influence and obligations between the parties in such cases... has therefore been enormous.³⁶

The fact that three of the principal agents employed during "denial" had no experience in purchasing from cultivators caused profound disruptions in the existing system of trade and contributed greatly to the "confusion" in the countryside. Sub-agents were enlisted indiscriminately and existing market systems were completely ignored. Credit relations, patronage, commercial familiarity and existing patterns of trade collapsed, leading to a dangerous breakdown in the operations of the rice markets in Bengal almost overnight. Resistance to governmental schemes was met with force, and without the necessary expertise or knowledge of existing agrarian relations, extraordinary means were often resorted to in the pursuance of "rice denial:"

Persons acting on behalf of Government [did] not always act either tactfully or fairly and the [Bengal Rice Mills Association] got the information that in many cases undue pressure was used on the growers and sellers to compel them to sell to people entirely unknown to them...this further stiffened the resolve of the growers. A few of the agents of Government...did not know the real and actual sources whence substantial stocks could be collected and were further handicapped by the attitude of the sellers... this exasperated them and also enraged them especially, because...Government was putting pressure on them for

³⁵ Nanavati Papers, Memorandum of the Bengal Rice Mills Association, p. 179

³⁶ Ibid

showing better purchases. At this stage it was reported that considerable pressure amounting in some cases to oppression was used on many people for obtaining stocks and it was not un-often said that such action was not merely countenanced and tolerated, but backed by local officers of Government who had been instructed to help the agents.³⁷

Such statements, it might be noted, particularly concerning the "stiffened resolve" of growers to resist the expropriation of their stocks by force, are interesting counterpoints to the received trope that the Bengal Famine passed off without a word of protest. Not only were growers reluctant to part with their product, but the pre-existing petty merchants approached by denial agents were likewise harassed to sell under Government conditions, and their stocks were reported to have been summarily seized for non-compliance.³⁸

Special Officer L. G. Pinnell, for his part, rued that "for anyone who knows the Bengal cultivator it was a completely heart-breaking job."³⁹ But a job is a job, and so he also admitted that he, himself, "had no objection to 'taking the gloves off.'"⁴⁰ On at least one occasion in Midnapur, late in the scheme, police "had to open fire because people would not let [government agents] shift rice."⁴¹ Pinnell himself gave the directive to open fire when he "got information that *our* rice was being held up by people who were trying to obstruct its movement."⁴² For the most part, however, Pinnell was careful to gauge the threat of resistance and adjust to the opposition. "If we had moved along certain routes," he noted in regards to purchases in Bakargunj, "the transport would have been obstructed or looted by the people."⁴³ In many areas, however, despite the threat - and at times reality⁴⁴ - of looting, Government was able to exercise their scheme without violence. In this regard Pinnell testified: "We got away with it by luck and money."⁴⁵

At the beginning of the denial scheme the maximum price that was to be paid for rice and paddy was fixed at the current market price, *plus* 10%. But with "denial" agents

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Nanavati Papers, Memorandum of the Bengal Rice Mills Association, p. 179

³⁹ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of L.G. Pinnell, p. 545

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 566

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Ibid, (*italics mine*)

⁴³ Ibid, p. 569

⁴⁴ Pinnell notes elsewhere: "We told the Government of India in one of our messages that people were reluctant to move rice because there was looting." Nanavati Papers, Testimony of L.G. Pinnell, p. 569

⁴⁵ Ibid

combing the countryside looking for "surplus," this ceiling soon became market price, and by late May the going rate had superceded even the value added price established at the commencement of denial.⁴⁶ As the Bengal National Chamber of Commerce noted: "the fact that it was the Government who were buying in the market... was sufficient to induce both a rise in prices and a feeling of panic among the general public."⁴⁷

Charges of corruption were also rampant, and not easy to dismiss.⁴⁸ Nawab Habibullah Bahadur of Dacca, who had ignored the directive of the All-India Muslim League and had joined the Huq-Mookerji Government as Minister of Agriculture, testified before the Famine Enquiry Commission that denial agents had been operating well outside the stipulated "denial" zone, "pretending in other areas that they were buying on behalf of Government."⁴⁹ Amongst desperate peasants, strapped by long years of marginal subsistence, the heavy hand of Government-backed agents, using coercive means to extract their crop, created a sense of panic and acute uncertainty.⁵⁰ The fact that primary agents recruited outside sub-agents, rather than working with existing *paikars* who had long standing relationships with growers in denial areas, compounded distrust.⁵¹ Furthermore, the dislocation of non-denial agents from districts in which they had established sellers and practices, created a general displacement whereby "owing to the practical monopoly of Government agents in [denial] districts, others flocked to non-denial areas and affected markets [disrupting] established organization and connections."⁵² In short, though the objectives of "denial" were ostensibly limited to removal of rice from certain coastal districts, in effect the denial scheme threw provincial rice markets, as a whole, into a state of chaos. On April 24th the Bengal National Chamber of Commerce sent a memorandum to the Government of Bengal protesting the

⁴⁶ *Report on Bengal*, p. 25

⁴⁷ Nanavati Papers, Memorandum of the Bengal National Chamber of Commerce, p. 35

⁴⁸ In his analysis of charges of corruption during "rice denial" Paul Greenough, for instance, in his *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal*, concludes that the nature of the appointments and the government cover granted to agents, make it seem "more than likely that the popular suspicion of fraud and rapacity was correct." p. 95

⁴⁹ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of Nawab Habibullah Bahadur of Dacca, p. 914

⁵⁰ In the Famine Enquiry Commission's *Report on Bengal*, very little importance is given to "rice denial." The report does, however, note that denial purchases "brought home to the people in the most emphatic manner, the danger of invasion; they increased local nervousness and probably encouraged cultivators to hold on to their grain as an insurance against invasion and isolation." p. 26

⁵¹ Nanavati Papers, Memorandum of the Bengal Rice Mills Association, p. 180

⁵² Nanavati Papers, Testimony of representatives of the Bengal Rice Mills Association, p. 1211

scheme, but "denial" continued unabated.⁵³ Though the Famine Enquiry Commission (for one) gave little emphasis to the "rice denial" scheme in its evaluation of the causes of events that transpired in 1942, the market dislocations and the rise in prices that "denial" precipitated, were profound and extremely pernicious.

The question of the real impact on actual stocks of paddy and rice is, in fact, impossible to determine. By official account the total of purchases transferred to Government warehouses, was rather small - 40,000 tons.⁵⁴ This number, however, does not represent either the true level of purchases made under government auspices, or the extent to which the turmoil in the rice markets effectively drove stocks underground. During this period, as already mentioned, Bengal was seeing heavy exports. No records exist to determine what percentage of these exports were related to purchases made, officially or unofficially, under the nebulous umbrella of "denial." Furthermore there is ample evidence that the recorded export statistics were, likewise, incomplete. Pinnell himself testified that exports were being made without Government authorization and that backroom deals were being struck between large-scale dealers and transportation officials.⁵⁵ "In the public mind," in any case, "there was the belief that large scale exports were going out."⁵⁶ In this instance, moreover, there is ample evidence that the public mind may have been correct. In the 24 Parganas, south of Calcutta, by May 1st, at least one hundred boat-loads of rice per month were "getting away." The District Magistrate, in a secret memo to the Joint Secretary, estimated that if this pace could be maintained through August all "surplus" rice would be cleared by the end of the summer.⁵⁷ Though this massive effort was being undertaken under Government notice, and in relation to the "denial" scheme, none of the rice or paddy involved appears to have been destined for government warehouses. Rather, the Magistrate was granting special permits for boat transport to Calcutta rice mill owners and large stockists so that they

⁵³ Nanavati Papers, Memorandum of the Bengal National Chamber of Commerce, p. 44

⁵⁴ *Report on Bengal*, p. 25

⁵⁵ Pinnell, in his testimony before the Famine Enquiry Commission: "while I was touring the denial districts, the steamer agent at Chanpur in East Bengal told me that some big Bombay firm had just bought up a whole lot of rice at Chanpur, and significantly added that somehow the Bombay firm had managed to get transport to move the whole lot of rice to Bombay - and that in the middle of a war situation!" Nanavati Papers, p. 551

⁵⁶ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of S. P. Mookerji, p. 1479

⁵⁷ WBSA, Home Confidential, file W-493/42

could "buy up and remove most of the surplus stock."⁵⁸ Accounting for the extent of rice removed during "denial" by resort to rice transferred directly into government facilities, is thus entirely misleading.

Boats:

The special permits mentioned above were necessary in relation to the second main prong of the Government of India's scheme - "boat denial." The coastal region of Bengal lies in the vast and volatile Ganges river delta. The silt of the Ganges and its tributaries have fertilized the delta for millennia, and as such it is one of the most productive regions in India. The Padma, Jamuna and Meghna rivers, with rich cultural, as well as economic significance, converge in a seemingly infinite and shifting series of tidal estuaries, bayous and backwaters that constitute the coastal belt of Bengal. The people of this region are deeply connected not only to the land that sustains them, but just as importantly to the waters that move them, that bathe them, that feed them, and that deliver them news of the world beyond. The "country boats" of Bengal, in this context, were, until this time, as much an inextricable part of the landscape of Bengal as the waterways themselves. These boats represented the primary - and during rainy seasons, the sole - means of transportation and trade for a significant population of the province. Potters in Chittagong depended on country boats to move the earth that was necessary for their livelihood. The *khalasis* of Noakhali, expert at navigating the shifting deltaic tides from Midnapur to Burma, also depended on country boats to survive. The *char* cultivators of Khulna and Bakargunj transplanted their paddy and harvested their crops from extremely fertile islands off the coast by means of country boats, and even the *babus* of Calcutta moved to and from their native villages onboard these same river-craft. Jute also moved to and from markets on country boats, as did paddy and rice. The fishermen of Bengal, the largest producers of foodstuffs other than rice, also depended on these boats, both for netting in the rivers and bayous, as well as for voyaging out to sea. In short, country boats were an unequivocally essential component of the economy of Bengal.

⁵⁸ Ibid

On April 2nd, after plans for "rice denial" had been leaked in the press, Governor Herbert stood before the Bengal Legislative Assembly and confirmed Government's intention to remove all "surplus" stocks of grain from the coastal region. "The other form of denial to the enemy that is intended," he went on, "is to prevent any means of transport from falling into his hands."⁵⁹ This prong of "denial" was to be implemented, by official reckoning, in the event that "the invasion of any district in Bengal [was] imminent."⁶⁰ A Press Note was released the following day informing district officials that all country boats capable of carrying ten or more persons should be registered in the coastal districts of Midnapur, Hooghly, Howrah, 24-Parganas, Jessore, Khulna, Bakargunj, Faridpur, Tippera, Dacca, Noakhali and Chittagong - all districts where water-conveyance constituted, by far, the most important means of travel and trade. In the subsequent weeks 66,563 watercraft were registered, and though there was no information of any sort that there was a threat of "imminent" Japanese invasion, the active implementation of "boat denial" was announced on May 1st. The confiscation and/or destruction of thousands country boats in Bengal began shortly thereafter.

The destruction and disabling of country boats in Bengal was the job of Special Officer, L. G. Pinnell. No elected members of the Bengal Government were consulted and little warning had been given. In a letter to Herbert a few months later, Fazlul Huq complained that the Governor "seem[ed] to have been consulting with Military authorities in secret and discussing plans with permanent officials... without taking Ministers into confidence."⁶¹ Military authorities, meanwhile, had expressed it necessary to "reduce the boats to the absolute minimum required for the subsistence of the people."⁶² By what matrix military authorities were able to gauge the subsistence requirements of an already impoverished Bengali population is impossible to guess, but the measures were drastic. "What was definitely and openly allowed [was] about 6,800 boats."⁶³ In the coming weeks 46,146 country boats were removed from the possession of their owners, some were sunk, others burnt, and still others warehoused in military

⁵⁹ Quoted in Kali Charan Ghosh, p. 52

⁶⁰ Ibid

⁶¹ Huq's letter to Herbert of August 2nd, 1942. Nanavati Papers, p. 742

⁶² Nanavati Papers, Testimony of L. G. Pinnell, p. 545

⁶³ Ibid

compounds were they rotted in the open air.⁶⁴ Some 20,000 boats, Pinnell admitted "were hidden and could not be traced."⁶⁵ It seems, perhaps, that the Bengali population may very well had different ideas about what was necessary for their subsistence than did the military authorities. As in the case of rice denial, it can be seen, resistance to colonial dictates that would deprive them of the means of survival belie the supposed passivity of the Bengali population in the face of famine.

However, despite dissent, government, backed by military authority, left a deep footprint. With the removal of more than 46,000 country boats from coastal districts, the economic infrastructure of rural Bengal collapsed. If the initial objective of denial, as was officially stated, was the "complete destruction of internal economy, trade and administration,"⁶⁶ nothing could have furthered that goal more swiftly than the removal and destruction of the majority of Bengal's country boats. From the beginning, the Famine Enquiry Commission reported, "it was always recognized that the removal of a large number of boats from the delta, in which communications [means of transport] are almost entirely by river and not by rail or road, would cause considerable hardship and difficulties."⁶⁷ And that it did. "In the districts of Khulna, 24 Parganas, Bakargunj and Tippera, it completely broke the economy of the fishing class."⁶⁸ In districts where people were involved in pottery making, an important and substantial industry that required large inland shipments of clay, many people "were put out of trade and...their families became destitute."⁶⁹ The productive and important paddy fields at the mouth of the delta in several districts could not be cultivated, and, moreover, the primary means of transportation of people, as well as goods and services, was almost entirely crippled. Pinnell admitted that boat denial had "throttled down" the rice trade, but the true impact of this massive dislocation of conveyance on the food supply in Bengal is impossible to

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ Ibid

⁶⁶ "Army Proposal of 23 April submitted to Chief Civil Defense Commissioner, Bengal" in *Pinnell Papers*, p. 5. Quoted in Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal*, p. 89

⁶⁷ *Report on Bengal*, p. 26

⁶⁸ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of L. G. Pinnell, p. 543

⁶⁹ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of Lieut. Col. Cotter, Public Health Commissioner of the Government of India. p. 382

gauge.⁷⁰ It would, however, have far-ranging ramifications, both economically and politically, which are more easily traced.

Compensation was initially only given to the owners of boats, which meant little to those who made a living from these same boats. Owners were, often enough, from the wealthier strata of society and leased their boats to those who actually made their livings from them. Those whose livelihood depended on these boats (fishermen, *khalasis*, potters, cultivators, *paikars* of the jute and paddy trade, etc.) at first received nothing. After protests from several quarters, however, it was decided to give three months compensation to workers. But for this segment of the population, already living on the margins of subsistence, this compensation was entirely insufficient. The livelihood of generations was lost in a matter of weeks, and for that loss, three months of wages were received - wages that even before they were dispersed had lost considerable value against continuing increases in the cost of living - and many quickly began to starve. Apart from the unimaginable consequences of such a policy on the existing economic and social structures of Bengal, the enormity of the undertaking also brought home to residents of the countryside the extent of British fears as well as their ruthlessness. Regardless of the extent to which British fears of Japanese invasion were transferred to the colonized population, the very presence of British authority and the impunity with which they were able to act throughout the countryside was enough to create a general sense of panic and uncertainty. For now, it looked to many, as if it were the British - not the Japanese - who were launching an attack on the coastal population.

Territory:

At the same time, the military was entrenching itself in and around the commercial and strategic centers of Bengal, even while administrative workers were removing their kin from "non-family areas," and non-essential government employees were receiving "exodus allowances" to relocate.⁷¹ Aerodromes, army encampments and supply dumps were carved out of the heavily populated countryside south of Calcutta. In the Diamond Harbor area, an order for military appropriation of land resulted in the

⁷⁰ In the Famine Enquiry Commission's *Report on Bengal*, it is noted: "As regards the extent to which the movement of rice was impeded, it is impossible to frame an estimate." p. 26-27

⁷¹ WBSA, Hone Confidential, "War Diary for May-June 1942," file W-77/42

summary eviction of at least 36,000 people. The Minister of Commerce received directions from the Governor that as many as 47 areas had to be cleared in as little as 24 hours.⁷² In Chittagong District a sub-divisional officer received a similar order: he was to evacuate 20 villages within 48 hours. "He did it with expedition... [but] it was afterward discovered that it was a mistake, and it was really only wanted to evacuate some 6 or 7 villages, the remainder being required for a defense zone."⁷³ In Noakhali another 70,000 were dislocated.⁷⁴ The total number of mostly poor tenants evicted from their lands in relation to such measures is not possible to determine.⁷⁵ The impact on those dislocated was more apparent: "compensation was off course paid, but there is little doubt that the members of many of these families became famine victims in 1943."⁷⁶

Uneasy about how such measures would be received, Government issued an order towards the end of May to appoint police guides and interpreters "to facilitate the work of troops and at the same time to reassure villagers against any apprehension or panic."⁷⁷ These guides and interpreters were, furthermore, tasked to "ensure cordial and friendly relations between troops and the people."⁷⁸ District officials were also enlisted in the public relations campaign. Herbert's Deputy Secretary sent out a memorandum to all District Magistrates reminding them that "everything possible should be done by propaganda...to instill into the general public the lesson that troops are their friends and that they have nothing to fear from them."⁷⁹ However, the circular went on, the public should also be warned that troops would not be confined to evacuated area, and in this regard, when and where military exercises were underway: "it would be far more satisfactory for [the public] and everyone else concerned if they remain in their houses, as otherwise they might only get in the way and suffer unnecessary inconvenience."⁸⁰

Ostensibly "necessary" inconveniences were, however, pervasive. A.R.P. medical facilities were buckling under the influx of refugees from Burma, and even in Calcutta

⁷² Nanavati Papers, Testimony of P. N. Banerjee, p. 868

⁷³ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of L. G. Pinnell, p. 543

⁷⁴ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of P. N. Banerjee, p. 868

⁷⁵ In the Famine Enquiry Commission, after its extensive work, was unable to determine the "complete number of the numbers of persons effected..." *Report on Bengal*, p. 27

⁷⁶ *Report on Bengal*, p. 27

⁷⁷ WBSA, Home Political, "The Movement of Troops and Behavior of the Public," file W-249/42

⁷⁸ Ibid

⁷⁹ Ibid

⁸⁰ Ibid

hospital bed-space was insufficient. Banks were having difficulties recovering loans, as people were reluctant to part with cash in increasingly uncertain times, and a "shortage of essential commodities such as rice, salt, kerosene oil, cloth, etc., in the countryside [was having] a further unsettling affect on the agricultural population."⁸¹ The Bengal Home Guard, as already mentioned in chapter one, was organized at this time also, even as the "unsettling" of the countryside continued apace. Arrangement for the guards were another point of contention between the representatives of the provincial government and the King's representative, John Herbert. Fazlul Huq complained of "the mischief of officialisation of Home Guards" without consultation with his Ministry as yet another example of the Imperial Government making a "mockery of Provincial Autonomy."⁸²

But even while plans were being made to ameliorate dissent in rural Bengal, national politics were becoming ever more embroiled in controversies emerging from "denial." Resentment simmered in the wake of the failed Cripps Mission and relations between the Indian National Congress and the colonial government were strained to the breaking point. Even before the official announcement of denial policies, Gandhi was warning against the intended measures in his weekly *Harijan*. In the March 22nd edition of 1942, sub-titled "Scorched Earth," Gandhi reminded his readers, "India is not fighting. Her conquerors are."⁸³ He continued crossly, "are we to contemplate with equanimity, or feel the glow of bravery and sacrifice in destroying life or property at the prospect of India's earth being scorched and everything destroyed in order that the enemy's march be hampered?"⁸⁴ On the next page of the same issue a column entitled "How to Ward off Starvation," recommended several pragmatic measures to ensure an equitable supply of food in the circumstance of increasing scarcity. Three weeks later, writing again in *Harijan*, Gandhi warned that the people of Bengal were already "suffering from famine," and explained the hardships of military evacuations taking place in eastern Bengal. He noted that as long as the uprooting of entire villages was "left in the hands of many and petty officials, fairness [could] not be assured."⁸⁵ By May 3rd the consequences and scope of "denial" were becoming ever more clear, and Gandhi wrote with increasing

⁸¹ WBSA, Home Confidential, "War Diary for May-June 1942," file W-77/42

⁸² Nanavati Papers, Letter from Huq to Herbert, p. 743

⁸³ *Harijan*, March 22, 1942, p. 3

⁸⁴ Ibid

⁸⁵ *Harijan*, April 19, 1942, p. 1

alarm: "No promise of compensation can be any comfort for the dispossession of...tenements. To the poor people it is like taking away their bodies. The dispossession of the country boats is almost like that of tenements. To deprive the people of East Bengal of their boats is like cutting off a vital limb."⁸⁶ Similarly, the "denial" of rice, Gandhi wrote, could not be countenanced: "people cannot be asked or advised to starve or die of thirst for fear of the Japanese helping themselves to the people's provisions or water."⁸⁷

"Denial," however, continued. Instructions were given in May for the confiscation, destruction or removal of all mechanical transport; private cars, bicycles, carriages and bullock carts "not required for Military or Civil Defense purposes."⁸⁸ and plans were hatched to blow up as many as 17 bridges in and around Calcutta.⁸⁹

The Fifth Price Control Conference was held in April, only two months after the Fourth Price Control Conference had failed to stem the rise of prices. Though the food situation in Bengal was becoming increasingly grave, it was concluded that the maintenance of the civilian food supply was to remain a provincial affair. Towards this end the Foodgrains Control Order was drafted and enacted on May 21st, 1942. The objective of this order was, ostensibly, to strengthen the hand of provincial governments so that they could gain control of food supplies. The central clause of the Order restricted the purchase, sale or storage of foodgrains in excess of 20 maunds to any but those licensed by the Provincial Government. Implementation of the Order was left to government discretion, and while Huq's Ministry did not immediately enforce the Order, even the threat of Government monopoly of grain markets appears to have further embolden "denial" agents operating under Government authority. Huq himself noted that although denial purchases were to have ceased in June, they continued well after that date.⁹⁰ The denial of boats was a protracted process as well. As late as the first week of July, in fact, a secret conference on the administration of denial policy was held and the question of "evasion" was addressed. In certain areas of Bengal, the panel concluded, "if

⁸⁶ *Harijan*, May 3, 1942, p. 4

⁸⁷ *Ibid*

⁸⁸ WBSA, Home Political, "War Diary: May-June 1942," file W-77/42

⁸⁹ WBSA, Home Political, "War Diary: May-June 1942," file W-77/42

⁹⁰ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of Fazlul Huq, p. 728

there is no improvement, armed patrols or the use of the flotilla might have to be resorted to."⁹¹ But, once again, the containment of local resistance to military appropriation of Indian resources would prove insufficient.

The "Denial Resolution"

It is a point that has received scant historical notice, but the colonial government's "denial" policy played a central role in the fiercest conflict between the Indian population and their colonial rulers since the rebellion of 1857. Not only did the "denial" policy meet with opposition at the local level, but opposition to "denial" at the national level created the grounds for the impunity with which the colonial government would suppress the independence movement in the fall of 1942. That the leadership of the Indian National Congress took issue with the scorched policies taking place in eastern India, was considered a dire threat to empire at war, and one that would be met with extreme measures. "Denial," in this sense, galvanized both the Nationalist struggle in India and London's extreme response to the same, contributing significantly to the way that the "Quit India" movement of 1942 played out. Though the All-India Congress Working Committee's resolutions of July 14th and August 8th are most often cited as the signal events that led to the "Open Rebellion" of 1942, the strategies of the colonial state were, in fact, forged in reference to an earlier resolution - that of July 10th, the "denial resolution."⁹² In as much as "denial" was a significant factor contributing to famine in Bengal, moreover, opposition to "denial" at the all-India level can - and should - also be understood as yet another example of resistance to war-time famine in Bengal.

After the failure of the Cripps Mission in April, the Secretary of State for India, Leo Amery and Viceroy Linlithgow, along with the War Cabinet in London, waited apprehensively for Congress's next move. On the 10th of July the Working Committee met at Wardha, and on the same day passed a resolution that was subsequently published in the nationalist media. The resolution, echoing Gandhi's earlier publications in *Harijan*, began with the injustice of "denial:"

⁹¹ WBSA, Home Political, file W-658/42

⁹² Linlithgow adopted this terminology to refer to the July 10th resolution. See, for instance, Linlithgow to Amery, T.O.P. Volume II, p. 382

Whereas various complaints have been received regarding Governments orders for evacuation of villages, lands and buildings without due notice and proper compensation, seizure and destruction of country-boats, even were life is impossible without them, requisition of vehicles without proper compensation and regard for needs of civil population, Working Committee issue following instructions for guidance of the people concerned...with regard to evacuation and other orders involving temporary or permanent loss of landed property full compensation should be demanded...there should be no interference with use or disposal of private property except with consent of owner or on adequate payment of compensation. In case of requisition of boats full compensation should be demanded and no boats should be surrendered until question of compensation is settled. In areas surrounded by water where boats are indispensable for normal everyday life they should not be surrendered at all. Fisherman dependent on boats for earning livelihood should be compensated for loss of employment in addition to price of boats. In case of requisition of vehicles full compensation should be demanded and until compensation is settled they should not be parted with.⁹³

When Amery received the draft of this resolution in London, he replied with urgency and alarm. Such a resolution by Congress, he warned the Viceroy, amounted to the declaration of a "parallel authority acting in defiance of established Government in respect of measures necessary for the prosecution of war," which, in turn, would, according to existing British law, "involve not only internment but prosecution and drastic punishment."⁹⁴ Amery, while anticipating a "more general" resolution from Wardha, urged Linlithgow to take "drastic action with Gandhi and Working Committee (such as immediate arrest pending prosecution) and with Press (in any case it would seem necessary to impound so far as possible all copies of papers carrying the Resolution.)"⁹⁵ On the same day, he quickly penned a minute to Winston Churchill warning the Prime Minister: "we are dealing with men who are now definitely our *enemies*...to appease them or delay in striking at them can only discourage the army and all other loyal elements."⁹⁶ The Secretary of State also personally authorized any extreme measures that Linlithgow should find expedient, extending him de facto emergency powers to deal with the situation immediately and forcefully. In the meantime, he brought the resolution before the War Cabinet in London for advice. The War Cabinet convened on the 13th of July

⁹³ T.O.P. Volume II, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 363

⁹⁴ T.O.P. Volume II, Amery to Linlithgow, p. 374

⁹⁵ Ibid

⁹⁶ T.O.P. Volume II, Amery to Churchill, p. 376 (emphasis mine)

and supported Amery's authorization of Linlithgow's emergency powers, agreeing that the "denial resolution" amounted to treason.⁹⁷

The Viceroy, however, argued for a measure of caution, fearing that the immediate arrest of Gandhi and the Working committee would only strengthen the Nationalists' position. He did, however, promise prompt action as soon as any of the instructions given in the resolution were executed. "I have no intention," he wrote to the Secretary of State, "of allowing these people to break the law,"⁹⁸ Amery, was not happy with Linlithgow's restraint, and reminded the Viceroy that "feeling may inevitably run high among ignorant villagers and people on whom hardship will *necessarily* be inflicted," but indiscipline could not be tolerated.⁹⁹ He again urged Linlithgow to adopt harsher measures with Gandhi and the Working Committee rather than "merely punish[ing] the wretched villager who refuses to hand over his boat or his bullock cart."¹⁰⁰ Linlithgow, in response, noted the "regrettable spirit of defeatism" that had gripped the country, and again argued that a militant response to the July 10th resolution would only inflame Nationalist sentiment and play into Gandhi's hands. In the meantime, he sent an urgent telegram to all Provincial Governors warning them of possible disturbances and directed them to see that requisitioning of lands and property was done as non-intrusively as possible and that compensation was paid swiftly. Amery deferred to Linlithgow for the time being, but the July 10th resolution would remain central to the colonial response to Congress agitation.

On the 14th of July the "general resolution" came out.¹⁰¹ This resolution did not deal directly with "denial," but was, instead, a plea for Indian independence, deeply couched in terms of "defense." In the wake of the Cripps Mission, the Working Committee warned, "a growing satisfaction at the success of Japanese arms" was sweeping the nation. In this context, the resolution continued, "Congress is anxious to avoid the experience of Malaya, Singapore and Burma." The only means of defending India, the Congress concluded, was for Britain to agree to grant the nation complete

⁹⁷T.O.P. Volume II, War Cabinet 91st Conclusions, p. 377-378

⁹⁸ T.O.P. Volume II, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 382

⁹⁹ T.O.P. Volume II, Amery to Linlithgow, p. 390

¹⁰⁰ Ibid

¹⁰¹ The text of this resolution is reprinted in T.O.P. Volume II, p. 385-387. All quotes are from this reprinting.

independence, at which time a treaty could be struck with the Allies for the continuance of war against Japan. Without such an agreement there could be no partnership, the defense of India would remain an impossibility, and India would fall to the Axis. In adopting this either/or stance, Congress was maneuvering to adapt the rhetoric of the day to its own purposes. Victory against Japan was contingent upon Indian independence, independence, therefore, was a "defense" policy and nothing less. In this spirit of patriotism and national defense, Congress warned of a "widespread struggle...under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi" if Britain refused to come to terms. A meeting was scheduled for August 7th.

In a telegram to Linlithgow on the 16th of July Amery adopted a dismissive attitude toward this "main resolution," while again pressing his concerns about the earlier, "denial resolution." It might be the case, Amery wrote, that the main resolution would necessitate no immediate action, but that of July 10th, he again insisted, could easily be understood to be in direct breach of Defense of India Rules 38 (1) (a), dealing with acts "prejudicial" to the authority of His Majesty's Government. In this context, Amery advised Linlithgow that he "already [had] ground for action if and when expedient."¹⁰² Linlithgow again argued for restraint, finding some encouragement in the "conciliatory" tone of the July 14th resolution, however "blatantly hypocritical" its demands.¹⁰³ He also saw a possibility that the July 14th resolution could be used to drive a wedge between religious communities, thus isolating Congress in its claims. In this context Linlithgow assured Amery that he was doing everything to "energize propaganda" against Congress in the hopes of "stimulating" open denunciations of the Nationalist principles outlined in the main resolution amongst "Muslims, Depressed Classes & c."¹⁰⁴ The Viceroy sent a special telegram to Bengal Governor, John Herbert, enlisting him to encourage Fazlul Huq, in particular, to issue a public condemnation of the Congress resolution.¹⁰⁵ Huq declined, preferring to maintain his pluralist position in Bengal, and resisting Government bait to publicly cross Congress.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² T.O.P. Volume II, Amery to Linlithgow, p. 393.

¹⁰³ T.O.P. Volume II, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 394

¹⁰⁴ T.O.P. Volume II, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 398

¹⁰⁵ Linlithgow to Herbert, July 16, 1942. Telegram 2109-S, MSS.EUR.F. 125/42

¹⁰⁶ T.O.P. Volume II, Herbert to Linlithgow, p. 440

Relations between Huq and Herbert were, at this juncture, particularly acerbic in any case. Huq felt deep resentment towards Herbert's contraventions of Provincial Autonomy. As already noted, the denial policy had been carried out by military fiat, with little or no consultation with elected officials. The Home Guards had been established under Imperial, rather than Provincial, authority. Herbert had directly obstructed Huq's motions to expand his Provincial Cabinet, and local officers of the Bengal Police had been authorized with special powers under the Defense of India Rules, again without consultation with provincial authorities. Cases of alleged rape by army personnel had been suppressed in the districts by Permanent Officials. And grievances about inequitable A.R.P. appointments to Hindus at the expense of Muslims by the appointed A.R.P. Controller were completely ignored.¹⁰⁷ In his long and angry letter to Sir John Herbert of August 2nd, 1942, Huq listed these, and several other grievances, as ample evidence that, under Provincial Autonomy "Ministers had been given [only] a mockery of authority, and the steel frame of the Imperial Services still remain[ed] in tact."¹⁰⁸ Huq further deplored such a state of affairs at a moment when Bengal was "faced with a rice famine," which threatened the survival of millions in the already impoverished province. Herbert sent no reply to Huq's letter.

With his propaganda campaign showing mixed results, Linlithgow was, meanwhile, making less rhetorical preparations against Congress. Consulting with his own legal council, the Viceroy confirmed Amery's opinion that the Defense of India Rules could be invoked against Gandhi and the Working Committee in response to both resolutions (that of July 10th and that of July 14th.) The "denial resolution," however, represented a more clearly actionable offence in that it contained "direct and authoritative instruction to the people to interfere with the administration of law."¹⁰⁹ As such, the resolution of July 10th fell foul not only of the Defense of India Rules, but also of the Criminal Law Amendment Act, which gave the colonial government grounds to declare the Congress *as a whole*, not merely the Working Committee, an unlawful association,

¹⁰⁷ Huq points out in his letter of August 2nd, 1942 that not even 5% of appointments to the A.R.P had gone to Muslims.

¹⁰⁸ Huq to Herbert, August 2nd, 1942. Reprinted in Nanavati Papers, p. 742

¹⁰⁹ T.O.P. Volume II, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 448

greatly expanding the emergency powers with which to suppress any eventual popular movement.

The resolution of July 10th was thus central to the three-staged plan that Linlithgow developed to deal with the "open rebellion," and the proposed resistance to "denial" that this resolution suggested, central to the brutality with which the "Quit India" movement would be dealt. The first stage, the propaganda campaign against Congress, was gaining little traction. The second stage would involve not only the arrest of Gandhi and the Working Committee, but also the arrest of the leaders of Provincial Congress Committees under the Criminal Law Amendment Act. The third stage would be to promulgate the Emergency Powers Ordinance, which would allow even broader impunity to suppress any movement that could not be squelched by stage two measures.¹¹⁰ Secretary of State Amery brought Linlithgow's plan of action before the War Cabinet in London on the 5th of August and won approval for the three-staged plan the next day. The course of action that government would take against Congress during the 'Quit India' movement was thus established even before the Working Committee had convened to issue their much more famous August 8th declaration.

Quit India

Winston Churchill needed little convincing that the hard line proposed by the Government of India was warranted. The Prime Minister had been a long time and particularly staunch advocate of Empire. "India," he had said some years earlier, "is a geographical term. It is no more a united nation than the equator."¹¹¹ The Cripps Mission had been salt in Churchill's wounds after losing Singapore. Cripps, a political opponent of Churchill's, had become Speaker of the House of Commons and a member of the War Cabinet only after the defeats in Southeast Asia. His appointment as emissary to negotiate a political settlement in March of 1942 was further evidence of a lack of parliamentary confidence in Churchill's own imperial acumen. During the mission, Churchill worked behind the scenes directly with Linlithgow to undermine Cripps'

¹¹⁰ This plan is outlined in: Government of India, Home Department to Secretary of State, July 24, 1942. T.O.P. Volume II, p. 447-450

¹¹¹ Churchill's Complete Speeches, March 18, 1931. (Winston Churchill (1874-1965), British statesman, writer. Speech, March 18, 1931, Royal Albert Hall, London. "On India," Maxims and Reflections, ed. Colin Coote (1947).)

positions.¹¹² The "denial resolution" had prompted the Secretary of State to warn the Prime Minister that the leaders of Congress were dangerous, but it is likely that Churchill understood freedom fighters in India as "enemies" even without further advice. Already entrenched in pitched battles on three continents, the unrest in India struck Churchill as yet another front in a "Total War" that Britain had yet to master. On the 11th of August he chastised Amery for using the word "independence" in a broadcast from London, and on the 2nd of September, while preparing a statement for the House of Commons on the worsening situation in Quit India, he exploded to his Secretary of State, "I hate Indians. They are beastly people with a beastly religion."¹¹³

The 'Quit India' resolution was passed in Bombay by the All-India Congress Working Committee on the night of August 8th, 1942. Early the very next morning, the leadership of Congress was rounded up and summarily jailed. Maulana Azad, President of the Working Committee, admitted that this swift move by the British had caught Congress on their back foot. "If the Government had accepted the demand," Azad wrote, "or at least shown a conciliatory attitude there would have been scope for further discussions."¹¹⁴ The terms of the resolution were similar to those put forward in the July 14th resolution¹¹⁵ and the nature of the movement that would follow if Congress demands were not met, remained vague. The sudden over-determining response by the colonial state thus came as a surprise to Azad and other Congress leaders. Of the August 8th resolution historian Sumit Sarkar too has argued, "far from ruling out further negotiations, the whole thing may conceivably have been an exercise in brinkmanship and a bargaining counter which was followed by an explosion only because the British had decided on a policy of wholesale repression."¹¹⁶ But the fact of the matter is that even before the resolution had been drafted - in response to the "denial resolution" - the die had already been cast.

Without leadership, nationalist elements across the country were left to their own devices and interpretations. Gandhi's appeals to non-violence had been recently

¹¹² *The Leo Amery Diaries*, p. 734

¹¹³ *Ibid*, p. 832

¹¹⁴ Azad, p. 84

¹¹⁵ Azad calls the July 14th resolution a "first draft" of the August 8th resolution, *Ibid*, p. 78

¹¹⁶ Sumit Sarkar, p. 391 For a more complete treatment of the extent, spread, and nature of the Quit India movement, see the same, pp. 388-404

attenuated by his increasingly and uncharacteristically extreme rhetoric throughout 1942. Even since the spring Gandhi had been urging Britain to "leave India to God or anarchy," expressing a final willingness to risk "complete lawlessness" if such would be the price of freedom.¹¹⁷ On the 8th of August he gave his now famous "Do or Die" speech, which, while still advocating non-violence, expressed a tone of finality that would characterize the intensity of the movement.¹¹⁸ With the arrest of Gandhi and both national and provincial Congress leadership the next day, the masses of India proceeded with their own interpretation of "Do or Die." Disruptions of transport, communication lines, factory operations, and open challenges to police and governmental authority began in most urban centers immediately. Violence moved into the countryside shortly, with peasants participating in open rebellion in large numbers. In rural districts of Bihar and the United Provinces, the movement was particularly intense; railway tracks were cut, telegraph poles were downed, goods-sheds were looted and police stations ransacked. A rebellion of a scale unseen since 1857 had broken out.

By the 15th of August things had spiraled out of control to the extent that Linlithgow had authorized the military, in aid of civil power, to begin machine-gunning saboteurs from the air.¹¹⁹ Sabotage of railway lines in and around Patna had successfully inhibited the movement of troops to disturbed regions. Attacks on communications lines had delayed dispatch of troops still further. Moreover, and perhaps most worrying to official in London, dissatisfaction with British heavy handedness was drawing complaints from China and the United States. Gandhi, imprisoned at the Aga Khan's palace in Pune, blamed the Government of India for precipitating the crisis, noting that no call to action had even yet been given by he or Congress before the Government began its crackdown. Linlithgow and Amery worried that if Gandhi choose to hunger-strike, world opinion might sour even further. Meanwhile the movement continued to gain strength. On the 31st of August Linlithgow telegraphed Winston Churchill and confided, "I am engaged

¹¹⁷ T.O.P. Volume II, p. 96

¹¹⁸ In his book *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922-1992*, Shahid Amin, traces the interesting and innovative manner in which Gandhi, as national icon, came to influence the popular uprising of 1922 in contradictory, contingent and colorful ways. A similar argument could be made for the ways that Gandhi as a socio-political *symbol* shaped the 'Quit India' movement of 1942.

¹¹⁹ T.O.P. Volume II, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 708

here in meeting by far the most serious rebellion since that of 1857, the gravity and extent of which we have so far concealed from the world for reasons of military security."¹²⁰

In Bengal, the pattern of disturbances followed the all-India model, with disturbances breaking out in Calcutta and Dacca shortly after the arrest of Congress leaders, and violence spreading to the countryside subsequently. Student demonstrations began on August 10th in both cities, and picked up momentum in the following days. The police and the Civic Guards were mobilized to deal with widespread transportation disruptions and vocal demonstrations. Military reinforcements were requested as the violence escalated. Scuffles broke out between the public and the police, and on the 14th police firings killed two in Calcutta.¹²¹ Marwari industrialists, led by Gandhi's staunch ally in Calcutta, G.D. Birla, organized strikes at jute mills and steel works in and around the city. At the Kesoram Cotton Mills, Birla's own textile mill in Metiabruz, striking workers clashed with police on the 24th, and other serious incidents were reported from the jute mills at Cossipore and Chitpur. The Imperial Tobacco Company was also attacked by a mob of at least 1000, and five were killed in police firings. In Calcutta alone, by the beginning of September, 20 protesters had been killed by the police, with a total of 229 reported injured, including 74 police.¹²²

By the end of the month, urban demonstrations had petered out just as the call to 'Do or Die' was gaining strength in the countryside. In Midnapur, a district just southwest of Calcutta, the "open rebellion" took firm root. Local activists organized attacks on police stations, post offices, transportation facilities and other symbols of imperial rule, and under the remnants of Congress leadership, an alternative "national government" (the Tamluk Jatiya Sarkar) was founded. A weekly journal, *Biplabi*, was also established to report on socio-political events in the district. With 57 army battalions mobilized across India, the 'Quit India' movement was suppressed in many rural areas of the country by main force. But due to organizational sophistication in Midnapur, the movement held together, despite brutal military intervention (that would have had national repercussions) and proved an enduring problem for colonial authorities for years to come. The Congress had a strong foothold in Midnapur, and, moreover, denial policies, increasing scarcity of

¹²⁰ T.O.P. Volume II, Linlithgow to Churchill, p. 853

¹²¹ Chatterjee, P.K., p. 115

¹²² Ibid, p. 125

essential commodities, and outrage at military heavy-handedness, created conditions for a sustained movement under dedicated leadership.¹²³ In other parts of the province, it could be argued, many of these same factors blunted overt political expressions among the peasantry, as the hardships of material scarcity began to *unravel* social networks and undermine political solidarity.

Economic Warfare

With the effects of massive rice exports from Bengal, coupled with the psychological effects of "denial" policies, and the chaos in rice markets that "denial" had entailed, rice and paddy prices continued to rise precipitously as the lean season fast approached. A statutory ceiling on rice and paddy prices was established on July 1st, and exports from the province were proscribed later in the month, but prices were already moving too fast for government to keep step. The controlled price announced on July 1st was already below prevailing market rates, which drew protests from stockists who would be operating at a loss for recent purchases if they sold their stocks. The price was adjusted according to these demands later in the month, but black markets had already begun functioning on a large scale.¹²⁴ By August official stocks of rice in Calcutta were exceedingly low, and Government began worrying in earnest about feeding labor in war-production factories.¹²⁵ About 100 control shops were established in Calcutta to feed the large number of industrial employees not provided for by large firms, and a Directorate of Civil Supplies was haphazardly set-up. "Denial" mastermind, L. G. Pinnell, was appointed Director of Civil Supplies and large purchases were made on government account from Birbhum district, north of Calcutta, at prices well above the price ceiling fixed by Government in July.¹²⁶ The fact that the government itself was buying at almost any price led to panic in rice markets across the province and the further proliferation of black market forces, which again fueled inflation.

¹²³ In his introduction to *Biplabi: A Journal of the 1942 Open Rebellion*, Bidyut Chakrabarty argues that local leaders of the movement in Midnapur were particularly adept at converting "suffering into political support." Introduction to *Biplabi* p. 2

¹²⁴ Nanavati Papers, Memorandum of the Bengal Rice Mills Association, p. 182

¹²⁵ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of D. L. Mazumdar, p. 522

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 523

The Directorate of Civil Supplies, it was apparent, had little real organizational capability to manage even its own affairs. Established under the authority of the Department of Commerce and Labor, it had no Minister of its own, only Pinnell as Director, D. L. Mazumdar as Deputy Director, one Assistant Director, and two trained clerks. "Briefly speaking," Pinnell admitted, "the department never even had 'the staff to ask for the staff' for months."¹²⁷ Recruitment was further handicapped by Pinnell's reluctance to comply with communal ratios, which would have necessitated hiring an equal proportion of Muslims to staff the directorate.¹²⁸ Pinnell's attitude drew ire from the Muslim League, which further complicated administrative execution. The very establishment of the Directorate, however, did spur alarm. "Civil Supplies," it was well understood by now, meant only supply to "essential" industrial labor in and around Calcutta, and the rest would be left to fate. Government alarm was read as inside information - if the government can't even feed Calcutta, what of the remaining 56 million in the province? Many of the big industrial firms, including jute mills, textile mills, the Calcutta Port Trust, the Calcutta Corporation, the railways, and steel manufacturers, had been granting "dearness allowances" and opening control shops since the beginning of 1942, which put further pressure on the market. With prices failing to stabilize even after controls were announced in July and Japan within striking distance, anxieties proliferated.

The Bengal National Chamber of Commerce, representing all the major jute mills, the Paper Makers Association, the Engineering Association, the Tramways, and other industries in the province, initiated its "Chambers Foodstuff Scheme" in late August 1942. According to this scheme, the Chamber began making large purchases of rice and paddy from districts and supplying it to its members directly for the first time. Constituent firms, meanwhile, continued bulk purchases on their own accounts, doubling down on the most essential commodity in the province. The Central Government had, some months earlier, imposed an Excess Profit Tax (E.P.T.) to raise revenue from industrial firms recording record profits in war industries. With developing difficulties in the food supply being reported from across India, however, the Labor Department of the

¹²⁷ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of L. G. Pinnell, p. 549

¹²⁸ Ibid, p. 549

central government notified employers in August that expenditures on foodstuffs for "essential" employees could be written off against the E.P.T.. And so, with the provincial government showing an "extremely panicky mentality themselves,"¹²⁹ high prices were freely paid on bulk purchases by industrial interests with priority access to transportation facilities¹³⁰ - and the expenditure was subsidized by the central government in the form of tax credits. With prices skyrocketing, speculation in increasingly volatile commodity markets fueled the fire still further. Between July 7th and August 21st alone, the price of rice rose 65% - and the "starvation season" in Bengal was about to begin.¹³¹

In its first issue of *Biplabi* the Tamluk Congress Committee reported the attack and attempted sinking of a boat trying to carry rice away from the Danipur rice mill by a group of villagers on September 9th. Police, backed by armed soldiers, had been making arrests in the sub-division for a week past. The villagers were fired upon by troops and three were killed.¹³² On September 14th, in Dinajpur, north Bengal, a crowd of as many as 10,000 villagers armed with lathis and other weapons, attacked government buildings and looted hoards of rice and paddy from stockists in the countryside.¹³³ Two weeks later a similar crowd gathered in Jalpaiguri, the chief grievance being a scarcity of paddy in the locality.¹³⁴ Local officials requisitioned paddy from large stockists and released it on local markets, pacifying the restive mob. "Workers and peasants," a government report noted, "are primarily concerned with problems of high prices and short supplies. Increased lawlessness... is commented on in several districts and is causing apprehension."¹³⁵ In a weekly report during the same quarter the Deputy Inspector General of Police noted a sharp rise in 'dacoity cases.' "It is a very significant sign of the times," the Inspector wrote, "that in not less than 33 cases utensils and/or cloth are specifically mentioned amongst the stolen property and in seven cases foodstuffs were

¹²⁹ Nanavati Papers, Memorandum of the Bengal Rice Mills Association, p. 182

¹³⁰ Source needed

¹³¹ WBSA, Govt. of Bengal Record of War Activities, File # W-77/42

¹³² *Biplabi*, p. 27

¹³³ Bose (1986), p. 262

¹³⁴ Ibid. Bose quotes from the District Officer's Chronicles: "the chief grievance of the mob appeared to be the scarcity of paddy in this locality."

¹³⁵ WBSA, Home Confidential, "Govt. of Bengal Record of War Activities," file W-77/42

either the sole objective or were taken along with other things. It is many years since dacoits bothered themselves with such items."¹³⁶

Faced with increasing disorder throughout the country, the Government of India adopted novel measures in accordance with the Defence of India Rules. On September 8th, 1942 the Collective Fines Ordinance (Ordinance Number XX of 1942) was executed for the first time. A fine of Rupees 10,000 was imposed on inhabitants of Bolpur in Bengal for unspecified "Congress-inspired disturbances."¹³⁷ A similar fine was imposed on inhabitants of Birbhum district a week later, and collective fines were subsequently levied in Malda, Burdwan, Midnapur, Tippera, Dinajpur, Faridpur, Murshidabad, Hooghly and Dacca. The concept of the collective fine was to create a backlash against political agitators, who were known to be in a minority in most districts, at the (literal) expense of the already impoverished masses.¹³⁸ In this way a wedge could be driven between the poor and the "political." Other measures were adopted for those with resources. In September a secret memorandum was sent out by the central government to all provincial Governors outlining general guidelines for "economic warfare" against all corporate anti-government entities.¹³⁹ Provincial governments were requested to black-list companies associated with the nationalist movement, confiscate the funds of "unlawful associations," prosecute all contributors to the same, withhold advertisement from newspapers printing "anti-government reports," and otherwise economically disadvantage sectors of the population in non-compliance with wartime authority. It was noted, furthermore, that "no public notice or warning of the action [to be taken] should be given in advance...and economic sanction [should] be enacted without publication of intent to do economic damage."¹⁴⁰

At the same time, the more overt economics of warfare were undermining the financial system of India still further. Since the beginning of the war, India had been providing Britain with a large number of troops and supplies for its campaigns in the Middle-East, North Africa and Southeast Asia. Because India (however firmly wedged

¹³⁶ Nanavati Papers, included in Testimony of C. J. Minister, p. 1092

¹³⁷ WBSA, Hone Confidential, "Action Under Ordinances other than Defense of India Act," file W-77/42

¹³⁸ Apart from the economic hardship that such fines entailed, they also created further communal disharmony. Muslims appealed to the government to be relieved of collective fines, arguing that 'Quit India' was a Hindu phenomenon, and were granted reprieve. Source needed

¹³⁹ WBSA, Intelligence Branch, file # 573/42

¹⁴⁰ Ibid

under the colonial boot) was recognized as a sovereign state, Britain was under obligation to pay for the Indian resources (both human and material) that it was utilizing across the globe. The Exchequer in London, however, was reluctant to part with the money that such exports from India entailed, knowing that the outlay of so much cash to India could spur inflation back home. Britain opted, instead, to float a massive I.O.U. to India in the form of "sterling balances" held on account by the Exchequer in a safe in London. In the meantime the Indian Government paid out large sums to manufacturers and the army, on Britain's (frozen) account. In order to cover these expenses, the Reserve Bank of India printed money at an accelerating pace - by the end of the war the currency in circulation in India had increased six-fold¹⁴¹ - which precipitated economic chaos in the colony.

With inflation whittling away at the security of the sub-continent, Amery pressed the issue of sterling balances owed to India in the War Cabinet. Churchill, however, could not be convinced that anything at all was owed to India, but rather "burbled away endlessly" that Britain was India's *protector* not its debtor!¹⁴² India should simply be grateful that Britain was there to defend her. "It is an awful thing," wrote Churchill's Secretary of State for India, "dealing with a man like Winston who is at the same moment dictatorial, eloquent and muddleheaded. I am not sure that I ever got into his mind that India pays for the whole of her defense including British forces in India, or that there is no other possible way of reducing these accumulating balances except by stopping to buy Indian goods or employing Indian soldiers outside India."¹⁴³ As for the rest of the Cabinet, Amery noted, "none of them ever really have the courage to stand up to Winston and tell him when he is making a fool of himself."¹⁴⁴ Needless to say, sterling balances on India's account continued accumulating in London, while Rupee notes continued flying off the presses in Delhi.

In the last week of September massive demonstrations against colonial rule rocked Midnapur. Thousands of villagers marched on police stations and government offices in Tamluk, Nandigram, and Contai sub-divisions. Troops stationed in the area

¹⁴¹ See Indivar Kamtekar's "War Dance." p. 199-201. Also, M.N. Roy's *Poverty or Plenty*, p. 24-35,

¹⁴² *The Leo Amery's Diaries*, p. 833

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 836

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*

responded with overwhelming force, killing at least 44 in Tamluk alone including Matangini Hazra, a 73 year old woman who would become an icon of the anti-British movement.¹⁴⁵ Villagers fought running battles with police and soldiers, blocking roads, burning down police *thanas*, and raising nationalist flags over government offices. The violence spread and was directed, also, against big landholders. The rent-collecting offices of the *zamindar* of Mahisadal were gutted, and the granary looted. Rice and paddy were distributed amongst the crowd and the grain bin was burnt to the ground.¹⁴⁶ *Chowkidars'* tax record offices and Debt Conciliation Boards were attacked and documents destroyed, and uniforms of local police agents were burnt in effigy in many places across the district.¹⁴⁷ Indiscriminate police firings were widely reported, and evidence of military atrocities multiplied. In the pages of *Biplabi* there were stories of rape, looting, arson and cold-blooded murder perpetrated by military troops. The situation was spiraling out of control.

Storm

On October 16th a strong wind was blowing and untimely rains were falling in Calcutta. On the same day, Midnapur went silent. Not a word of news about the prevailing situation in the district reached Calcutta for the next three weeks to come. Even the Chief Editor of Calcutta's premier newspaper, *The Statesman*, heard neither fact nor rumor about what was happening in the rebellious region.¹⁴⁸ It was only later revealed that on the 16th a massive cyclone and an accompanying tidal wave had swept through the district, destroying paddy land, houses, cattle, and communications.¹⁴⁹ The Bengal Government later estimated the death toll to be 14,443, but accurate information was difficult to gather. Corpses lay scattered over several thousand square miles of devastated land. 7,400 villages were partly or wholly destroyed by the storm, and standing flood waters remained for weeks in at least 1,600 villages. Cholera, dysentery and other water-borne diseases flourished. 527,000 houses and 1,900 schools were lost.

¹⁴⁵ *Biplabi*, p. 33

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 35

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*,

¹⁴⁸ Stephens, p. 71

¹⁴⁹ All numbers used here, unless otherwise noted, are taken from Paul Greenough's *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal*, p. 92-97

Over 1000 square miles of the most fertile paddy land in the province was entirely destroyed, and the standing crop over an additional 3000 square miles was damaged,¹⁵⁰ and 70,000 head of plow and milk cattle were drowned.¹⁵¹ Amongst the worst hit sub-divisions were Tamluk and Contai, the same areas where revolutionary activities had been most violent: 786 villages in the two sub-division had disappeared without a trace.¹⁵²

In all as many as 2.5 million people were killed, displaced or dispossessed by the October cyclone. When the devastation was finally announced, the Secretary of the Revenue Department, B. R. Sen, was put in charge of relief operations. The most pressing issue of concern was getting food into the cyclone-struck area. Sen approached the newly inaugurated Directorate of Civil Supplies for help. In his testimony before the Famine Enquiry Committee, he reported that he was told that "since the Department of Civil Supplies found it impossible to cope with the demands made on them by different authorities, I should myself go into the market and buy what I could."¹⁵³ In his *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal*, the only full length scholarly work on the Bengal famine to be published in English, Paul Greenough argues that the cyclone that struck Midnapur might be understood as the "first stage" of the famine. While there can be little doubt that the dispossessed of Midnapur fell victim to starvation in large numbers, the question of the beginning and end of famine in Bengal is an extremely complex one, and, as I have demonstrated until now, defies the fixing of any particular event as a sign post.

On October 28th, even before the Midnapur cyclone had been reported, the American Economic Warfare Board sent a communiqué to the Indian Government expressing deep concern about the "critical" food situation in India. Crop shortages, the loss of Burma rice, a lack of effective controls, dangerous speculation, large exports, hoarding, thriving black-markets, rail priority for military shipments creating pockets of acute shortage, and sharp inflationary pressures were included as causes for immediate redress. "The rice situation," the letter read, "is especially critical."¹⁵⁴ The Government of India, however, and despite acute British concern about American perceptions,

¹⁵⁰ Nanavati Papers, Memorandum of the Bengal Rice Mills Association, p. 182

¹⁵¹ Sumit Sarkar (1983), p. 400

¹⁵² Greenough (1982), p. 93

¹⁵³ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of B. R. Sen, p. 441

¹⁵⁴ India Office, L/I/1/1106, Telegram no. 5682/42 in: L/I/1/1106

remained entrenched in denial. At the Sixth Price Control Conference, it was finally admitted that Central Government needed to concern itself with the civilian food supply and a "Basic Plan" for procurement and distribution was outlined, but no measures towards actual implementation were undertaken. "Such food shortages as occur," the External Affairs Department responded to American Economic Warfare Board, "are local and mainly experienced by relatively small *urban* populations."¹⁵⁵ Feeding urban populations by means of rural appropriation, the letter explained, would be tricky business. The letter then went on to address each point in the Warfare Board's memorandum, assuring proactive measures taken on each count that would contain the situation.

Three days later, however, and a full three years after the war had begun, Viceroy Linlithgow - in something of admission that the food situation was dire - approved the establishment of a separate Government of India, Department of Food. No independent Food Member was, as of yet installed, however. Instead, the Food Department portfolio was assigned to the Commerce Member of the Government of India, Nalini Sarkar. Sarkar, earlier in his life, had been President of the Bengal National Chamber of Commerce as well as Commissioner of the Calcutta Port, a fact that surely comforted government with its concerns about feeding the industrial population of Calcutta. The War Transport Member of the Government of India, Sir Edward Benthall, was, similarly, a Calcutta based industrialist, whose firm Bird & Co. on the Hooghly River was a major player in war productions. As such, the Government of India did appear to be staffed with crucial personnel who had both the resources and incentive to keep the industrial population of Calcutta fed at all cost. The question of the Bengal countryside was another matter.

Reports of death from starvation, quite outside the cyclone decimated area, were being reported from several districts.¹⁵⁶ In fact; every indicator outlined in the Bengal Famine Code, by October 1942, had already been met. The impact of disaster, war and want had dislocated several hundreds of thousands Bengalis and non-Bengalis who

¹⁵⁵ India Office, L/I/1/1106, Telegram no. 8953 (emphasis added)

¹⁵⁶ See, for instance, the Communist Party's weekly, *Janayuddha*, October 28, 1942, "Sara Banglay Khadda Sanket" (trans.: "Food Crisis Grips All of Bengal") This article, alone (printed before news of the cyclone leaked out), reports cases of death by starvation in Faridpur, Mymensingh and Jalpaiguri.

wandered the rural districts looking for shelter, work, food and safety. Credit in rural districts had contracted to the extent that the poor were selling off their household possessions in large numbers. Speculation, black-marketing, and a general atmosphere of uncertainty and fear had rendered rice markets increasingly volatile. There had been a high spike in crime, including the theft of foodstuffs. Looting of food stores and transportation facilities had been reported widely across several districts, and "test works," the final measure of prevailing distress, had been opened in several places as early as 1941, and had drawn large numbers, indicating, according to the Bengal Famine Code, that famine should have officially been declared and appropriate steps taken to alleviate its predations immediately. Yet the administrative focus on feeding labor in war factories would continue to be the sole priority of the Central and Provincial Governments alike for many months to come, and the proliferating misery in the countryside would be studiously ignored and, indeed, exacerbated by the anxieties of empire.

Late in November a ship arrived at the Kidderpore docks in Calcutta and began loading large quantities of rice bound for Ceylon and Mauritius. The coolies along the dock were busy hoisting sacks of grain onto the steamer, when a curious public gathered to watch. Rumors of a massive export of rice (even after exports had been banned in July) spread quickly. Director of Civil Supplies, L. G. Pinnell, was aware of the deal cut with the Central Government for a shipment of rice to Ceylon, but was shocked, himself, by the spectacle, given the extremely precarious situation already prevailing in the province. "The effect of such a kind of thing is disastrous," he explained, "you can easily buy two or three thousand tons [of rice] in different places quietly without upsetting the market, but if a man runs around Ramkrishnapur market area in Howrah for the whole quantity to be obtained in the course of a day the effect of that is very severe...rice disappeared from the Howrah market and prices in rose in Calcutta, [which] had far reaching effects, the Calcutta market dominating the rest of Bengal."¹⁵⁷ Pinnell was himself, however - and at this same time - planning "an intensive attack on the market and backing it up by requisitioning" in the Rajshahi division of northern Bengal.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of L. G. Pinnell, p. 552

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 557

Having experience in rural Bengal with unwilling agents during "denial," his Rajshahi Scheme was designed to extract rice, by force if need be, from unwilling villagers in order to feed industrial Calcutta. Meanwhile, in Midnapur, cyclone survivors were unearthing water-damaged paddy and subsisting on stores that "were black in color, with the smell of decaying flesh, which was not completely removed by cooking."¹⁵⁹

On December 3rd, 1942 the Viceroy cabled the Secretary of State to relay a "serious deterioration in the food situation in India."¹⁶⁰ Amongst the causes of the "acute difficulty" Linlithgow listed prominently "the tendency on the part of small subsistence farmers to keep back more of his grain than usual for his own consumption, a course rendered possible by enhanced prices realized by such part of his produce he sells."¹⁶¹ Linlithgow warned that the food situation was dangerous to internal security and had already "excited considerable public criticism."¹⁶² The Viceroy recommended an immediate stop of all exports from India and the necessary arrangements made for subsequent imports to stabilize markets. "The food situation is so acute," he cabled to Amery, "that immediate substantial assistance is essential if war work in India is not to be seriously disorganized and law and order gravely menaced."¹⁶³ This pairing of the "food situation" with "law and order" and the effects that hunger might have on the prosecution of war, became the only *working* "famine code" in India for the foreseeable future. According to this code, the threat to war industries and internal security that scarcity might entail were extremely serious matters that demanded imperial attention and immediate action. In contrast, as long as war work was progressing smoothly, and threats to law and order remained in-check, the country could push on with the status quo. Above all, the Viceroy knew: production and order needed to be maintained in the industrial capitol of Calcutta.

On December 12th "an acute scarcity of rice" was reported to be prevailing in Burdwan, just north of the city.¹⁶⁴ On December 15th, at a meeting of the Calcutta Corporation, "deep concern over the soaring prices of foodstuffs was expressed," and a

¹⁵⁹ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of T.G. Davies, p. 120

¹⁶⁰ T.O.P. Volume III, Linlithgow to Amery, p.

¹⁶¹ Ibid

¹⁶² Ibid

¹⁶³ T.O.P. Volume III, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 358

¹⁶⁴ *The Statesman*, December 13, 1942 "Rice Scarcity"

recommendation for rationing the city was tabled.¹⁶⁵ On the 16th of December, the Bengal Government tried to assuage mounting panic, assuring the public that there was no shortage of rice. Prices were skyrocketing, it was suggested, because of "large scale un-coordinated buying all over the province...and widespread speculative buying in both Calcutta and the rice-growing districts."¹⁶⁶ On the 18th of December the Employers' Federation of India met at Calcutta. The Federation recommended that employers adopt a policy of paying dearness allowances in kind, rather than in cash, as access to food was becoming highly contingent.¹⁶⁷ "Akin to the problem of foodstuffs," it was noted at the conference, "and second only to it in urgency, was that of cloth, the prices of which had risen to an abnormal extent."¹⁶⁸ On the 19th of December a joint meeting of all Chambers of Commerce operating in Bengal was convened. "Grave alarm" was expressed at the "unprecedented and unnatural" rise in the price of foodstuffs.¹⁶⁹ A few days earlier, the British Indian Association had sent an urgent memorandum to the Government of India in Delhi warning of a "grave situation that threatens the Province of Bengal in the matter of steep rise in price of rice and apprehended famine conditions."¹⁷⁰ The following day the Viceroy left for Calcutta.

Christmas in Calcutta - 1942

"When Lord Linlithgow traveled from Delhi in the cold weather as he always did to Calcutta around Christmas,," wrote his Reforms Commissioner, Harry Hodson:

he used the famous white train, preceded for security's sake by another locomotive and guarded by armed policemen stationed at short intervals along the route. The vice-regal establishment occupying the train on these journeys was reputed to number 500. When you consider that His Excellency's entourage included official staff from private secretary to typists and cypher clerks, the Viceroy's Bodyguard of cavalry with all their appurtenances, chaprassis, syces and servants domestic and personal, together with servants of the servants in the caste-bound Indian tradition, five hundred begins to seem too few... in 1941-42 the Viceroy was still a great potentate, successor to the Mogul throne, surrounded

¹⁶⁵ *The Statesman*, December 15, 1942 "Food Shortage in Calcutta"

¹⁶⁶ *The Statesman*, December 17, 1942 "Rise in Price of Rice"

¹⁶⁷ *The Statesman*, December 19, 1942 "Employers in Conference"

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid*

¹⁶⁹ *The Statesman*, December 21, 1942

¹⁷⁰ *The Statesman*, December 13, 1942 "Rice Position"

by a court whom his unfortunate hosts had to entertain, as aforesaid grandees in England were obliged to lodge the train of a medieval or Tudor monarch.¹⁷¹

In December of 1942, Linlithgow found Calcutta "in very good trim... the streets" he wrote to Amery, "were full of British soldiers and airmen, there was any quantity of military transport, jeeps & c. about; and in the center of Calcutta one of the principal avenues has been made into a runway."¹⁷² The city was well prepared for war, the Viceroy thought. However, Linlithgow noted in the same correspondence, he continued to be "greatly exercised about the food position...we are terribly hampered by the absence of personnel with expert experience in this line... I hope very much that you may be able to borrow me man from the Ministry of Food."¹⁷³ No man was sent.

The admirable preparedness of Calcutta was severely tested the very day after the Viceroy left the city. On December 20th Air Raid sirens began to sound throughout the city and industrial areas, but residents of the city had become inured to false alarms, and largely went about their business unperturbed.¹⁷⁴ An hour later, however, the air filled with the rumble of Japanese fighter planes and bombs fell in several parts of the city and the industrial suburbs. An hour later the "all-clear" signal sounded. News about damage from the raids was censored from Delhi, with official reports denying any significant destruction or dislocation.¹⁷⁵ After the first air raid it was reported only that "the number of casualties was very small."¹⁷⁶ Night time air-raids followed on the 21st, 23rd, 24th, and 28th. The third air raid, on Christmas Eve, was heavier, coming in two waves of attack, with "sticks" of heavy explosive bombs falling "slap across the middle of the city."¹⁷⁷

"Fear of the unknown seized the industrial labor in and around Calcutta, the members of essential services including A.R.P. organizations, the members of public utilities services like Tramways Corporation, and even the constabulary and warders in

¹⁷¹ Harry Hodson's Autobiography, Chapter VIII, p. 4 at (<http://www.athelstane.co.uk/hvhodson/hvhbiogr/biogr08.htm>)

¹⁷² T.O.P. Volume III, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 410

¹⁷³ Ibid

¹⁷⁴ It was reported in *The Statesman* December 22, 1942 that "many lights" were not extinguished and that police would take "drastic measures" in the future to deal with non-compliance to "black-outs."

¹⁷⁵ Stephens, p. 82

¹⁷⁶ *The Statesman*, December 22, 1942 "Calcutta's First Raid"

¹⁷⁷ Stephens, p. 82

Jails."¹⁷⁸ An exodus from the city was again underway, with people packing their belongings and setting out on foot, traveling trunk roads out of the city with whatever belongings they could carry perched on their heads. By the 23rd "every imaginable vehicle seemed to be in use."¹⁷⁹ The Bengal Chamber of Commerce called the exodus "immense," estimating that between six and seven hundred thousand people left the Calcutta area.¹⁸⁰ Sir Edward Benthall, War Transport Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council, had given a figure of 300,000 fleeing by rail.¹⁸¹ With the exodus of "sweepers" as well, the depopulated city had been left to "crows, kites and pi-dogs squabbling over the debris amidst much smell."¹⁸²

Linlithgow, however, congratulated the citizens of Calcutta for their steadiness and fortitude: "Well done Calcutta!"¹⁸³ On the 23rd of December a press release was issued from Delhi commending the fact that there had been "no evacuation" from the city.¹⁸⁴ Ian Stephens, editor of *The Statesman* took Government denials to task over the next several days. "We do not know what the term 'evacuation' officially means," an editorial of the next day read, "but large numbers of people could be seen leaving the city..."¹⁸⁵ On the 27th a second editorial was published, roundly condemning Government's air-raid publicity. After the heavy raids of the 24th, no information about damage had been released for a full 12 hours and the announcement that eventually came was "of the most meager sort."¹⁸⁶ Photographic evidence was censored and false claims about the lack of exodus from Calcutta were continuing to be circulated. "When authority fails to put forth reliable information promptly or in adequate amount about outstanding local happenings," *Statesman* reporters argued, "it is inevitable that rumors should gain currency... the population would have been less suddenly depleted had rumor been less."¹⁸⁷

¹⁷⁸ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of P. N. Banerjee, p. 285

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, p 80

¹⁸⁰ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of Reps. of the BCC, p. 1404

¹⁸¹ Ibid

¹⁸² Stephens, p. 83

¹⁸³ *The Statesman*, December, 22, 1942 "Viceroy's Message to Calcutta"

¹⁸⁴ Stephens, p. 82

¹⁸⁵ Stephens, p. 82

¹⁸⁶ *The Statesman*, December 27, 1942 "Remedy Needed"

¹⁸⁷ Ibid

Lurking behind governmental denials were simmering anxieties that were about to explode. Though, by all accounts, material damage from this first series of Japanese bombings was, by contemporary standards, "light," the ramifications of Japanese attacks on Calcutta in 1942 were to be extremely profound. In some sense, it could be argued, the air-raids on Calcutta in December of 1942 were among the most devastating of World War II, and can be implicated in the death of as many as 3 million residents of Bengal.

Chapter Three: Priorities

Requisitioning

While British defeats at Rangoon and Singapore had been a shocking blow, Calcutta was an immensely more important city; psychologically, strategically, and economically. It had been the foundation of British imperialism in Asia, the "second city" of Empire, the "London of the East," and the first capital of colonial rule in India. It was now the central collection point of personnel and resources for the Allied military mobilization against Japan. Hundreds of thousands of British, American, African and Indian troops passed through the city on their way to the front, and returned there for "rest and recreation." It also served as the gateway to vital coal and iron ore fields to the west, which fed industrial production essential to the war effort. Its factories were running at full tilt to supply armaments and other supplies to the military. Huge profits were being made in the textile, engineering, food services and entertainment industries. The city was, in many ways, awash in cash.. The loss of Calcutta under these circumstances, as the Viceroy himself confessed, would be "tantamount to the loss of India." As such, the pressure on governmental officials in Bengal, and particularly on I.C.S. officers like L. G. Pinnell, to supply Calcutta and keep its industries functioning was tremendous. Moreover, it came from all quarters; the military, big business, the Secretary of State's office in London, the Government of India in Delhi, and also from foreign governments, particularly the Americans, who were investing more and more of their own resources in the war in the Pacific.

When Calcutta was bombed there was, therefore, a desperate re-entrenchment that in its intensity belied the acute panic and uncertainty that lay just below the surface. Calcutta needed to be kept going at all costs, it *could not* fall. With record numbers of laborers having migrated to the city and its industrial suburbs to drive the production boom, the maintenance of Calcutta depended, above all else, on keeping them at their

posts. The fourth Japanese bombing, on December 24th, had been the heaviest until that point, and panic ensued. Thousands amongst the ranks of "essential" labor, together with many civilians from all walks of life, packed up their portable belongings and headed for safer harbors. Once again Calcutta began to empty out. The exodus only picked up pace when more bombings followed in the last week of December. With the exit of Marwari merchants, in particular, the circulation of goods and services was crippled. Of ultimate importance to government officials, meanwhile, was access to stocks of rice. The question of feeding industrial Calcutta, had been weighing ever-heavier on government officials for some time, and now with bombs falling four nights out of five and merchants and stockists putting padlocks on their doors and seeking passage out of Bengal, Pinnell rolled the dice.

On December 27th an order was issued giving agents of the Directorate of Civil Supplies, in conjunction with police and A.R.P. officers, authority to break open the rice shops and storage sheds of Calcutta and Howrah and seize all the rice that they could lay their hands on.¹ According to the order, any and all "godowns" and stores dealing in rice, wheat, *atta*, flour, *dal*, mustard oil, salt, coke or matches (all of which were increasingly scarce across the province) which failed to open for business within 24 hours of the "all clear" siren were subject to forcible entry and confiscation of goods. The order also gave the Directorate of Civil Supplies authority to dispose of the seized commodities "in such a manner as they consider expedient."² So that stocks could not be removed from Calcutta, further authority was granted to seal up mills, shops, offices, or any other place of storage of rice, sugar, or *dal* regardless of their period of closure. A second order restricted the sale or movement of any of these commodities by any manager or person in charge of places of storage sealed off by the government, except under written permission of the Director of Civil Supplies. All *imports* into Calcutta and Howrah were also restricted, prohibiting delivery of any rice arriving by rail or steamer to any consignee, except under the authority of the Directorate. These orders essentially amounted to a state of martial law in the commodities markets of Calcutta and Howrah, denying private businesses the

¹ *The Statesman*, "Control of Stores in Calcutta," December 31, 1942

² *Ibid*

rights to their own products, while conferring extraordinary powers of seizure and control on the Director of Civil Supplies, L. G. Pinnell.

In the subsequent days a full two thirds of the "visible" stocks of rice in and around Calcutta was seized by the Directorate of Civil Supplies.³ Little contact had been made with the merchants or stockists whose goods were seized, and the scheme was enacted with such speed and impunity that effected parties had little scope to protest. The seizure of grain from rice mills around Calcutta was especially pernicious:

Instead of sending for the mill owners and seeking their co-operation to maintain supplies in the city, Government sent around a large number of police staff who descended on the mills without notice and sealed godowns of a large number of mill owners. The action destroyed all faith the mills still had in Government's good dealings. The usual channels through which the mills supplied the Calcutta market immediately dried up.⁴

In addition, the price given to mill owners and stockists was below existing market rates, breeding intense resentment. Pinnell himself was forced to admit that some stockists must have incurred considerable losses in relation to the compensation paid.⁵ A letter of protest from the Rice Mills Association followed, stating that "the sudden seizure of rice by Government and payment of an arbitrary rate to stockists and mill-owners in Calcutta... created panic in the minds of all owners of paddy and rice and [other] legitimate trade interests."⁶ In its *Report on Bengal*, the Famine Enquiry Commission, couching its language in diplomatic terms, concurred: "On the 27th December, the Government of Bengal, in order to maintain the distributions of supplies in Calcutta, were reluctantly compelled to requisition stocks from wholesale dealers and *from that moment* the ordinary trade machinery could not be relied upon to feed Calcutta. The crisis had begun."⁷

If the manner and extent of requisitioning in Calcutta had deeply alienated "legitimate trade interests," it had also revealed the true extent of Government's anxieties. All stocks that were requisitioned had been identified in relation to applications filled out under the Foodgrains Control Order - these were what Pinnell called "visible" stocks.

³ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of L. G. Pinnell, p. 553

⁴ Nanavati Papers, Memorandum of the Bengal Rice Mills Association, p. 184

⁵ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of L. G. Pinnell, p. 554

⁶ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of Bengal Rice Mills Association, p. 1226

⁷ *Report on Bengal*, p. 34

Meanwhile a thriving black-market was already operating. After the bombings and associated requisitioning, the black market began to expand rapidly as the potential liability of playing according to government rules was laid bare. Duly reported stocks in the city began to decline, as traders, mill-owners and large stockists in Calcutta became increasingly mistrustful of government interference. Stocks, in other words, increasingly went "under-ground," and government estimates of the rice position in the province, as a whole, became increasingly speculative and unreliable. The less officials - as well as the public at large - knew of the true position, the more anxious they became. The need to balance uncertainty with large stocks of rice-in-hand increased, and Government again turned to the countryside to achieve this objective.

The Civil Supplies Department began its Rajshahi procurement scheme just two days after Calcutta was bombed. Rajshahi, a productive agricultural district in the Dinajpur division north of Calcutta was cordoned off and soon thereafter government-appointed agents entered to buy up large quantities of rice and paddy for Calcutta. Competition was excluded by a permit system, and government agents were backed by the threat of forceful requisitioning if their restricted price structure was contested.⁸ Dinajpur, while normally a surplus district, had, in the past, provided little rice to Calcutta.⁹ That the government was now making large purchases there for Calcutta, alone, was cause for alarm. When word got out that Government were resorting to strong-arm tactics to extract foodgrains from Rajshahi, moreover, "confusion" in the countryside mounted. Rumors spread that Government was buying to supply massive military requirements elsewhere, or that the British were planning to withdraw from Bengal altogether, and were taking all the rice they could lay their hands on with them.¹⁰ "The least the people could think was that there must have been something extraordinarily wrong as otherwise Government would not take such extraordinary action."¹¹ Though the Rajshahi scheme had been planned in advance and was unrelated to the bombings, the timing of the scheme only served to maximize distrust, suspicion, and panic.

⁸ Knight, p. 83

⁹ Nanavati Papers, Memorandum of the Bengal Rice Mills Association, p. 183

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid, p. 184

The "Steel Frame"

Government officers, particularly non-elected, colonial officials, were themselves in a state of extreme anxiety. The losses in Singapore, Malaya and Burma had deeply shaken the confidence of members of the Indian Civil Service (I.C.S.). The I.C.S. was an elite and rather closely knit network of colonial officials whose skills and aptitudes had to be adjusted according to contingent colonial appointments. Governors, Secretaries, District Magistrates, Commissioners, and the Directors of various agencies, all forming the "steel frame" of colonial authority in some 250 districts of British India, rotated through positions and postings that were as dependent on social networks at least as much as on administrative competence. I.C.S. officers, moreover, operated under the authority of the Secretary of State in London and the Viceroy in New Delhi, and as such were largely unanswerable to provincial Indian governmental authority. With the advent of "provincial autonomy" they were ostensibly responsible to the Ministry, but, in fact, the I.C.S. became increasingly instrumental to the *circumvention* of self-rule during the period under consideration. The I.C.S. was, however, at least since the time of WWI, a fairly moribund and anemic corps.¹² Particularly in the vast province of Bengal, the I.C.S. was undermanned, poorly equipped and, increasingly, ill at ease. The local population was disaffected, starving and rebellious. The war was going badly and upon their shoulders rested the prestige of colonial rule in South Asia. The mood in the clubs and parlors of Calcutta where the governing elite met to discuss the events of the day was sour:

The more far-sighted of these tired middle aged civilians, sipping their 'pegs' in the Bengal Club's vast airy exclusive rooms, clad in bow-ties, black jackets, cummerbunds and white trousers - to the perplexity of someone's colonel-guest, fresh from England, open necked and en route to the front - doubtless felt they were performing a charade; that however total the Allies' [eventual] victory, the India they knew, the privileges they'd enjoyed... were fading and largely irrecoverable... whatever emerged from the diverse confusion without - to be glimpsed through the Club's verandahs traipsing up and down Chowringhee -

¹² See: Ann Ewing, "The Indian Civil Service 1919-1924: Service Discontent and the Response in London and in Delhi." *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (1984), pp. 33-53

things for them and their kind couldn't be the same again...they symbolized a vanishing past.¹³

The calamities in Singapore and Burma reflected particularly badly on colonial officials, who were seen as apathetic, ill-prepared and ultimately timorous in the face of Japanese threat. The chaotic and desperate evacuations of Rangoon and Singapore had been sordid and humiliating. Many of the colonial officers from the fallen cities had made their way to Chittagong and Calcutta, sometimes in desperate condition, with little or no help from military or magisterial authority. They "came out" and were welcomed into the clubs and parlors of colonial Calcutta with hair raising stories to tell. The collapse of British colonial authority had been so swift and so disorganized that many had made the journey by boat or by land with nothing but the shirts on their backs. With morale among colonial servants in Bengal already at a low point, this influx of disillusioned comrades from further east only served to compound the enervation of war, rebellion and administrative impasse. Would they be next to be driven from their posts and suffer the humiliations of enemy defeat in a foreign land? Whatever the outcome, the "defense" of Calcutta, they knew, was as much about rice as it was about anti-aircraft guns, as long as the city's production could be maintained, the war could be won.

Early in January, while food still remained a subsidiary directorate under the Labor Department, a Foodgrains Purchasing Officer (F.G.P.O.) with far-ranging authority was appointed by the Governor to scale up procurement for Calcutta. Mr. A.A. McInnes, I.C.S., had been in service in India for 24 years past, most recently as the manager of the National Bank in Chittagong. He had no experience whatsoever in foodgrains purchasing, but had great confidence in his understanding of things Bengali. McInnes, something of a lay anthropologist, boasted that he had always "made a special hobby of spending weekends and holidays living among the villagers and studying life from their point of view."¹⁴ Along the way he had learned some Bengali and imagined that his linguistic achievements would stand him in good stead with the local population. However, and by his own admission, rice procurement was tough business and villagers remained unimpressed by his assurances in broken Bengali. According to his own words,

¹³ Stephens, p. 103-104

¹⁴ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of A.A. McInnes, p. 647

"they thought that more and more of their supplies [were] going to be in danger, and they had no confidence in us."¹⁵ L.G. Pinnell, on the other hand, having already mixed with villagers extensively during "denial," was less of a romantic. He had no illusions about the difficulties that he and McInnes were likely to face in the countryside and was happy to be able to "pitch into the villagers...in their own language which," he admitted, "I find, I can speak with force if not with grammar."¹⁶

When the rural procurement scheme got underway in January of 1943, there were again disagreements between the Governor and the Bengal Ministry about agency appointments.¹⁷ Again Pinnell wanted to enlist Ispahani's firm - which was deeply enmeshed with the Muslim League - as a primary agent. Again this caused a backlash from the Huq Ministry and Hindu interests. Seeking to ameliorate the political tensions that quickly emerged when the agency scheme was announced, Pinnell opted for a 'Dutch Auction' to select agents. At length, seven agents whose turn-over in the province was thought to be the highest, were given exclusive contracts to purchase on Government's behalf. Each was assigned a particular area of operation and tasked with buying up as much rice as possible in that zone. To minimize competitive buying, "free run" was given to these agents in their assigned districts and "considerable restriction on other people" was enforced.¹⁸ In addition, embargoes were placed around purchasing areas, restricting export to all but government agents. Even in areas not covered under the scheme, embargoes were levied in order to prevent speculative purchasing by non-government agents in these markets.¹⁹ In "denial" areas special passes were given so that agents could bring boats into coastal areas to remove rice and paddy. A ceiling price was also fixed for the agents of the scheme, and purchases and sales above that ceiling were outlawed by threat of arrest and confiscation. This de facto price control measure was in contrast to earlier indications that the fixed price would not be enforced, which only added to confusion.

In January of 1943, less than one year after "denial," with the essential *aman* crop again making its way to the market, agents and purchasers employed by the government,

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 658

¹⁶ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of L.G. Pinnell, p. 558

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 556

¹⁹ *Report on Bengal*, p. 37

protected by executive orders, and backed by police and ultimately military force, fanned out across the districts to buy up the "surplus" rice of Bengal. A special deal was struck between the Bengal Chamber of Commerce and government for the Chamber to cease its own purchases during the government's drive. The Chamber itself did lay off the market, but there was little to prevent their constituent members, primarily jute mills, railways, and other large industries, from buying on their own accounts. As his first priority was to supply foodgrains to these same interests in any case, it made no sense to block their purchases and, as such, permits were issued liberally by McInnes.²⁰ The Calcutta Port Trust, the Calcutta Municipal Corporation, the big railways, the military and even the Revenue Department of the Government of Bengal itself, continued heavy purchasing, writing off the expenditure against the Excess Profit Tax.²¹ The Railways and the Port Trust were especially advantaged by their ability to arrange their own transport at a time when transportation facilities were under intense pressure due to military requirements.²² The drain of the countryside that had begun with "denial" continued. The alienation of trade interests falling outside the governments scheme also continued and not surprisingly, large quantities of rice continued to disappear into thriving black-markets across the province, driving up prices still further.

Durbhikkho

With rumors about governmental intentions swirling, the frenetic purchasing activities of agents, sub-agents and district officials, was received with alarm in the countryside. It was well understood that the government was in a state of panic and would use any means at its disposal to acquire rice and paddy from the districts - even while conditions in the *mofussil* continued to deteriorate. The Rajshahi scheme had ended, but even then, in Chittagong the Collector began "requisitioning hard" from cultivators towards the middle of January, and "this caused strong local resentment -

²⁰ Nanavati Papers, Memorandum of the Bengal Rice Mills Association, p. 184 The text reads: "practically all purchases made by the F.G.P.O. went to feed what were called the essential industries and essential priority consumers"

²¹ See: Nanavati Papers, Testimony of the Marwari Chamber of Commerce, p. 1446, Testimony of Bengal Chamber of Commerce, p. 1406, Testimony of Ashutosh Bhattacharjee, p. 1468

²² Nanavati Papers, Testimony of the Marwari Chamber of Commerce, p. 1446

people on their knees weeping or cursing before the District Magistrate."²³ A shortage of kerosene across the province was becoming acute and made the cooking and consumption of rice that much more difficult. Sugar, lentils, coal, and matches were also growing increasingly scarce. A dearth of small coins in circulation was also hampering trade, with hoarding of copper and other metals on the rise. In Rangpur District it was reported that desperate farmers had eaten up their seed stocks and had nothing to sow for the summer season.²⁴ In Jessore the price of milk and fish were rising out of the reach of all but the wealthy, and in parts of Rajshahi, famine conditions were being reported, with as many as 50% of households in some areas without any rice stores left at all.²⁵

Even in Calcutta, at control shops around the city, queues began increasing and supplies were being shifted without explanation. At some shops, government lorries, aided by police officers, removed wheat to unspecified locations, leaving nothing at all behind for local residents.²⁶ At Ballygunge Station, on the southern fringe of the city, when rail wagons arrived loaded with coal, a crowd of 2,000 local residents gathered and surrounded the train, demanding that the goods-cars be unloaded so that they could purchase coal. Armed police were called in to disperse the crowd and the shipment was moved on to an unknown destination in the middle of the night.²⁷ Priorities in Calcutta were becoming ever-more inequitable, with provisions for "essential" laborers at large industrial firms enjoying precedence. Sweepers, servants, contract laborers, and other menial workers employed in private residences and factories, however, were, for the most part, left to fend for themselves. They had little security, either in terms of food or even shelter. That these workers fled from the city in large numbers after the bombings, then, is not surprising.

The hardships of white-collar workers, on the other hand, did receive attention from the highest quarters. The Commerce Member of the Government of India, N.R. Sarkar, also in charge of the newly minted Food Department, visited Calcutta in early January to inaugurate a canteen system for the middle-class public, which, he said, had "been so badly hit by food shortages, high prices, disruption of the family, and, lastly, the

²³ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of L.G. Pinnell, p. 564

²⁴ *Janayuddha*, February 17, 1942 "Banglar Grame Grame Khanna-Samasya"

²⁵ *Ibid*

²⁶ *Janayuddha*, January 20, 1942 "Garhi Garhi Atta Pacharer Chesta"

²⁷ *Janayuddha*, February 3, 1942 "Pach Hajar Mon Koyla Aday"

exodus of servants."²⁸ That the Executive Council Member in charge of the Food portfolio was catering to the middle-class of Calcutta at a time when the poor in the countryside - and the city itself - were actually starving is a sad comment on the true priorities of the colonial state. Such realities led to considerable resentment, a hardening of class animosities, and the increasing fragmentation of a society already under economic siege. Even while Sarkar was inaugurating his canteens, J.C. Roy, president of The Refuge, an organization feeding homeless people in Calcutta, applied to the Directorate of Civil Supplies to obtain a permit to purchase rice and wheat at controlled prices in order to continue feeding the destitutes in their care. The permit was refused without explanation.²⁹ The problem of acute destitution and homelessness, however, was fast becoming impossible to ignore.

By January 1943, Calcutta was filling up with "beggars." A string of letters written to *The Statesman* complained that these "gentlemen of leisure" were increasing, spreading filth and shame throughout the city, squatting in air raid shelters and pestering hard working citizens with their plaintive grumblings.³⁰ The newspaper reported that while urban poverty was an "old evil" in Calcutta, the numbers of desperate immigrants had sharply increased in recent months. Another editorialist worried at the discomfort more fortunate residents of the city must surely be suffering, crowded with these wretches in air raid shelters during drills.³¹ A Press Note on the topic was released in the middle of January by the Government of Bengal explaining that government had every good intention to round up the "beggars" and place them in detention, but were facing certain administrative obstacles. Suggestions that they should be "kept under restraint" in relief centers built for air-raid refugees were impractical.³² These shelters, on the outskirts of Calcutta, had been built for evacuees "on the move" and did not have the sanitation or logistical facilities to house Calcutta's mounting indigent population. Furthermore, the shelters were unsecured and would have to be fortified with compound walls, as, it was noted, "beggars will not remain voluntarily in detention."³³ The prospect

²⁸ *The Statesman*, January 7, 1942, "Cheap Meals for Citizens"

²⁹ *The Statesman*, January 10, 1942 "No Supplies"

³⁰ *The Statesman*, January 11, 1942 "Letter to the Editor"

³¹ *The Statesman*, January 24, 1942 "Calcutta's Street Beggars"

³² *The Statesman*, January 22, 1942 "Beggar Problem in Calcutta: Government Action"

³³ *Ibid*

of building new detention facilities for the poor was, however, also fraught with difficulties. For one thing, bricks were in extremely short supply, and for another, the location of such detention camps was tricky. Proposals for building thatched structures in Murshidabad district were floated, but in the meantime Government could only reassure the more fortunate public, that "it [was] fully conscious of [the] urgency and [was] constantly considering possible ways and means for the earlier collection and detention of at least those beggars who are suffering from dangerous or infectious diseases."³⁴

On the 24th of January an editorial in *The Statesman* read, "there seem more beggars than ever in the city's streets and dirtier than ever; many are more importunate in plying their calling. A census to find from whence they come would be interesting, but unprofitable."³⁵ The question of profit aside, it would not have been difficult to determine where they were coming from. They were coming from the cyclone ravaged towns of Midnapur to the west, the militarily evacuated regions of Diamond Harbor to the south, the impoverished districts of Rangpur and Rajshahi to the north, Faridpur to the northeast, and Khulna to the southeast. Across the province as a whole, in fact, the price of rice had risen far beyond the reach of many millions of Bengalis. As the government strained ever-more fitfully to bring the rice of Bengal into Calcutta, there followed - as if on a string - an ever-growing stream of starving people from every corner of the province who understood that survival, if it could be found, could only be found in Calcutta. In the countryside there were soldiers and government agents, there were police convoys and sub-divisional officers, there were purchasing agents for large industrial firms and the military - all after rice. It took little acumen to understand that a landless agricultural laborer - who lived by debt and prayer in the best of times - could not compete. It did take, however, a tremendous amount courage - and despair - for these same landless laborers, fishermen, potters, and, increasingly, small holders who had lost their lands to need, to pick up and leave their native villages behind in search of the barest survival. But, for many, Calcutta proved to be only a mirage of fleeting hope. In the city too there was brutal hardship, and charity had become extremely strained.

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ *The Statesman*, Jan. 24th, 1943

The most common Bengali word for scarcity, often translated as "famine" in English, is *durbhikkho*; a word that might be more literally translated as "scarcity of alms." In a province historically ravaged by hunger and with a long trajectory of dispossession and impoverishment, the poorest members of society had long depended on the charity of the wealthy to survive hard times. When times were especially hard, however, they found no help, and starved in large numbers. With the rural credit system in shambles, and after more than a decade of especially pernicious economic conditions, the dislocations of war, natural disaster and governmental predation were taking a brutal toll. The uncertainties and anxieties that gripped Bengal had dried up the compassion that in less tumultuous times created a buffer for the poorest of the poor. Every indicator listed in the Bengal Famine Code had been long in evidence, and yet famine was not declared. However, that Calcutta was filling up with "beggars" by January 1943, and that their plaintive moans were increasingly going unheard, was a clear indication to many of the city's residents that *durbhikkho* was well underway.

Imports

The Government of India in Delhi, it should be said, had few illusions. Linlithgow, in his official capacity as head of the (only days old) Government of India Food Department, wrote to the Secretary of State in London on December 9th informing him that the food situation had "deteriorated seriously," and was causing "acute anxiety."³⁶ He asked for the immediate import of 600,000 tons of wheat to forestall an imminent catastrophe. For "psychological effect," he suggested, the request should be made without specific reference to military or civilian allocation. The Food Department, the Viceroy assured London, "will see that military needs are given preference."³⁷ Using the peculiar "famine code" that would prevail in official circles throughout the most acute stage of starvation, he also lamented the imposition of asking for imports, but noted: "the food situation is so acute that immediate substantial assistance is essential if war work in India is not to be seriously disorganized and law and order gravely menaced."³⁸ Amery replied that imports would, unfortunately, be an impossibility, citing the prohibitive "cost

³⁶ T.O.P. Volume III, Govt. of India Food Dept. to Secretary of State, December 9, 1942

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Ibid

to the main war effort" that such imports would entail. The Government of India was on its own, he continued, and in this regard "should therefore lose no time in setting on foot measures which, *though drastic*, will serve to place maximum food supplies at disposal of Government and full cooperation of Provincial authorities should be secured by all means available."³⁹

Linlithgow sent several more telegrams, pleading the case, noting that the Food Conference held in Delhi on the 14th and 15th of December had revealed that the situation was even worse than he had originally thought.⁴⁰ All efforts being made from Delhi to deal with the crisis were further hampered by a lack of competent personnel, and if nothing was done, he warned, there would even be the possibility of "shortage being felt by the armed forces here."⁴¹ Amery remained skeptical, wondering whether or not the statistics that Linlithgow was using were of any merit: "judging by the use which the Congress people have made of the Midnapore disaster," he replied, "they are no doubt capable of doing their utmost to aggravate the food situation by encouraging hoarding on the one hand and, on the other, [by] denouncing the Government for deliberately starving the people."⁴² Linlithgow persisted, assuring Amery that Government would take every measure possible to "place maximum food supplies at disposal of Government," but maintained that immediate imports were "absolutely essential."⁴³ He also enlisted the influence of the Commander-in-Chief for South and Southeast Asia, Field Marshall Archibald Wavell, who agreed that the situation was grave. Military rations, Wavell informed the War Cabinet, were already being cut for both men and draught animals.⁴⁴

On or about the 8th of January, Amery - convinced by Linlithgow's repeated entreaties - sent a memorandum to the Minister of War Transport in London, Lord Leathers, outlining Linlithgow's request for imports. "It is the urban population," he wrote, "who are the first to experience any shortage, and since it is the urban population on whose labour the Indian munitions and supply industries depend, any marginal shortage of food tends to reduce the output of those industries. Such a shortage may have

³⁹ T.O.P. Volume III, Secretary of State to Govt. of India Food Dept, December 15, 1942 (emphasis mine)

⁴⁰ T.O.P. Volume III, Govt. of India Food Dept to Secretary of State, p. 394

⁴¹ T.O.P. Volume III, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 396

⁴² T.O.P. Volume III, Amery to Linlithgow, p. 413

⁴³ T.O.P. Volume III, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 421

⁴⁴ T.O.P. Volume III, Linlithgow to Amery, p.455

the effect of driving labour from factory centres back to the country where they may be lost to industry and constitute a threat to law and order with the possibility of food riots." Government's "famine code" encapsulated. A meeting of the War Cabinet was held in London, and at length it was agreed that in lieu of the 600,000 tons of grains requested by the Viceroy, a maximum of 130,000 tons might be made available by the end of April.⁴⁵ Amery suggested that to make full use of the propaganda value of this decision, the announcement of imports should be made without mentioning the tonnage involved. In return for imports into India, the War Cabinet was pressing for Indian assistance to Ceylon. Ceylon, a former major importer of Burmese rice, was a critical strategic base against Japan as well, and there too labor and rice was needed to keep operations going. While Bengal Chief Minister Fazlul Huq was in Delhi towards the end of January, the Viceroy approached him with the Ceylon problem: "Mindful of our difficulties about food I told him that he simply *must* produce some more rice out of Bengal for Ceylon, even if Bengal itself went short! He was by no means unsympathetic," Linlithgow wrote hopefully, "and it is possible that I may in the result screw a little out of them."⁴⁶

Recognizing the insufficiency of imports promised, on February 3rd, 1943 the Viceroy wrote to all provincial Governors detailing the gravity of food situation in India. "The Central Government," he warned, "regard the position more seriously than might be supposed from their communications to the general public."⁴⁷ Wheat imports were promised, he noted, but would necessarily be far less than adequate. "As for the problem of rice," he added, "no help can be expected from outside the country and we are forced back on our own resources."⁴⁸ It would be imperative, he added, for provincial Governments to use all means necessary to get control of as much food as possible. Rather than suggesting that Governors attempt to work with elected Provincial Ministries, however, the Viceroy advised Governors that "for the fullest measure of success" they should rely on the I.C.S. for the execution of procurement. With this, Linlithgow contented himself with the "food position" for the time being. Other vastly more

⁴⁵ T.O.P. Volume III, Amery to Linlithgow, p. 520

⁴⁶ T.O.P. Volume III, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 544

⁴⁷ T.O.P. Volume III, Linlithgow to Provincial Governors, p. 580

⁴⁸ Ibid

spectacular events were on the immediate horizon, and it was to them that all administrative eyes now fell.

Starving Indians

The Government of India regret to announce that Mr. Gandhi died in detention at Poona at hours on from collapse/heart failure following a self-imposed fast. Gandhi started his fast on 10th February and refused to conduct it under his own arrangements outside the Palace. Government therefore put all medical resources available at his disposal and allowed him to have his own doctors and nurses. It had earlier become apparent that at his age he could not stand the 21 days' fast he had imposed upon himself and he was warned to that effect by his medical advisers. However, he persisted in it with fatal results.

Press release prepared in case of Gandhi's demise
February 19, 1943⁴⁹

Even before Gandhi was arrested on August 9, 1942, plans for what course of action to take if he chose to go on a hunger-strike were being urgently discussed in Delhi and London. On August 2nd the Viceroy relayed to the Secretary of State his intention to follow the officially codified "cat and mouse" procedure,⁵⁰ releasing Gandhi if his health declined enough that he was in danger of dying on Government hands, then re-arresting him if he survived.⁵¹ The War Cabinet rebutted Linlithgow, staunchly advocating allowing Gandhi to fast to death in detention, if it came to that. The political implications of his possible death in custody, could be blunted, the War Cabinet argued, if Gandhi could be deported upon arrest and detained in Yemen or Sudan - where news of his demise could be carefully censored.⁵² Additionally, and with a pointed lack of deference to the Government of India, the War Cabinet expressed its jurisdictional primacy, noting that the treatment of State Prisoner Gandhi "was a matter in which His

⁴⁹ T.O.P. Vol. III. Linlithgow to Amery, p. 692

⁵⁰ The "Cat and Mouse" procedure was officially recognized in the Prisoners (Temporary Discharge for Ill Health) Act of 1913, was thus considered a humanitarian solution to the thorny problem of hunger strikes that plagued Britain since the turn of the century. Its advantage was that Government could absolve themselves of responsibility for the care of prisoners - allowing them to die in "freedom." The disadvantages were that release of prisoners in reaction to a hunger strike showed weakness, and furthermore, the released prisoner could resume political activity upon discharge. Re-arrest, in the case of a popular leader like Gandhi, could also prove a second political liability.

⁵¹ T.O.P. Volume II, Government of India, Home to Secretary of State, p. 535

⁵² T.O.P. Vol. II, War Cabinet W.M. (42) 105th Conclusion, p. 588

Majesty's Government must [ultimately] be responsible for the decision taken."⁵³

Linlithgow, though still worried about popular unrest if Gandhi died in detention, sought to appease the War Cabinet. He drafted a new plan that involved keeping Gandhi in detention, but rushing the Mahatma's son, Devadas, to the site and providing him with food, medical supplies, and other amenities, and leaving him in charge of his father for the duration.⁵⁴ Perhaps this would shift responsibility away from Government in the event of Gandhi's death. The War Cabinet found this suggestion more or less amenable and the urgency of the debate ebbed as Gandhi gave no indication of resorting to a fast for several months to come.⁵⁵

The first inklings that Gandhi would venture to starve himself while in custody came in an uncharacteristically angry letter to the Viceroy on New Year's Eve, 1942. In this correspondence Gandhi focused on the lack of evidence linking the Congress Resolution of August 8th to the violence that had swept the country since the arrest of Congress leaders the following day. Such arrests, Gandhi argued, were unjust unless and until some objective proof could be given that the leadership of Congress had, in fact, instigated the violence directly. He added that a fast would be his "last resort" to redress this governmental injustice. The Viceroy replied tersely that Gandhi was merely trying to evade responsibility, and that he should, at once, denounce the popular movement that *he* had set off. In a subsequent letter to the Viceroy on the 12th of January, Gandhi reiterated his argument that Government heavy-handedness, not Congress instigation, had precipitated the uprising, and added that as a "helpless witness to what is going on in the country, including the privations of the poor millions owing to the universal scarcity stalking the land,"⁵⁶ he was morally compelled to fast in solidarity with the masses. In a third and final correspondence to Linlithgow before beginning his fast, Gandhi again cited the "privations of the millions due to India-wide scarcity," and the administrative injustice leading to the same, as grounds for carrying out a "fast according to capacity" beginning on February 9th.⁵⁷

⁵³ Ibid, p. 587

⁵⁴ T.O.P. Vol. II, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 844

⁵⁵ T.O.P. Vol. II, War Cabinet W.M. (42) 121st Conclusion, p. 917

⁵⁶ T.O.P. Vol. III, Gandhi to Linlithgow, p. 518

⁵⁷ T.O.P. Vol. III, Gandhi to Linlithgow, p.559

With a hunger-strike likely, the debate about how to handle Gandhi's fast again heated up. Governor of Bombay, Sir Richard Lumley, under whose jurisdiction the immediate matter of dealing with the intricacies of Gandhi's detention fell, argued frankly against the plan to keep Gandhi in detention, warning Linlithgow that in Bombay, if not across India as a whole, Gandhi's death under arrest would be sure to create considerable unrest, and would seriously hamper the war effort by souring Indian opinion further. He also warned Delhi that the Surgeon-General of Bombay had alerted him to the fact that at Gandhi's age, and given his high blood pressure, Gandhi would be unlikely to last more than 3 or 4 days.⁵⁸ Linlithgow seconded Lumley's apprehensions, and relayed these concerns to London. "Personally," the Secretary of State wrote in his diary, "I should be all for letting Gandhi fast to death if he likes. However great the sensation at the moment, in the long run India is unlikely to make any progress while he is alive."⁵⁹ He did, however, submit a memorandum to the War Cabinet in London, outlining Lumley's objections and urged reconsideration of the case given sentiments on the ground in India.⁶⁰

Amery knew that the case for release would be a hard sell, particularly with Winston Churchill at the helm. Churchill, it was well understood, was deeply opposed to Indian independence, and had a particularly arch opinion of Mohandas Gandhi. When Gandhi had met with a previous Viceroy to negotiate a detente between nationalist forces and the colonial government, Churchill had been aghast: "it is alarming," he commented, "and also nauseating to see Mr. Gandhi, a seditious Middle Temple lawyer, now posing as a fakir of a type well known in the East, striding half naked up the steps of the Viceregal palace, while he is still organizing and conducting a defiant campaign of civil disobedience, to parley on equal terms with the representative of the King-Emperor."⁶¹ Amery's memorandum, moreover, was considered by the War Cabinet on a day that seems to have found Churchill in a markedly acrimonious mood - particularly on the topic of Empire.

⁵⁸ T.O.P. Vol. III, Lumley to Linlithgow, October 22nd, 1942.

⁵⁹ *The Leo Amery's Diaries*, p.866

⁶⁰ T.O.P. Vol. III, War Cabinet Paper W.P. (43), p. 452

⁶¹ Quoted in Baker, p. 23

The War Cabinet began discussions with a proposed joint declaration on colonial policy. Amery, himself a conservative with close ties to the Prime Minister, was dismayed to find Churchill "at his worst as a Chairman" that day. He had "not really read the Declaration itself," but, in any case, "started off with a terrific tirade against apologizing for the Empire, appeasing the Americans, etc."⁶² Amery tried to keep the meeting on track, but confessed:

when he is really stupid like that and simply cannot see obvious points, I find myself getting very impatient... At one moment he got onto a long discourse on Imperial Preference and Ottawa and could not see that this was not raised one way or other by the declaration. In the end after an hour and a half or more of time wasted it was decided that a revised draft with one or two further amendments should again be submitted. We then got on to Gandhi.⁶³

Unsurprisingly, the War Cabinet stuck to its guns, and found that Gandhi should remain in detention, until death if need be.

Linlithgow was disgruntled, and wrote to the Secretary of State that he, after all, was in the best position to judge these circumstances, priding himself on a "close acquaintance with the working of Gandhi's mind."⁶⁴ Furthermore he was obliged to give some relevance to the attitude of his Executive Council. "Resignation of Hindu members on such an issue," he wrote, "would have most unfortunate effect and I doubt certain of them would be willing to shelter behind the fact that responsibility was mine."⁶⁵ To make matters only more complicated for the besieged Governor-General,⁶⁶ Franklin Roosevelt's "personal representative" to India, William Phillips, had arrived, and was snooping into colonial affairs at this particularly sensitive moment. In the meantime Linlithgow prepared a stern response to Gandhi's New Year's Eve letter, and Amery prepared to present the Viceroy's arguments for Gandhi's release to the War Cabinet.

The War Cabinet met again on January 12th, and while reaffirming its own view that Gandhi should continue to be held in detention even if he starved to death, deferred to the urgency of the Viceroy's insistence on jurisdiction. It also considered the letter the Viceroy had drafted. In it Linlithgow had expressed his "disappointment" that Gandhi

⁶² *Leo Amery's Diaries*, p. 867

⁶³ *Ibid*

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p. 484

⁶⁵ *Ibid*

⁶⁶ Interchangeable with "Viceroy."

had failed to take responsibility for, and subsequently disavow, the violence that had visited the land: "[the] murders, the burning alive of police officials, the wrecking of trains, the destruction of property, [and] the misleading of... young students, which [had] done so much harm to India's good name, and to the Congress Party."⁶⁷ The letter was approved without amendment. It is worth noting - particularly in the context of Gandhi's mention of India-wide food scarcity as a primary cause for his fast - that at the same meeting of the War Cabinet the "Food Situation" in India was also discussed, "for another ten minutes or so."⁶⁸ Despite dire warnings by the Secretary of State, it was decided that the imports that Linlithgow had requested would be quite impossible.⁶⁹

Gandhi responded to the Viceroy's letter promptly, roundly rejecting the charge that Congress was responsible for the violence in India.⁷⁰ Again he blamed Government's excessively belligerent posture of the previous August, when Congress leaders were preemptively arrested. He compared this unwarranted act of repression with the Amritsar massacre of 1919, the Cawnpore incident of 1913, and the Partition of Bengal in 1905 - all of which had precipitated wide-spread unrest in India. After each of these offenses, the Government of India had ultimately "owned their mistakes," and had made efforts at redress. The heavy-handedness of the government in August 1942, Gandhi argued, was an analogous case in point. If Government were unprepared this time to own their mistakes, Gandhi warned, he would be inclined to undergo a fast. This inclination, he added, was not simply the result of the injustices being done to him, but rather was the fruit of his frustration, as a leader of the people, at being incarcerated when "universal scarcity [was] stalking the land," and millions were being deprived of the means of survival.⁷¹

Linlithgow sent back a blunt and uncompromising response. Again he strained to associate the violence with the Congress Working Committee and its August Resolution. He urged Gandhi to "face the facts," accept responsibility for the "sad campaign of violence and crime" that had swept the country, and disown the August Resolution,

⁶⁷ T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Amery (text of letter to Gandhi), p. 463

⁶⁸ T.O.P. Vol. III, Amery to Linlithgow, p. 510

⁶⁹ See: T.O.P. Vol. III, Amery to Linlithgow, p. 513

⁷⁰ T.O.P. Vol. III, Gandhi to Linlithgow, p. 517-519

⁷¹ T.O.P. Vol. III, Gandhi to Linlithgow, p. 518

which, he argued, had instigated the same.⁷² He did not mention the "food situation" or, for that matter, Gandhi's threat of a fast.

Behind the scene, however, a potential hunger strike was of primary concern. Linlithgow's reputation was at stake in relation to the high profile arrest and detention of Gandhi. The diplomacy demanded by war was increasingly complicated, and the U.S., Britain's now essential ally, had made its distaste for British colonial policy known. The Labour Party in Britain was another thorn in the conservative Government's side. Linlithgow himself, moreover, had announced his intention of stepping down within the year. The fiasco of a fast, and the possibility of Gandhi's death while in detention, was therefore a liability to the Viceroy's personal, as well as professional, legacy. After replying to Gandhi, Linlithgow grumbled to his Secretary of State that Gandhi seemed to be hell bent on a hunger strike, even "in connection with the food situation if he is deprived of an excuse for fasting on political grounds."⁷³ The Secretary of State was sympathetic, agreeing that in reality the Mahatma did look to be intending a fast only "in order to focus the limelight on himself again."⁷⁴ That Gandhi would be actually concerned with the deprivation of millions of Indians was somehow inadmissible.

Gandhi's next reply was even more direct. The August resolution had made no mention of violence, and had, in fact, been only meant as an opening salvo to negotiations. It had laid out a clear plan of *support* for the war and had soundly condemned the fascist enemy. It had mentioned civil disobedience as a last resort, but civil disobedience, Gandhi assured Linlithgow, could not be equated with the violent unrest in India. The violence in India he argued, stemmed instead from the "leonine violence" of the government's summary arrests. Such authoritarian measures, Gandhi argued, had "goaded the people to the point of madness."⁷⁵ The madness of the people, he argued further - and again - had been significantly compounded by hunger. The scarcity stalking the land, he asserted, was violence in its own right, stemming from the injustices of colonial rule. This injustice of hunger, Gandhi insisted furthermore, "might have been largely mitigated, if not altogether prevented, had there been a *bona fide*

⁷² T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Gandhi, p. 536

⁷³ T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 540

⁷⁴ T.O.P. Vol. III, Amery to Linlithgow, p. 557

⁷⁵ T.O.P. Vol. III, Gandhi to Linlithgow, p. 558

national government responsible to a popularly elected assembly."⁷⁶ The fast would begin on February 9th, he concluded, six months to the day after the arrest of the Congress leadership. If he survived, it would end 21 days later, on the 2nd of March.

After receiving this more definitive declaration of Gandhi's intentions, the Viceroy hastened to finalize Government's plan. That Gandhi was insisting on making "publicity use of the food situation," was deplorable, but "however flimsy the justification," the Government of India needed to proceed with great caution and foresight to avoid popular unrest.⁷⁷ Linlithgow, for his part, informed Amery, that he had "never wavered that Gandhi, if he desired to do so, should be allowed, on his own responsibility, to starve to death."⁷⁸ But, the Viceroy admitted, there were intricate strategic considerations that could not be ignored. Lumley had written a series of telegrams to Linlithgow, arguing that Indian opinion would be perilously inflamed if Gandhi were to die a prisoner, which was an argument the Viceroy could not refute. Furthermore, Gandhi's death in detention was an eventuality that the political left in Britain would make hay out of and Washington would revile. What was required was for the Government of India to present a united front. Towards this end the Viceroy felt it necessary to enlist the opinions of his Provincial Governors, and most importantly, his Executive Council.

The Executive Council

The Viceroy's Executive Council, established by the Indian Councils Act of 1861, was an advisory body of appointed Members, vetted by the Crown, who were assigned governmental "portfolios" deemed essential to the various tasks of colonial administration. At its inception the Executive Council consisted of six British members. In the first half of the twentieth century, "Indianization" of the Executive Council became a bargaining chip in the independence struggle. Gradually, Indians were to be incorporated into the Executive Council, presumably to groom them for eventual self-rule. In 1941 Linlithgow advanced the most comprehensive expansion and Indianization of the Council, adding four additional portfolios; Supply, Civil Defence, Information and

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 559

⁷⁷ T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 565

⁷⁸ T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 570

Broadcasting, and Indians Overseas. All the new positions were to be filled by Indians, and the new Labor Member would also be an Indian, shifting the overall composition from 5 Europeans and 3 Indians, to 4 Europeans and 8 Indians. In all, the Executive Council, at this time, remained a loyalist body with little public accountability, particularly with Congress refusing participation after the declaration of war on India's behalf. The ramifications of a fast by Gandhi, and the disruptions that any mass movement on his behalf might have, however, represented a particularly pressing dilemma for the Council, most of whom had vested political and economic interests in maintaining a "peaceful" status quo.

War Transport Member, Edward Benthall, for one, had extensive connections in Calcutta industries. Appointed to the Executive Council in July 1942, he was the long-time Chairman and Senior Partner of Bird & Co., the largest European industrial firm operating in and around Calcutta.⁷⁹ Bird & Co had made its name in Bengal's booming jute industry during World War I, but had diversified into coal and paper by the 1940s and remained a formidable presence in all three industries. Benthall himself was an uncompromising advocate of free trade, arguing in 1941 that business interests in India needed to "avoid like a plague anything that involves protection."⁸⁰ He was also well schooled in the rough and tumble of Bengal politics; the influence peddling on which it revolved, and the systems of patronage which were necessary to grease the wheels. For European firms, manipulations within the Bengal Legislative Assembly depended on the influential European Group of legislators, with whom Benthall was quite well acquainted. Even in the late 1930s, when profits were still moribund, Benthall could brag of the powerful position he and Bird & Co. exercised in the Bengal Legislature. "In fact," he remarked to an associate, "if we work things rightly I believe they would adopt any policy that we liked to press on them."⁸¹

Between Benthall and Congress Nationalists there was little love lost. Any mass disturbance, the War Transport Member fully understood, could have crippling effects on Calcutta trade. Disruptions to the transportation infrastructure during the "Quit India" unrest, had hampered war production in Bengal significantly, and as such. In a time

⁷⁹ Goswami, (1989), p. 299

⁸⁰ A.M. Misra, (2000), p. 341

⁸¹ Quoted in Goswami (1982), p. 171

when paper shortages were an increasing concern, Bird & Co. continued supplying paper at cost to the Muslim League's local organ, *The Star of India*.⁸² Moreover, Bird & Co.'s primary competitor in Bengal had been, for many years, Marwari business mogul, and unabashed Indian nationalist, G.D. Birla - Gandhi's close friend and ally. Birla had muscled his way into the European boys club of the Bengal jute industry in the 1920's and had succeeded beyond expectations. Making use of elaborate networks of finance, wholesale purchasing, and labor recruitment (unique to the Marwari community in Bengal,) Birla had established a foothold in the jute business that posed a direct threat to Bird & Co.'s supremacy by the early 1920s. In 1926, Birla had played a central role in setting up the Indian Chamber of Commerce to rival the European dominated Bengal Chamber of Commerce, a move that rankled Benthall. Based on success in the jute industry, the Birla family had subsequently branched out into coal, paper, and cotton, thus contesting Bird & Co. on several fronts. In 1942 the Birlas also established Hindustan Motors in Gujarat, diversifying into the booming war-time engineering sector at exactly the right time. Frustrated by Birla's successes, Benthall's associate at Bird & Co, Monty Thomas commented that if Birla "can't get us by kicking us out, he will get us out by unfair competition."⁸³

But it is important not to exaggerate the rivalry between Birla and Benthall's concern, Bird & Co, the two largest employers in Bengal. Birla, although a renegade in many ways, had joined the Indian Jute Mills' Association (IJMA), and as such Birla and Benthall had corporate interests that coincided at least as much as they collided. The IJMA exercised tremendous influence, setting regulations for crop acreage, working hours and profit margins. While there were discrepancies of opinion within the IJMA, its ultimate mission was to benefit the industry as a whole. Similarly in 1943, as leading industrialists in a highly profitable market, both firms had a vested interest in maintaining order in industrial Calcutta, to keep trade booming. As did another Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council, Nalini Sarkar. Sarkar, like Benthall (and Birla), had deep roots in Bengal's industrial infrastructure. Appointed to the Viceroy's Executive Council as Commerce Member in 1942, Sarkar's experience included terms as President of the

⁸² Ibid

⁸³ Goswami (1989), p. 297

Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce & Industry and, later, the Bengal National Chamber of Commerce and Industry, as well as Commissioner of Calcutta Port Trust. He also had his own jute mills, was an active member of the IJMA, and his expertise in the notoriously "irregular" workings of the Bengal Legislature was, like Benthall's, formidable.⁸⁴

It is very interesting to note that even while Gandhi was declaring his intention to fast in relation to the "privations of the poor millions," these three industrialists, Birla, Benthall and Sarkar, all intimately involved in the drama of Gandhi's fast, were, at the very same time, all extremely busy buying up large quantities of rice in the Bengal countryside at sharply escalating prices in order to keep their industrial interests in Calcutta booming. The scramble to stockpile rice for Calcutta, was their scramble, and the various plans at increasing appropriation from rural districts, were for their direct benefit. Sarkar, as Commerce Member, had been recently assigned the new Food portfolio, and as such had gained important official leverage and influence in the area of civilian (which at the time was synonymous with "industrial") food supply. And Benthall, as War Transport Member, held perhaps the most important key to solving the supply situation in Calcutta, namely an inside track on transportation facilities at a time when shipping was extremely tight owing to military requirements. Reports of irregularities in the movements of food by railway transport, in particular, were widespread, and the extent of Benthall's knowledge of these irregularities is an interesting, if open, question. In any case, that these two critical Members of the Viceroy's Executive Council had such substantial interest in feeding industrial Calcutta - at the expense of the Bengal countryside - cannot be easily overlooked. Their concerns were decidedly *not* related to the hungry masses.

Discussions in the Executive Council were complicated and "tense," but at length the Viceroy was able to hammer out a unanimous policy in relation to the Mahatma's fast. In its statement the Council declared, "the Government of India deplore the use of the weapon of fasting to achieve political ends [and] regret that Mr. Gandhi should think it necessary to employ such a weapon on this occasion , and should seek a justification for

⁸⁴ Omkar Goswami, in his "Collaboration and Conflict," quotes Partha Chatterjee's assertion that Sarkar was "a prominent businessman with jute mill shares whose sleights of hand 'were all too well known in Bengal to require and comment.'" p. 171

it in anything which Government may have said or done in connection with the movement initiated by him and his co-workers in the Congress Party."⁸⁵ The Council went on to attack Congress as a whole as an autocratic organization with arrogant presumptions of representing the Indian masses. Note was made of the Muslim League's suspicions that the democratic "Quit India" slogan had been merely a smoke screen, when "what was really meant was supreme control of Government of the country by Congress." In a brief nod to Gandhi's inclusion of the "food situation," the Council ended by contending that the violence that *Gandhi* had instigated had also and "incidentally, aggravated the difficulties of the food situation."⁸⁶ Given these facts, the Executive Council decided that it could not be burdened with the responsibility of Gandhi's health in the event of a fast: "if he decides to do so, he must do so at his own risk, and under his own arrangements. They have accordingly decided to release him for the duration of the fast."⁸⁷ The Executive Council had decided on the "cat and mouse" strategy.

When Winston Churchill got wind of the Council's conclusion and Linlithgow's insistence on giving it weight, he was apoplectic. At the War Cabinet meeting, according to the Secretary of State for India, Churchill, as Chair, was "in an aggressive mood."⁸⁸ He argued for an immediate contravention to "force the Viceroy to override his Council,"⁸⁹ and ordered Amery to draft a telegram to Linlithgow at once to this effect. Amery went off and composed what he deemed "a telegram of the most dictatorial kind," and returned to Churchill to argue his case further before sending the telegram. Solidarity with the Executive Council, Amery argued, was an essential tactic in dealing with the Gandhi affair. If a hard line were to be dictated from London, it could lead to resignations in the Executive Council that would seriously effect public opinion. Churchill was unimpressed and accused Amery of weak-kneed appeasement, "as for the Council," he told his Secretary of State, "what did it matter if a few blackamoors resigned!"⁹⁰ The War Cabinet's conclusion was a sharp rebuke of the policy advocated by the Viceroy in collaboration with his Council, noting that it was "gravely disturbed by the

⁸⁵ T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 601

⁸⁶ Ibid

⁸⁷ Ibid

⁸⁸ *Leo Amery's Diaries*, p. 871

⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 872

⁹⁰ Ibid

Viceroy's proposals."⁹¹ Linlithgow was order by the Cabinet to "suspend action on [his proposal] until further notice," and Amery's "dictatorial telegram" contravening the authority of the Viceroy, chief executive of the Government of India, was posted.⁹²

Hunger Artist

While this drama is an instructive example of the colonial chain of authority, its practical import was mooted. Linlithgow had already broadcast his offer of release to Gandhi, and Gandhi had refused his "freedom," preferring to fast while still in detention. Amery breathed a sigh of relief at not having to override the Government of India from London.⁹³ The Viceroy convened his Executive Council in the middle of the night and they voted, by majority, that since Gandhi had refused Government's offer once, he should now be held in detention for the duration of his fast, even if he died in custody.⁹⁴ Those in the minority, Linlithgow pondered, might cause problems down the road, but for the time being they took the majority decision with relative equanimity.

After the flurry of activity leading up to the fast, Gandhi's hunger-strike began on the 10th of February with little fanfare. Lumley telegraphed the pre-arranged code word - "repudiation" - to convey that Gandhi had begun his fast, and thereafter Government shifted into a tense and ironic mode. Amery, in his diary of the day, jotted a single line: "The fast seems to have begun in a most amiable mood on the part of Gandhi and all concerned."⁹⁵ Linlithgow wrote a "Private and Personal" telegram to Churchill, apologizing for his "flank march," which had cause the Prime Minister "some uneasiness."⁹⁶ He also apologized for his Executive Council, which, after all, was the true source of Churchill's disquiet. "They are not precisely the troops I would choose for a close encounter," the Viceroy assured Churchill, "but I think we shall manage well enough. May you never have to handle a Cabinet of NO-men. Love and good hunting. Hopie."⁹⁷

⁹¹ T.O.P. Vol. III, War Cabinet W.M. (43) 25th Conclusion, p. 613

⁹² Ibid

⁹³ *Leo Amery's Diaries*, p. 873

⁹⁴ T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 643.

⁹⁵ *Leo Amery's Diaries*, p. 873

⁹⁶ T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Churchill, p. 650 ("

⁹⁷ Ibid, ("Hopie" is short for: Victor Hope, the Marquess of Linlithgow's given name.)),

Much to the Viceroy's relief, the Indian general public remained relatively calm as well. Reports from many of the previously volatile provinces, including Bombay, Bengal and Bihar, indicated a lack of public "excitement" over the fast.⁹⁸ (The word "hunger-strike," itself, had been censored from the press.⁹⁹) Linlithgow informed London that he had consulted with Central Intelligence Officers from all Provinces and "all [were] perfectly confident of the ability of the Police to hold the position."¹⁰⁰ The Muslim League distanced itself from concern over the fast, and ran articles in *Dawn* ridiculing Gandhi, which greatly pleased the Viceroy.¹⁰¹ Bengal industrialist G.D. Birla was pressuring sympathetic members of the Executive Council to resign, but all Members remained at their posts, at least for the time being.¹⁰² Linlithgow, in any case, had been prepared for resignations. He had a standing pool of I.C.S. officers from which he was ready to appoint replacements at a moment's notice.¹⁰³ Churchill, for his part, remained singularly unimpressed by Gandhi's "fasting antics," conveying his suspicion to the Viceroy that Gandhi was surely sneaking glucose into his water.¹⁰⁴

All was not quiet, however, on the diplomatic front. William Phillips, Roosevelt's "Personal Representative in India," began asking questions. In the absence of any formal diplomatic relations between Washington and Delhi, Phillips was assigned the task of drawing up a report on the political situation for the U.S. President. A meeting with Gandhi, Phillip's suggested to the Viceroy, was in keeping with this mission. Linlithgow, resenting the intrusion, but ever-conscious of the delicacy of international relations at the present moment, told Phillips "in the politest and most definite language that the answer to his request was NO."¹⁰⁵ Not wanting Phillips to harbor any illusions on the matter, Linlithgow furthermore informed him that it was "quite likely that [Gandhi] would die in prison."¹⁰⁶ And when he died, the Viceroy assured Phillips, there would be "six months

⁹⁸ T.O.P. Vol. III, # 473, Lumley (Bombay) to Linlithgow, # 475, Rutherford (Bihar) to Linlithgow, # 518 Herbert (Bengal) to Linlithgow

⁹⁹ WBSA, Home Confidential, "Record of War Activities" file W-77/42

¹⁰⁰ T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 657

¹⁰¹ T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 667

¹⁰² T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 652

¹⁰³ Ibid

¹⁰⁴ T.O.P. Vol. III, Churchill to Linlithgow, p. 659

¹⁰⁵ T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Amery, February 11, 1943. p. 653

¹⁰⁶ Ibid

unpleasantness steadily declining in volume... [and] after it was over, India would be a far more reliable base for operations."¹⁰⁷ By such frank communications Linlithgow hoped to "disabuse Phillips of any misconceptions he may have had about his work [in India.]"¹⁰⁸

In the meantime, the Mahatma's physical health quickly began to deteriorate. On the night of the 13th he had not slept well and his blood pressure stood at 195/104 the next morning. The Surgeon-General of Bombay had warned that Gandhi wouldn't last for more than 3 or 4 days, and now the body of the Mahatma seemed to be confirming this diagnosis. Nausea on the 14th inhibited his ability to take fluids and acetone was reported to be found in his urine. The Viceroy expressed his frustration that Gandhi seemed "insistent on submitting himself to the full rigor of the game."¹⁰⁹ A Congress doctor was transferred from Yeravada Jail to attend the Mahatma. The Viceroy telegraphed Churchill on the 15th, informing him that despite repeated entreaties from his attendants, Gandhi had, in fact, refused to be administered glucose, even in his precarious position.¹¹⁰ On the 16th Lumley relayed the Surgeon-General's opinion that Gandhi was unlikely to last more than five days, that is unless "sudden collapse" didn't terminate his life sooner. The Surgeon-General, himself, was convinced that "there [was] more danger of death from heart attack than of a slow petering out from starvation."¹¹¹ Secretary of State Amery, having received the news in London, could only hope for heart attack so that "the period of suspense and growing hysteria not be prolonged."¹¹² He inquired of Linlithgow whether or not flags across the country would be "half-masted" when Gandhi died, and encouraged the Viceroy to write the Mahatma's obituary forthwith (see above.)¹¹³

On the 17th, unnerved by the Surgeon-General's reports, and relenting to the ongoing pressure of Birla and other pro-Gandhi nationalists, three Hindu members of the Viceroy's Executive Council; Homy Mody (Supply), Madhao Aney (Indians Overseas), and Nalini Sarkar (Commerce) resigned. Since the fast had begun, Government had been

¹⁰⁷ T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 690

¹⁰⁸ T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 654

¹⁰⁹ T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 675

¹¹⁰ T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Churchill, p. 669

¹¹¹ T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 681

¹¹² T.O.P. Vol. III, Amery to Linlithgow, p. 679

¹¹³ T.O.P. Vol. III, Amery to Linlithgow, p. 679

at pains to paint it as a Hindu affair, reveling at the Muslim League's lack of concern, and couching references to support for Gandhi in terms of "Hindu elements."¹¹⁴ The resignation of Mody, Aney, and Sarkar, fortunately, fit the bill. Muslim, non-League affiliated, Law Member, Sultan Ahem, and Sikh Health and Lands Member, Jogendra Singh, though they had voted for Gandhi's release and were also under pressure to resign, were convinced by the Viceroy to remain.¹¹⁵ J.P. Srivastava, the remaining Hindu member (Civil Defence), had been put in a desperate situation by the fact that he had been in the majority arguing for holding Gandhi in detention for the duration, and so remained in his post. The remaining Indian members of the Executive Council, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (Labour), Sir Mahomed Usman (Posts and Air), and Sir Firoz Khan (Defence), also stayed put. That the resignations had been thus minimized (and Hinduized), relieved the Viceroy. He made plans to "fill the vacancies at leisure," and assigned departmental secretaries to the vacant portfolios in the meantime.¹¹⁶

Two days after these resignations the "Leaders Conference" was convened. With the leadership of Congress in jail, and the Muslim League refusing participation, an eclectic patchwork of influential Indians, provincial politicians, businessmen, et al, was organized to draft a resolution addressing Gandhi's fast and imprisonment. Invitations were sent from "Birla House" in Delhi, and a wide variety of prominent Indians attended. At the opening ceremony special mention was made of the Executive Council resignations, and Madhao Aney (the only ex-Member in attendance) received the largest round of ovations from the gathering when he was introduced.¹¹⁷ Though the Viceroy was want to characterize the Conference as a "Hindu" concern,¹¹⁸ the leaders, under the Presidency of moderate/loyalist politician Tej Bahadur Sapru, seem to have been at pains to enlist a diverse range of participants, including Hindu Mahasabhite, non-League Muslim, Sikh, and Christian representatives. The resolution that emerged from the Conference was a tepid appeal, consisting of a total of three sentences urging the immediate and unconditional release of Gandhi "in the interest of the future of India and

¹¹⁴ See, for instance; T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 668

¹¹⁵ T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 683

¹¹⁶ T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 683

¹¹⁷ *Leaders Conference: An authentic account of the Leaders Conference held at New Delhi on 19th and 20th February 1943 in respect of Mahatma Gandhi's fast.* p. 7

¹¹⁸ See, for instance, T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 667

of international goodwill."¹¹⁹ The conference, unsurprisingly, had little, if any, political impact.¹²⁰

It is interesting (and also a rather sad commentary) that, though Gandhi's correspondences with Linlithgow had been published in the press, and were circulated at the Leaders Conference itself, no mention at all was made of the "privations of the poor millions" or the "scarcity stalking the land" to which Gandhi had made meaningful reference. In his "welcome speech," C. Rajagopalchari (C.R.) confessed that Gandhi was "a strange man," but had a profound and consequential relationship with the Indian masses. "What is it that Gandhi wants?" C.R. queried. "The only thing he asks," and the reason for his fast, he contended, "is the right to review the position as a free man."¹²¹ In his presidential address, Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru, while distancing himself as far as possible from Congress, did offer a fairly comprehensive defense of Gandhi's non-violent credentials, rebutting the charges contained in the Viceroy's responses to Gandhi's letter, but - again - made no mention of Gandhi's references to privation or scarcity. Next up to the podium, Bengali Hindu Mahasabha leader, Shyamaprasad Mookerjee, also made no mention of Gandhi's concern for the hungry. And the "Leaders" were not alone. The Viceroy, for his part, was satisfied that "it [was] not too obvious to anybody for what precisely the old man ha[d] decided to fast."¹²² Linlithgow, himself, concluded that Gandhi simply intended "to kill himself and to get out of his difficulties in that way," adding, "I can see no other possible explanation."¹²³

Given the contemporary erasure of Gandhi's inclusion of the "food problem" in the context of his 1943 fast, it is perhaps not a surprise that the same has been entirely ignored in historical evaluations of the event. The Communist Party, legalized in July of 1942 by the Government of India for their support of the war effort, was the only organization that seems to have even noticed, or at least taken seriously, Gandhi's warnings - even as developments in Bengal were reaching a critical stage. "The clue to Gandhi's fast," they declared at the Fourth International in March, 1943, "is to be found in one of the passages of his letters to the Viceroy. In it Gandhi refers to 'the privation of

¹¹⁹ Ibid, p. 25

¹²⁰ Ibid, p. 46

¹²¹ Ibid, p. 10

¹²² T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 674

¹²³ Ibid, p. 676

the poor millions, due to the India-wide scarcity."¹²⁴ At a time when, "food shortages and inflationary price increases have brought a new stage of hunger to the hundreds of millions who have always known hunger," Gandhi's fast, the authors suggested, was "a protest against... steadily worsening conditions of life."¹²⁵ The Communist Party's organ in Bengal, *Janayuddha*, also featured prominent stories on the fast. One such article, under the headline "Gandhiji Fasts for the Hungry," began, "in a small town in Rajshahi sub-division, a boat carrying away paddy was looted by a crowd. The police fired upon the looters and several were killed. The starving villagers clamored for rice and instead they got bullets."¹²⁶ The article then went on to translate Gandhi's message of fasting for the "poor millions" into Bengali.

It was, however, the American press which was of primary concern to the Government of India. Roosevelt's envoy, William Phillips, expressed grave anxiety over the possibility of Gandhi's death in detention.¹²⁷ Linlithgow, abandoning his earlier jurisdictional jealousy, informed Phillips, in no uncertain terms, that he was, at present, a "war Viceroy," and that every decision made regarding Gandhi's fast was being made from London and in relation to securing overall Allied victory. As such, Phillips needed to convey to the U.S. Government that it should address its appeals not to the Government of India, but to the British Ambassador to the United States in Washington or the Foreign Office in London.¹²⁸ The situation with Phillips and the Americans, he told Amery, was becoming "intolerable."¹²⁹ Amery suspected that two women were behind all the anxiety over Gandhiji: Eleanor Roosevelt and Madame Chiang Kai-shek.¹³⁰ The Secretary of State sent a stern telegram to Washington reiterating Linlithgow's request that all input from the U.S. regarding the "Indian situation" should be directed towards H.M.G. in London.¹³¹

¹²⁴ From: *Fourth International*, vol.4 No.3, March 1943, pp.67-69. As Transcribed, Edited & Formatted by Ted Crawford & David Walters, found at: <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/fi/vol04/no03/editors.htm> (accessed, March 23, 2010, 4:42 PM)

¹²⁵ Ibid

¹²⁶ *Janayuddha*, March 3, 1943. (Translations mine.)

¹²⁷ T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 687

¹²⁸ T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 692

¹²⁹ T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 690

¹³⁰ T.O.P. Vol. III, Amery to Linlithgow, p. 695

¹³¹ T.O.P. Vol. III, Amery to Linlithgow, p. 695-696

On the 21st of February Gandhi suffered what the Surgeon-General termed a seizure, and his "pulse became nearly imperceptible."¹³² The Viceroy had already written Gandhi's obituary, made plans for the disposal of his ashes, and broadcast policy on half-masting of flags (negative), and so felt confident that preparations were "well in hand."¹³³ Later in the day, however, Gandhi had recovered somewhat and was able to ingest fluids. On the 22nd Gandhi remained stable and the doctors "looked less worried."¹³⁴ The doctors' bulletin of the following day was, likewise, encouraging. The Viceroy was pleased with the news, but still cautious. On the 23rd, Horace Alexander of the Friends' Ambulance Unit - in India to aid with cyclone relief work in Midnapore - visited the Mahatma. Gandhi and Alexander were friends and as such the conversation was cordial. Alexander asked Gandhi what he would do if he was released and Gandhi replied that "he would naturally deal with all forces of violence in the way that he knows, and he would also naturally plunge into the task of bringing relief to those who are suffering from the present scarcity of food and other necessities."¹³⁵ The following day doctors reported another "slight improvement," and on the 25th Linlithgow received intelligence that G.D. Birla had received a telephone message from Gandhi's doctors in Poona that the Mahatma was out of danger.¹³⁶ Hearing of the likelihood of Gandhi's survival, Winston Churchill sent a cable to the Viceroy to convey his suspicions about the "*bona fides* of Gandhi's fast."¹³⁷ The Prime Minister urged the Viceroy to search out and expose any evidence of "fraud." "With all these Congress Hindu doctors around him," Churchill maintained, "it is quite easy to slip glucose or other nourishment into his food."¹³⁸

As it became increasingly apparent, over the next several days, that Gandhi would survive his hunger-strike, Government in both Delhi and London became increasingly jubilant - as well as increasingly denigrating. Linlithgow responded to Churchill that he would not be surprised himself if reports of Gandhi's weakness had been "deliberately cooked."¹³⁹ He had long known Gandhi, he told the Prime Minister, "as the world's most

¹³² Note 1 in T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 719

¹³³ T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 719

¹³⁴ "Day by Day" in *Leaders Conference*, p. 32

¹³⁵ "Notes of a talk with Mr. Gandhi, February 23, 1943." Enclosure to # 542, T.O.P. Vol. III, p. 734

¹³⁶ T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 728

¹³⁷ T.O.P. Vol. III, Churchill to Linlithgow, p. 730

¹³⁸ *Ibid*

¹³⁹ T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Churchill, p. 737

successful humbug," and would not be surprised if the whole affair was revealed to be just another act of "Hindu hocus pocus."¹⁴⁰ Churchill wrote to Field Marshall Smuts that he imagined that Gandhi had "been eating better meals than I have for the last week."¹⁴¹ On the 28th Churchill again wrote to the Viceroy "that the old rascal [would] emerge all the better from his so-called fast."¹⁴² He praised Linlithgow's fortitude and highly recommended the "weapon of ridicule" to further deflate Britain's foe now that he was likely to survive. Linlithgow, in turn, wrote to the Secretary of State for India, "We have exposed the light of Asia - Wardha version - for the fraud it undoubtedly is; blue glass with a tallow candle behind it!"¹⁴³ Amery joined in the fun, calling Gandhi a "wooly pacifist, (a) simple... life preacher with no ideas of any particular distinction who has combined a reputation for holiness most successfully with a political dictatorship exercised in a wrecking and negative sense."¹⁴⁴ "Hindu India," he rankled on, would be "immensely relieved that the old fraud's precious life is spared," but, on the whole, Gandhi's "antics" had amounted to nothing.¹⁴⁵

On March 3rd, 1943 Gandhi broke his fast. He remained in prison for another 14 months - as India starved.

De-Control

On February 16th, the day before Food Member Nalini Sarkar resigned from the Executive Council, the Government of India sent provincial authorities a memorandum ordering them to fix strict targets for procurement of foodgrains. Official purchases in Bengal were faltering, with competition from industrial firms, the military and speculators, meanwhile, driving prices still higher. On the 18th the Bengal Government abandoned the agency system, and Food Grains Purchasing Officer, A.A. McInnes, was made sole purchaser for the government.¹⁴⁶ According to the Viceroy's earlier directive, McInnes employed District Magistrates, Controllers, Civil Supplies officers, and other I.C.S. officials to aid in procurement. Embargoes that had been enforced for the benefit

¹⁴⁰ Ibid

¹⁴¹ T.O.P. Vol. III, Churchill to Field Marshall Smuts, p. 738

¹⁴² T.O.P. Vol. III, Churchill to Linlithgow, p. 744

¹⁴³ T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 746

¹⁴⁴ *Leo Amery's Diaries*, p. 875

¹⁴⁵ Ibid

¹⁴⁶ *Report on Bengal*, p. 38

of government appointed private agents were maintained, and export restrictions continued. Meanwhile, police officers were stationed at all points of entry into Calcutta to assure that rice was moving only to approved locations.¹⁴⁷ The aim initially had been to "break the market"¹⁴⁸ in the city by dumping large quantities of rice on open markets, but by this point all shipments were heading directly to large factories and control shops, without regard to open market prices.¹⁴⁹ Secret conferences between the Civil Supply Department and "priority" purchasers were held to facilitate their procurement efforts, and again, with government sanction and collusion, tea gardens and other large employers continued buying in bulk on their own accounts, laying in as much as one year's stock to keep their operations running smoothly.¹⁵⁰

Given the nexus between different chambers of commerce, war-production industries, the Port Trust, the big railways, and government agencies, including the Civil Supplies Department, the Legislative Assembly, the Calcutta Municipal Corporation and a panoply of district officers; the actual extent of "Government" purchasing in Bengal during the entire period, as has been mentioned, is extremely difficult to assess, but the official numbers continued to disappoint Pinnell. On the 11th of March, therefore, the Government of Bengal took another drastic step and decided to abrogate price control entirely. "The Bengal Government," the order read, "in full accord with the Government of India, adhere to a policy of buying as much rice and paddy as possible by free market operations in order to secure the best use of the resources of the province."¹⁵¹ Towards this end, it was announced, "The Bengal Government declare categorically that there is and will be no statutory maximum price for wholesale transactions in paddy and rice."¹⁵² In some definite sense the black-market had won out and was now receiving official sanction. McInnes and the Government of Bengal were now able to report large scale purchases of their own,¹⁵³ and as prices began to rise still more precipitously, the stream of rice into Calcutta steadily escalated. Imports also flooded in from adjacent provinces,

¹⁴⁷ Greenough (1982), p. 112

¹⁴⁸ A term used by Civil Supplies personal to denote the price decrease that it was hoped the dumping of rice on Calcutta's markets would entail. See *Report on Bengal*, p. 48.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid

¹⁵⁰ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of N.R. Sarkar, p. 1138

¹⁵¹ *Report on Bengal*, p. 39

¹⁵² Ibid

¹⁵³ *Report on Bengal*, p. 40

and though the same were intended to go to the Civil Supplies Department, they, in fact, went directly into the possession of the Chambers of Commerce.¹⁵⁴ Within a little more than two weeks of the announcement of the abrogation of any and all price controls, the price of rice, already at more than twice its pre-war index rate in December of 1942, had doubled yet again.¹⁵⁵ A few weeks later the Revenue Commissioner of Chittagong reported that "starvation [was] spreading from towns to villages," and test works would soon be opened.¹⁵⁶

The true impact of these events on the countryside, and particularly on the impoverished and terrorized poor, is impossible to fully appreciate. Scarcity, dislocation, war, governmental impunity, and, above all, hunger had created a situation which the term "panic" (often used in official accounts) fails to capture. As prices continued to rise, and as the tactics employed by Government and big business alike became ever more desperate, many of Bengal's poor began to sell off their stocks of rice in order to secure hard currency in increasingly uncertain times. Cultivators in Khulna protested embargoes around the district that inhibited their access to markets where they could unload their crop,¹⁵⁷ and paddy growers in Bakargunj disposed of their rice to black-market agents that moved through the district in boats.¹⁵⁸ Rice or paddy, they knew, was not secure in their hands. In the best of times, given the cycle of debt and repayment, they had little holding power. With powerful forces attacking the market with seemingly limitless resources, and with prices sky-high, the temptation to *sell* became irresistible. Who could say, after all, that their turn at physical dislocation from their land, or summary requisition, would not be next? Cash, at least, would be portable. But cash-in-hand, relative to the price of rice, was, meanwhile, becoming less and less relevant. As such many villagers were in a worse position by early 1943 than they would have been even under normal circumstances - and help would be a long time coming.

¹⁵⁴ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of Justice Braund, p. 1014

¹⁵⁵ Greenough (1982), , Table 8, p. 115. Coarse rice was selling in Calcutta at Rs. 11/4 per maund on January 4th, 1943 and at Rs. 22/0 per maund on March 29th.

¹⁵⁶ Greenough (1982), p. 99

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 119

¹⁵⁸ Ibid

Section 93

With Sarkar's resignation, the Viceroy was now managing India's Food portfolio himself, though "without letting that to be publicly known."¹⁵⁹ In Bengal, as well, there were secret happenings underway. On the 16th of February the Viceroy informed his Secretary of State that a "tiresome" and "school-boyish" quarrel had erupted between the Chief Minister of Bengal, Fazlul Huq, and Provincial Governor, Jack Herbert. Relations between the Governor and the Chief Minister had been strained to the breaking point at least since the time of "denial." In his letter of August 2nd, 1942, Huq had detailed at length, the extent to which he believed the Governor had abrogated his authority on a number of fronts, including both rice and boat "denials," but had received no reply. In January of 1943, Huq had sent another letter to the Governor protesting the appointment of A.A. McInnes, a man who Huq knew "nothing about," to the post of Foodgrains Control Officer. The duties attached to this office, the Chief Minister explained, he likewise knew nothing about.¹⁶⁰ This habit of making critical appointments and plans without any consultation with the Ministry, Huq charged, had completely undermined the principles of "provincial autonomy." The Governor, Huq added, was repeatedly acting as if "the Ministers must be completely eliminated and the Government carried on by you through the various Departments as if the constitution did not exist."¹⁶¹

Meanwhile, rumors, outrage and rancor about Government repression in the districts had been rife at least since the time of Hindu nationalist S.P. Mookerjee's resignation from the Assembly in November 1942. Since that time, Huq had been under increasing pressure from Mookerjee and his supporters to order an investigation into the alleged atrocities committed by officials in Midnapur to suppress the "Quit India" movement. The Governor was well aware of these murmurings, and in the first few weeks of 1943 was pressuring Huq and his cabinet to make an unequivocal statement distancing himself from the same. The European Party and Huq's Muslim League opponents joined forces with the Governor to lobby for Huq's compliance. Instead, on the 12th of February, Huq allowed S.P. Mookerjee to make a statement on the floor of the Assembly outlining the circumstances behind his resignation and detailing his

¹⁵⁹ T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 855

¹⁶⁰ Huq to Herbert, January 9, 1943. Reprinted in Nanavati Papers, p. 746

¹⁶¹ Ibid

allegations. The push for an investigation gained steam. Huq felt compelled to agree to debate the merits of an inquiry, and on the 15th announced this decision on the floor of the house - without consulting the Governor. Now, a little more than one month after Huq's letter regarding the appointment of a Foodgrains Purchasing Officer, the tables were turned, and it was Herbert who felt that Huq was stepping on *his* authority.

The Governor wrote a sharp letter to his Chief Minister, reminding him that the issue of an enquiry into atrocities in Midnapore "attract[ed] [his] special responsibilities" and was "undesirable," at best.¹⁶² Herbert ended his letter curtly, informing Huq that he "expected an explanation," in person, by the very next morning. Huq failed to appear. Instead he responded in print that he "owed [Herbert] no explanation whatever," and issued a "mild warning that indecorous language such as has been used in your letter under reply should, in future, be avoided in any correspondence between the Governor and his Chief Minister."¹⁶³ Huq went on to defend the right of the elected house to find in favor of establishing a committee of enquiry - a decision which, he argued, most certainly did not "come within the purview of [Herbert's] special responsibilities."¹⁶⁴ In the event that the Governor refused the establishment of such a committee, on the other hand, it would be the *Legislature* who would have "the right to expect sufficient explanation as to why a committee of enquiry [could not] be constituted."¹⁶⁵

Herbert conveyed his dissatisfaction with Huq to the Viceroy, who, annoyed, proposed to let them "fight the battle themselves."¹⁶⁶ The budget session in the Bengal Legislative Assembly, however, had begun by early March and the acrimony between Huq and Herbert was complicating an already excruciating process. Herbert, seeking to rid himself of the Chief Minister somehow, proposed to the Viceroy that Fazlul Huq would be an excellent choice to replace Azizul Huque as High Commissioner to India in London. Once Huq was shipped off, Herbert maintained, he would be able to work Muslim League stalwart Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy into the chair of Chief Minister.¹⁶⁷ The Viceroy approved of the idea of a Muslim League Ministry, but had little confidence

¹⁶² Ibid, p. 747

¹⁶³ Ibid

¹⁶⁴ Ibid

¹⁶⁵ Ibid

¹⁶⁶ T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 677

¹⁶⁷ T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 751

in Huq - or for that matter Herbert, who he asserted was the weakest of all his provincial Governors.¹⁶⁸ Meanwhile the budget session ground on and the impasse of a fragmented Assembly wore on the Chief Minister, who suffered only luke-warm support from the European Party, and obstructionist opposition from the Muslim League. Huq informed Herbert on the 26th of March that for the good of Bengal he would be willing to resign if that would facilitate the installation of an all-parties Ministry.¹⁶⁹ Herbert now saw his chance. On the eve of the final budget vote, the Governor summoned the Chief Minister to his office where a letter of resignation was already waiting. Huq initially refused to sign, but the Governor was persuasive. He assured Huq that the letter would be used only in the interests of forming an all-parties Ministry. He would keep it as evidence of Huq's goodwill to all parties, and use it only to lobby support for a coalition. Huq, however naively, signed the letter. The next morning his resignation was already a hot topic on the Assembly floor. The budget session was adjourned and the Ministry fell. On March 31st Emergency Rule was declared in Bengal under Section 93 of the Defence of India rules and Governor John Herbert, himself, signed the budget into effect.

The Scramble for Rice

In the last week of March 1943, Japan launched daily air raids on the 24 Parganas just south of Calcutta. It was reported that thousands of displaced residents of the district flooded into the city that same week: "their stomachs burning with hunger they arrived dazed and desperate, thinking that if they could just make it to Calcutta, they could find rice to eat... but when they reached Calcutta, their hopes were dashed. They quickly realized that if many residents of the city themselves were unable to secure food supplies, what could they, as outsiders, expect?"¹⁷⁰ Police drove them from street corners and crossroads, and in short order they disappeared into the eclectic chaos of wartime Calcutta.

With the sharp rise in the price of essential foodstuffs that had accompanied Government procurement schemes, labor actions, too, were again widespread. The Communist Party, while in unequivocal support of the war effort, reported in its Bengali

¹⁶⁸ T.O.P. Vol. III, Amery to Linlithgow, p. 765

¹⁶⁹ Huq to Herbert, March 26, 1943. In Nanavati Papers, p. 750

¹⁷⁰ *Janayuddha*, April 7, 1943 (translation mine)

weekly that, "even today, while the whole of Bengal is under threat, those working in factories that supply the arms and equipment necessary to defeat fascist advance, are without any arrangements as far as food supply."¹⁷¹ Factories were cutting rations and workers were responding with threats of walkouts and petitions for better guarantees of access to rice, increases in wages, and inflation-pegged dearness allowances.¹⁷² Meanwhile, in the countryside, hunger marches, drawing thousands of participants, were held across the province.¹⁷³ For reporting on the same, *Janayuddha* was fined 1500 rupees by the Government of Bengal in April.¹⁷⁴

The Government of Bengal (and along with it, the various chambers of commerce and corporate concerns with which Government efforts coincided) were, likewise, increasingly restive about their *own* access to rice. With the Ministry disbanded and the Governor wielding emergency powers, the Civil Supplies Directorate, lead by I.C.S. officer L. G. Pinnell, was freed from accountability for the time being. Decisions within the department during this period went largely un-recorded, with Civil Supplies officials holding oral discussions that left no documentation of deliberations.¹⁷⁵ The policies that emerged from this period, however, left little doubt about where priorities lay.

Pinnell himself had argued staunchly for a further commitment to unrestricted "free trade."¹⁷⁶ On April 23rd it was announced that all restrictions on river transport throughout the Bengal delta were to be removed in order to accelerate the movement of rice into Calcutta from the countryside.¹⁷⁷ Though the number of boats actually plying had been sharply reduced a year earlier by "denial," the extraction of rice from the countryside remained dependant on river transport, and as such Government gave the "all clear" - even while bombs were actually now falling across the province. A week later another order was issued which removed all restrictions on the movement of rice between districts "*except existing restrictions on exports from Calcutta [i.e. to districts] and the industrial area [i.e. to districts].*"¹⁷⁸ On the all-India level, Pinnell advocated

¹⁷¹ *Janayuddha*, April 7, 1943 (translation mine)

¹⁷² *Janayuddha*, April 7, 1943

¹⁷³ *Janayuddha*, March 31, 1943

¹⁷⁴ *Janayuddha*, April 21, 1943

¹⁷⁵ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of N. M. Ayyar, p. 595

¹⁷⁶ Greenough (1982), p. 115

¹⁷⁷ *The Statesman*, "River Transport," April 23, 1943.

¹⁷⁸ *The Statesman*, "Paddy and Rice Movement," May 1, 1943. (italics mine)

contravention of the "Basic Plan," designed to eliminate competitive buying by establishing Central Government authority over inter-provincial purchasing. A letter was sent to the Government of India, that in Pinnell's words, "virtually demanded" the Bengal Government be given sanction to purchases outside the province.¹⁷⁹

Governor Herbert found this demand "admirable,"¹⁸⁰ but was less involved in the deliberations than his robust authority under Section 93 might suggest. The spat with Huq and the unorthodox way that he had ousted the Chief Minister had not been received well in Delhi or London. The explanations the Viceroy had received from Herbert, he wrote to the Secretary of State, had been riddled with "a good many inconsistencies," and Herbert's handling of the affair had depleted the Viceroy's already wavering confidence in the Governor.¹⁸¹ Linlithgow, dismayed as he was by Herbert's incompetence, however, understood his duty of "protecting [Herbert's] position and saving face."¹⁸² He hoped that Herbert might "get out of it more lightly than he might [have] for the Muslim League detest Huq, and their anxiety to discredit him will divert attention a little from the Governor."¹⁸³ The Viceroy, himself, was eager to have the Muslim League (which he thought would be more "loyal") in power in Bengal, and now feared that Herbert's actions had complicated that eventuality. "I must say," he wrote to Amery, "that the more I consider the handling of this business the more lighthearted and irresponsible it seems to me to have been. And Herbert may very well, unless he is very lucky, find himself in a position in which [Muslim League leader] Nazimuddin is unable to get a Ministry together, while Huq is in a position to claim he has a working majority behind him."¹⁸⁴ Moreover, Linlithgow predicted, the installation of a Muslim League Ministry in such circumstances, cobbled together with support of the European Group and Scheduled Castes, was sure to inflame "Caste Hindu" opinion, resulting in "an active increase in communal tension with a possible reversion to terrorism" in a province on the front line at a critical juncture in the war.¹⁸⁵

¹⁷⁹ Quoted in Greenough (1982), p. 115

¹⁸⁰ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Herbert to Linlithgow, p. 189

¹⁸¹ T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 862

¹⁸² T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 876

¹⁸³ Ibid, p. 875

¹⁸⁴ T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 881

¹⁸⁵ Ibid

The Governor, having received a stern letter of reproof from Linlithgow, sent off a "personal apologia" to the Viceroy, and forged ahead with his efforts to boot-strap Nazimuddin into power. On the 13th of April he called Nazimuddin to form a Ministry, which in composition was entirely antithetical to the promise of an all-parties coalition that he had made to Fazlul Huq. In the 11 days that followed, a Ministry consisting largely of the Muslim League, the Bengal Legislative Scheduled Caste Party and the European Group was formed and ushered into office on the 24th of April.¹⁸⁶ The composition of the new Ministry, and the animosities that it entailed, confirmed the Viceroy's forebodings about alienating caste Hindus. All Muslim cabinet positions went to League members, and only token Hindus could be persuaded to participate. With the installation of a Muslim League dominated Ministry politics in Bengal became increasingly communal, and with starvation mounting across the province, the primary issue at stake from the inception of the League Ministry was the "food situation," which lent a certain elemental, and for many, existential, hue to the acrimonious political (and increasingly communal) relations that characterized the Muslim League Ministry.

On the same day that the Ministry was formed, opposition leaders addressed an ad hoc meeting in the Calcutta Town Hall. Hindu Mahasabha President, and former Bengal Minister, Shyama Prasad Mookerjee, issued a stark rebuke to the newly formed government. "Sir Nazimuddin can never hope," he declared, "to serve Bengal at the head of a Ministry which is opposed by a strong section of Muslims and by the entire Hindu community. The grave problems that confront us, specifically relating to food and internal security, imperatively demand unity of thought and action."¹⁸⁷ Fazlul Huq also put the new government on notice: the distress prevailing in the rural areas, he warned, was dire, and immediate steps needed to be taken. His own Ministry, Huq assured a gathering a week later, had "made desperate efforts to avert a crisis," but in vain. The denial policy, exports of rice from the province, de-control, and several successive governmental procurement campaigns had all gone forward without any consultation

¹⁸⁶ Out of a total of 140 members of the governing coalition, 79 were from the Muslim League, 25 from the European Group, and 20 were from the Scheduled Caste Party. The remaining 16 seats were garnered from small splinter parties who carried little weight in the Assembly. The Hindu Mahasabha, the Krishak Praja Party and Huq's Progressive Party went into the opposition, which consisted of 108 members. Source: Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal*, p. 173

¹⁸⁷ *The Statesman*, "Dr. Mookerjee's Views," April 27, 1943.

with the Ministry. The Governor had proceeded autocratically, making a mockery of provincial autonomy, and this had destabilizing the entire province. Now that the crisis was starkly manifest, Huq demanded, the new Ministry had the responsibility to cope with the situation post-haste.

Nazimuddin himself was not unaware of the situation that faced his fledgling Ministry. The Civil Supplies Directorate, managed by L.G. Pinnell, had become an independent Department of the Government of Bengal a little more than a week before Huq's resignation. Upon forming his Ministry, Nazimuddin appointed Midnapur native, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, to the critical post of Minister of Civil Supplies. Suhrawardy was a seasoned politician, well versed in the rough and tumble of Bengal politics, who had a particularly colorful history of sparring with Fazlul Huq. Now as Minister of Civil Supplies he addressed Huq's admonitions promptly. He was well aware of the seriousness of the food crisis, he responded in a press note, but could assure the people of Bengal that a solution was in sight. The high price of rice was the result of hoarding by stockists and cultivators alike, and had no relation to any actual shortage, or for that matter, governmental interference. "If only the people had confidence in the future," he lamented, "if only they realized their duties to their more unfortunate neighbors, and if only the hoards in Bengal could be made mobile, the situation could be eased."¹⁸⁸ He warned all "hoarders" to liquidate their stocks at once, or face drastic consequences. He ended his statement with a threat:

I am determined to use all the powers of Government to see that prices are brought down and see that these hoards are disgorged...I am giving a chance to the people to do it voluntarily, while I perfect my plans to make them disgorge the hoards. If they do not listen to my warning, let them not think that they can run their hoards underground or that they will be able to succeed in dissipating the hoards.¹⁸⁹

Suhrawardy's position was, in fact, conspicuously resonant with that of the Government of India. In December when anxieties about the food supply to Calcutta began running high, Linlithgow had written to Amery that "building up of large reserves by middle-class consumers and the tendency on the part of the small subsistence farmer to keep back more of his grain than usual for his own consumption," were primary factors

¹⁸⁸ *The Statesman*, "Warning to Hoarders," May 8, 1943

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid*

inhibiting the increase of food supplies to Calcutta.¹⁹⁰ In April of 1943, the Government of India's Regional Commissioner for Civil Supplies, Mr. Justice Braund, made a broadcast over All-India Radio addressing the food situation in similar words. The crisis in Bengal, he assured listeners, was the result of *consumers* withholding rice from the market and keeping it out of the hands of Government. "Both the cultivators and the householder desire to keep in hand or purchase more food than in normal times," and as a result "there is nervousness and panic which makes a man produce the very scarcity the he dreads."¹⁹¹ No mention was made of industrial concerns. To these evils, Braund added "the creature who, for sheer greed, grabs and withholds from circulation the food of his fellowmen." He failed to identify this last creature further, but in this instance, at least, the evidence seems to corroborate his assumptions.

Abandoning the Basic Plan

Several previous works on the Bengal Famine have centered around availability of rice in Bengal during 1943, but the numbers used to determine how much rice was supposedly available to the market have failed to take into account the substantial indeterminacy of how much rice was removed or "frozen" by the big players. The actual extent of purchases made by Government, big business, military, semi-military and the various Chambers of Commerce, is, in fact, quite impossible to assess. The big jute mills, textile mills, paper mills, engineering works, armament factories, and other private interests were never called on to release numbers for their procurements. That they had continued heavy purchasing throughout the period under consideration, is a fact that was corroborated by several reliable witnesses at the Famine Enquiry Commission held in the summer of 1944.¹⁹² Whatever the actual numbers, there can be little doubt that given their almost unlimited purchasing capacity (particularly in relation to the E.P.T., mentioned above), they were substantial.

¹⁹⁰ T.O.P. Vol. III, Linlithgow to Amery, December 3, 1943.

¹⁹¹ *The Statesman*, "Bengal's Food Supply," April 9, 1943

¹⁹² The participants who identified ongoing large-scale purchases by big business concerns in Bengal, included (but are not limited to); Marwari Chamber of Commerce (p. 1443), Nalini Sarkar, ex-Food Member G.O.I. (p. 1138), Bengal Chamber of Commerce (p. 1406), B.R. Sen, Secretary Revenue Department, G.O.B. (p. 441), L.G. Pinnell, Director of Civil Supplies, Bengal (p. 581), Nawab Habibullah Bahadur of Dacca, ex-Food Minister, G.O.B. (p. 914), The Marwari Relief Association (p. 1041), Bengal National Chamber of Commerce (p. 1084). All pages numbers from *Nanavati Papers*.

The British Military did release their figures for purchases of certain foodstuffs for direct rations to their troops. From Bengal markets, at the time, these purchases amounted to, per month: 617,712 pounds of beef, 274,221 pounds of fish, 375,890 pounds of goat meat, 623,593 pounds of milk, 1,120,406 pounds of vegetable, 1,213,478 pounds of potatoes, and 185,230 pounds of poultry.¹⁹³ These numbers, however substantial they may be, do not include purchases made for private canteens, restaurants or hotels in and around army encampments, which flourished, particularly in Calcutta. They are also limited to British military purchases, at a time when American military engagement in the region was growing, and American soldiers began extensive participation in the black market.¹⁹⁴ The high demand for ice by military personnel put a further strain on fish markets (which depended on ice for preservation during transport), thus denying a primary source of protein to middle-class residents of Bengal. In some districts fishermen, already crippled by "boat denial" were forced to throw away as much as a third of their catch due to a lack of ice.¹⁹⁵ The Railways were also purchasing "at any price," and had the additional advantage of the ability to move stocks effectively at a time when transportation was scarce and competition for the same was fierce.¹⁹⁶ Both the Railways and Port Trust, it was later revealed, also made arrangements to purchase and move large quantities of rice on the behalf of third parties.¹⁹⁷

Whatever the stocks in hand of industrial interests in Calcutta, the military and other "priority" purchasers, Government continued to worry that they were not enough. At the beginning of May it was decided by the Government of Bengal to abandon the permit system, and allow unrestricted purchasing without, as earlier noted, any price controls or restrictions on movement. In the second week of May, Azizul Huq, who had been named Food Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council, following Linlithgow's own tenure, and Major General E. Wood, Secretary of the Food Department, Government of India, visited Calcutta and met with Suhrawardy in the Writers' Building.¹⁹⁸ The three men held a press conference afterwards and cited "psychological factors" as central to the

¹⁹³ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of Major-General F.H. Skinner, p. 941

¹⁹⁴ See: Nanavati Papers, Testimony of Major-General F.H. Skinner, p. 939

¹⁹⁵ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of S.L. Hora, Director of Fisheries, Bengal. p. 984

¹⁹⁶ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of Representative of the Marwari Chamber of Commerce, p. 1446

¹⁹⁷ Ibid

¹⁹⁸ *The Statesman*, "Food Situation in Bengal: Government of India's Assurance," May 14, 1943

food crisis in the province. They urged cooperation of the public, politicians, and the press in order to "keep up morale." Haque assured the people of Bengal that the Government of India was prepared to assist the provincial government at some future date, but, in the meantime, Bengal would need to "face the situation [on its own] in a spirit of courage and realism."¹⁹⁹ Major-General Wood produced figures that showed that Bengal had at its command *more* foodgrains than it had in 1939, and the Government of India proposed that provincial governments might collect their land revenues in kind, rather than in cash, in order to put more of that abundant rice into Government hands.²⁰⁰ Huseyn Suhrawardy reiterated his dismissal of Huq's contention that denial and exports had caused the crisis, and repeated that there was no shortage of foodgrains in Bengal.

The following day, the Civil Supplies Department seized large stocks of rice in Narayangunge, Dinajpur, Bankura, Pabna, and Barisal.²⁰¹ The merchants, all modest sized dealers, were reported to have been in breach of the Food Grains Control Order (which had been all but obliterated by "free trade"), having not properly declared their stocks. Suhrawardy promised further action on this front in days to come. Fazlul Huq, speaking at a meeting in Howrah's Town Hall the next day, noted that "each time Mr. Suhrawardy made a statement, food prices went up."²⁰² Shyamaprasad Mookerjee, at the same meeting, agreed with Suhrawardy that hoarding was driving prices, but fingered the Government itself as the main culprit. Professor Haricharan Ghosh of Calcutta University said that the statistical figures presented by the government the preceding day were inaccurate and unreliable. A resolution was passed calling for the immediate cessation of exports from Bengal, the import of stocks from surplus provinces, special transport arrangements for food grains, the establishment of an all-parties Food Committee, the immediate release of all Government stocks to the people, and the establishment of a rationing system for the entire population of Bengal. Why these same proposals were not advanced while the petitioners themselves were in control of the

¹⁹⁹ Ibid

²⁰⁰ *The Statesman*, "Problems of Food and Cloth Distribution," May 27, 1943

²⁰¹ *The Statesman*, "Atta to Replace Rice Rations,": May 15, 1943

²⁰² *The Statesman*, "Howrah Meeting," May 16, 1943

Ministry is not a mystery. When they no longer had to placate pressures from the center, they were able to advocate the measures that cried out to be done.

On May 18th the Government of India announced its own "free trade" policy. Heeding the demands made by the Government of Bengal, they abrogated the "Basic Plan," which had established Government of India control over inter-provincial trade in food grains. All trade barriers between Bengal and its neighboring provinces of Bihar, Orissa, and Assam were abolished overnight, and as such the order effectively relinquished the last vestige of central authority (*or accountability*) over the food supply of India. The results of the order were predictable. "The introduction of free trade," as Famine Enquiry Commission found, "led immediately to the invasion of the provinces of Bihar, Orissa and Assam by a large army of purchasers from Bengal ."²⁰³ Conditions in Bengal were replicated in microcosm, as the mania to feed Calcutta destabilized large regions of the peripheral countryside. Prices in Bihar and Orissa shot up immediately, while in Calcutta only a transitory dip in prices was registered. The Government of Bihar lodged an angry protest. "Bengal merchants or their agents," they charged, "went into the interior villages and offered fantastic prices, as a result of which the arrivals of supplies in local markets were extremely poor [and] prices fluctuated almost from hour to hour due to wild speculation."²⁰⁴ In Orissa the consequences were similar. According to the provincial Government: "it was undoubtedly the greatest factor in causing high prices , hoarding and the un-availability of foodgrains to consumers in the later part of 1943."²⁰⁵ In short, the Government of India's experiment had confirmed that the policies adopted in Bengal some months earlier, were just as "effective" everywhere. Meanwhile, growing provincial distrust only isolated Bengal further in its plight.

Two days after the inauguration of inter-provincial free trade, the Bengal Ministry announced that it had appointed a sole purchasing agent for the Government of Bengal: M. M. Ispahani Limited. Both Mirza Ahem (M. A.) Ispahani and his brother and partner at Ispahani Limited, Mirza Abol Hassan (M. A. H.) Ispahani, were established members and staunch defenders of the All-India Muslim League, with intimate ties to its leader, Mohammad Ali Jinnah. M. A. H. Ispahani and Jinnah carried on a long and genial

²⁰³ *Report on Bengal*, p. 50

²⁰⁴ *Ibid*, p. 50

²⁰⁵ *Ibid*, p. 51

correspondence throughout the period, with Ispahani reporting to Jinnah on the divisive, and at times fractious, workings of the provincial Bengal Muslim League.²⁰⁶ The firm itself, M. M. Ispahani Limited, was a well established trading company, with extensive connections to sub-agents and purchasers across the Eastern Region, which made it a valuable addition to Government's procurement plans. The appointment of Ispahani, however, by a Muslim League controlled Ministry, with the rice situation rapidly deteriorating and starvation on the rise, was a move that greatly inflamed communal sentiment in Bengal and claims and counter claims about the Ispahanis' role in precipitating famine would circulate for many years to come.²⁰⁷ The Hindu Mahasabha met on May 21st and the 24th and excoriated the Government of Bengal's food policy, accusing the Ministry of "pro-Pakistan" activities, and again called for an all-Parties Committee to tackle the food situation.²⁰⁸ In conclusion a resolution was passed urging the government to make sanitary and feeding arrangements for the "thousands of men, women, and children coming from *mofussil* areas to control shops in Calcutta."²⁰⁹ With other supply concerns taking priority, however, the government instead began shortening the hours that control shops would operate. Citing the "hardship" of waiting in long queues in the summer sun for rice at controlled prices, it was announced on May 27th that shops would remain closed in the afternoon forthwith. In an addendum - as if incidental - it was noted: "it has also been decided to limit the sale of rice to one seer per head per day in the interest of maximum equity in distribution."²¹⁰

"Equity," however, was again being prioritized. A few days after its Press Note announcing restricted hours at control shops, the government released a second press note that it would be establishing one control shop in each approved market exclusively for "local people." The aim was to "facilitate the obtaining of supplies by permanent residents of Calcutta." Residency in Calcutta could be confirmed, the order outlined, by

²⁰⁶ Published as *M. A. Jinnah - Ispahani Correspondence, 1936-1948* (Forward Publication: Karachi, 1976)

²⁰⁷ By this time "denial" expert L. G. Pinnell had been transferred to Chittagong as Division Commissioner, and N. M. Ayyar, I.C.S., had been appointed Director of Civil Supplies, Bengal. Ayyar revealed that the Government of Bengal was paying Ispahani between Rupees 16 and 20 per maund of rice, while prices in Bihar had been considerably lower. Intensive investigation by the Famine Enquiry Commission would largely exonerate Ispahani Limited, but the rumors of defalcation extend even to the present day.

²⁰⁸ *The Statesman*, "Hindu Sabha Meeting," May 25, 1943

²⁰⁹ *Ibid*

²¹⁰ *The Statesman*, "Distribution of Rice," May 27, 1943

presentation of an A.R.P. "enumeration" slip. Both the A.R.P. and control shops, however, were thought by many, including Muslim League Ministers, to be Hindu enterprises. The A.R.P., Fazlul Huq had also protested, was at least 95% Hindu, which was clearly the result of discriminatory recruiting policies.²¹¹ "Control shops," which were, in fact, private shops selling essential commodities supplied direct by the Department of Civil Supplies to the public at controlled rate, were also mostly Hindu owned. These issues led to increasingly bitter communal relations, which would have disastrous consequences in the years to come. In the meantime, conditions in the Bengal countryside were rapidly deteriorating and starvation was beginning to decimate the province.

²¹¹ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of Fazlul Huq, p. 744

Chapter Four: Famine

Defense

The period covered in the chapter to follow - May 1 - December 5, 1943 - is often understood to define "The Bengal Famine." In works on the famine, therefore, this period is typically prioritized. As I have demonstrated in previous chapters, however, famine in Bengal was a far more protracted event than this periodization suggests. Dire scarcity, hunger, disease, and, indeed, starvation, had been persistent realities in Bengal since at least 1940, and would continue to plague the province for several years to come. Above all it was the arrogance of power that led to the bracketing of famine in Bengal within the tight time-frame covered below. This exercise at once justified the neglect of famine that preceded its begrudging official recognition in 1943, as well as valorizing the eventual relief efforts that were presumed to punctuate it. Limiting the time-frame, in this way, limited blame.

In my own effort to broaden the temporal frame of famine in Bengal, I will resist the impulse to sensationalize this particular period. It is my aim, instead, to demonstrate that this period represents only an especially horrific phase in the continuum of colonial impunity, administrative dysfunction, and de-humanizing indifference that defined the final years of British rule in India. The ideological disposition of authority, even during this period of acute starvation, was, as before, deeply enmeshed in myopic concerns of "defense," "security," "law and order," and war-time "priority." It is also a period during which capital profit continued to drive policy. The chapter to follow will analyze this period in relation to these same and consistent objectives of empire. The starvation of millions of poor Bengalis, in this context, provides a foil against which the contours of colonialism can be viewed in better relief. Though it is not my intention to advance a

counter-factual argument, one is forced to wonder, with Gandhi (and later Amartya Sen¹), to what extent a lack representative government and the denial of self-determination were responsible for famine in Bengal.

The Famine Enquiry Commission, even according to its conservative timeline, pegged May as the beginning of famine in Bengal; with increasing numbers of deaths from starvation being reported in Rangpur, Mymensingh, Bakargunj, Chittagong, Noakhali and Tippera districts.² The May 23rd edition of *Biplabi*, from Midnapur, also recorded five deaths from starvation, eight cases of paddy looting, and a sharp rise in prices everywhere in the district. "Driven by the pangs of hunger," it was reported further, "about 600 to 700 people [were] daily traveling by rail, mostly without tickets, from Mecheda and nearby stations in Tamluk police district to Orissa in the hopes of procuring rice at a cheaper rate."³ Those who came back empty handed were selling whatever possessions they still held and departing for Calcutta in "large numbers."⁴ On the 25th of May a hunger march, comprised of more than a thousand starving men, women and children, entered Tamluk from the surrounding villages. The marchers were threatened by armed police and retreated empty handed.⁵ Several individuals, including Bankim Chandra Naskar, Upendra Nath Pradhan, and a ten year old son of Dharanidhar Roy, were reported to have died of starvation that same week.⁶ The writing was on the wall, the journal warned, "The situation in Chittagong is very insecure for the British, who probably have realized they will very quickly have to beat a retreat from Bengal with their tails curled under their bellies. It is for this reason that they are planning, we think, to decamp from this province with whatever booty they can loot - be it bits of straw or hay."⁷

¹ In his 1999 work, *Development as Freedom*, noble prize winning economist Amartya Sen has famously argued "no famine ever taken place in the history of the world in a functioning democracy." (p.16) This argument is resonant with Gandhi's assertion (included in chapter 3) that famine in India could have been averted by a representative government in India.

² *Report on Bengal*, p. 112

³ *Biplabi*, p. 197

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 209

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 208

⁷ *Ibid*

The circulation of such opinion was not entirely arbitrary. In December of 1942 British and Indian troops under Commander-in-Chief, Archibald Wavell, had launched a campaign to regain an Allied foothold in Burma, mounting an attack on the Arakan.⁸ The operation was launched in secret, but heavy troop movements through Calcutta to Bengal's border district of Chittagong belied a major offensive.⁹ It was less well known that Japanese troop reinforcements were creating havoc for Indo-British forces, and a lack of coordination, equipment and training, as well as malaria and other endemic diseases, were taking a sharp toll. By the early spring morale was collapsing and the failure of the mission was imminent.¹⁰ Fearful as ever of how defeat would be received in India, a news black-out was imposed towards the end of March. Word of yet another defeat at Japanese hands, however - only 300 miles from Calcutta - was not easily suppressed. The denial of official information from the front only fostered what *Statesman* Editor Ian Stephens termed a "rumor-breeding silence" in Calcutta. The demoralized return of another wave of defeated troops from the Burmese front fueled sentiment further. Stephens and his staff at *The Statesman* could find no justification for the censorship of information:

Would the public in any war-theatre, we wondered, have been treated so stupidly? Could one imagine a fortnight's news-blackout in Britain about the ground-fighting during the retreat from Dunkirk or, a year later, the withdrawals in Libya, Greece and Crete? It wasn't as if Calcutta's inhabitants hadn't direct means of gleaning information. 'Security' there was always poor; often the city leaked like a sieve with military data of variable worth; and our own fighting men, Indian as well as British, were now streaming back through it. Their comments on the handling of affairs, with ugly garblings and accretions, were of course widely repeated.¹¹

On April 6th *The Statesman* published an editorial critical of the "officially created news-famine" on the Arakan campaign.¹² Official silence in the face of an obvious defeat was only compounding popular anxiety, while official anxiety remained entrenched in denial. A stop order was issued to block all circulation of the newspaper and the commander of the Arakan operation, General Irwin, held a press conference at

⁸ an area three hundred miles northwest of Rangoon and approximately equidistant from Calcutta.

⁹ Stephens, p. 112

¹⁰ Bayly and Harper, p. 274

¹¹ Stephens, p. 115-115

¹² *The Statesman*, "The Arakan Campaign," April 6, 1943

the military encampment in Barrackpore, just north of Calcutta, to rebuff suggestions of military bungling. Disgruntled soldiers, however, continued to filter into Bengal, cursing the generals for the abject failure of the campaign. Whatever slim local support Britain still had in Japanese-occupied Burma also collapsed. And, even more alarmingly, Indian soldiers in the battle zone had deserted in numbers, with news of the re-organization of the Indian National Army, under the leadership of Bengali nationalist leader Subhash Chandra Bose,¹³ eroding morale (and loyalty) further.¹⁴ The suspicion of British intentions as far as Bengal was concerned - and as expressed in *Biplabi* - were surely widespread. British troops were, again, returning from the front defeated and demoralized, reports of starvation were coming in from across Bengal, and Government had proven itself entirely incapable of taming the increasing scarcity that was blighting the province.

Food Drive

It was in this context that the Government of Bengal launched its province-wide Food Drive in June of 1943. The idea of a "food drive" had been hatched in earlier oral consultations between the Government of India and the Government of Bengal, at which time the abandonment of the "Basic Plan" had also been agreed upon. It was, furthermore, the fruit of the Muslim League Ministry's contention (shared by the Government of India) that there was no food shortage in Bengal, but that rural hoarding by cultivators was responsible for a crisis of price and supply. The stated objectives of the Drive were: "to ascertain the actual statistical position, to locate hoards, to stimulate the flow of grain from agriculturalists to the markets, and to organize the distribution of local surpluses as loans or by sales to those who were in need of foodgrains."¹⁵ No mention was made of who, exactly, was "in need." To achieve the former objectives

¹³ The Indian National Army (I.N.A.) was an organization founded in 1942 by Mohan Singh. Its ranks were comprised of Indian soldiers who had been captured by the Japanese in Malaya and Singapore. Disillusioned with their abandonment by Britain, they organized an irregular army with the goal of invading India from the east and joining with radical national forces to overthrow British rule in India. The I.N.A. was reorganized in early 1943 under the leadership of Subhash Chandra Bose. Its message of militant resistance to colonial rule was broadcast over "Azad Hind Radio," which reached Calcutta over the airwaves, resulting in full knowledge and widespread support for the Indian National Army in Bengal. By the end of the war, it was comprised of as many as 40,000 troops.

¹⁴ Bayly and Harper, p. 274

¹⁵ *Report on Bengal*, p. 55

(enumeration, location and the movement of rice from the countryside to Calcutta) a militia of 8000 government employees, recruited from several governmental departments, was assembled under the authority of the Department of Civil Supplies. In the districts, village organizations were set up according to the recommendations of Union Boards and authority was also delegated to selected, non-official residents of the community in ad hoc "food committees." The Home and Civic Guards were enlisted to enforce "order," and the police, as well as the A.R.P., participated in urban areas outside Calcutta.¹⁶ Calcutta itself was excluded.

The authority to requisition stocks was broad. Any and all stocks of traders not licensed under the Foodgrains Control Order were to be confiscated. Additionally, any stocks that were deemed to have been inaccurately declared under the same order, were, likewise, subject to requisitioning. More problematically, any trader, even with correctly declared stocks could have his license revoked if he was judged to be "withholding [stocks] from the market."¹⁷ Exactly how such judgment would be made was left vague - presumably refusal to sell to Government or its agents would constitute "withholding from the market." Once a trader's license was cancelled, his stocks would be "undeclared" and could be summarily seized. In addition, any stocks held by either traders or agriculturalists could be requisitioned if in excess of a government decided maximum limit of 300 maunds.¹⁸ That traders, in particular, would be holding more than 300 maunds would be nothing extraordinary. But even stocks below this official limit were insecure. District Officers, ultimately, were given authority to requisition, *regardless of the size of the holding*, "whatever quantities they considered necessary," the only caveat being that they should leave enough behind to leave the stock-holder "self-sufficient."¹⁹ Given the breadth of these powers - which essentially, even if variously, gave Food Drive officers authority to requisition *any and all* rice they decided it

¹⁶ The use of the Home Guards, the A.R.P., and the Civic Guards presented nothing of a paradox to Government. That these forces, organized to deal with "enemy threat," were being used to monitor and manage the rice supply of Bengal, was in keeping with the rhetoric of "civil defence," that continued to mold all policy, and justify any means. Question about the food supply, throughout the period, were enmeshed in the rhetoric of "defence," structuring the only "code" of famine that was ever invoked.

¹⁷ *Report on Bengal*, p. 56

¹⁸ 300 mds. = @ 10.5 tons, approximately enough to feed approximately one hundred people for six months.

¹⁹ *Report on Bengal*, p. 56

"necessary" to appropriate - it is little surprise that distrust of the campaign was widespread.

The exclusion of Calcutta and its industrial suburbs, in particular, was a feature that caused popular alarm and misgiving. In the wake of a year that had included "denial," requisitioning (under various schemes), "free trade" (both provincial and regional), and, concurrently, continuous pressure from military, corporate and speculative purchasing - all in the name of feeding Calcutta - the suspicion that if there were large hoards anywhere, they were certainly to be found in the capital, was widespread. Though, as noted, the exact amount of rice that had already been transferred from the countryside to Calcutta is impossible to gauge, the popular impression was that it had been considerable. The exclusion of Calcutta from the Food Drive only tended to confirm this conviction. The necessary early announcement of a plan on the scale now envisioned, moreover, presented large stockists throughout Bengal with the opportunity to shift their stores to Calcutta before the "drive" had begun in order to shelter their holdings and avoid confiscation. This window of opportunity only added to the chaos as well as suspicion that accompanied the implementation of the Food Drive.²⁰

Furthermore, though the rural population now had some experience with governmental penetration into the countryside - particularly one year earlier during "denial" - the administrative footprint in Bengal remained light, which presented other problems. The Secretary of the Revenue Department, B. R. Sen, put in context the practical difficulties government faced during the Drive succinctly: "The administrative machinery in Bengal," he told the Famine Enquiry Commission, "is weak. It is a permanently settled area. We have no revenue staff. The Collector depends for information about agriculture mostly on his circle officers... unlike in ryotwari provinces, the District Officer has no grip over the agricultural situation in the district."²¹ This lack of contact with and official information about rural conditions, it might be noted, throws into question the charge of hoarding *by cultivators* that was the justification for the Food Drive. It also goes some way towards explaining the panic and dismay that gripped the populations in the countryside when uniformed (and armed) Government officers

²⁰ According to the *Report on Bengal* (pg. 57) the accusation of preemptive movements of "hoards" held outside Calcutta into the city after the announcement of the "food drive" was widespread.

²¹ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of B. R. Sen, p. 446

descended on the *mofussil*, yet again, in search of rice. The government position was made only more complicated by the fact that the Union Boards, the most local branch of Provincial Government in rural Bengal, were notoriously rife with factionalism and corruption.²² Utilization of the Union Boards during the "food drive," therefore, was a further difficulty, both in terms of the coordination and perceived integrity of the campaign.

In addition, and as L. G. Pinnell had found out during "denial," the environmental complexities, and the difficulties entailed by the same, were immense. Pinnell, speaking of the difficulties he had encountered during "denial," estimated the topographical challenges of taking a proper inventory of rice in the region prohibitive:

There [are] no steam launches except one for the use of the district Magistrate in each district. There are no mechanically propelled launches in the sub-division, and none in the *thanas*. You have sub-division which from north to south, taking inhabited portions, may be 50 or 60 miles long and your only means of getting about is a wooden boat which cannot travel against the tide. You can travel when the tide is in your favor, but you cannot when it is against you. Similarly for police stations, which are composed of large areas; the same kind of transport is there. The whole of this area is a network of tidal *khal* running between very big and dangerous rivers and your staff consists of the sub-divisional officer, perhaps a couple of Circle Officers for an area of 600 square miles, and a *thana* staff of a Sub-Inspector with perhaps one assistant for an area of - I would not like to say exactly. Under such circumstances, to attempt to visit every village or send people to every village in a short period of time [is] quite impossible.²³

Very little had changed in the year since Pinnell had undertaken to "deny" the countryside of rice, boats and all other modes of transportation along the 90,000 miles of Bengal's waterways, *except* the fact that more than half of the country boats that moved people and goods throughout the delta region had been withdrawn from service or destroyed during the same campaign. And yet, now during the Food Drive, again, the government went off into the hinterland, with the objective of taking a "census" of some ten million homes (representing a population of 56 million) across the 84,000 villages of Bengal, in order to assess, and, as necessary - and with granted authority - confiscate, the rice supplies of the province and bring them to Calcutta. The organizational difficulties

²² The evidence for this is rather anecdotal, but believable. See for instance, the testimony of the Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha (the most extensive, non-official organization in rural Bengal during the period) in Nanavati Papers, p. 148

²³ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of L. G. Pinnell, p. 547

of such a proposed course of action - which was scheduled to be executed in a few short weeks - were, indeed, unimaginable. But, in fact, there was only a very tenuous adherence to any sense of organization in actual practice.

The District Magistrates fortnightly report from Dinajpur, north of Calcutta, is revealing in this context:

The drive was conducted under very many handicaps... the whole scheme had to be pushed through at break-neck speed... instructions [from Calcutta] given to squad workers were all in English and when one remembers that the average Primary Licensing Agent or clerk is not particularly qualified in 'English,' it will be appreciated that issue of such detailed instructions in English were not likely to be a very great insistence.²⁴

And the confusion was indeed great. Boats moving rice from Assam into the front-line Chittagong Division were subject to "over zealous interference" from Food Drive workers and were forced to turn back.²⁵ In the Bogra District of Rajshahi Division, "hoards were unearthed and about ten thousand maunds of rice and paddy were seized,"²⁶ but miscommunications, between Food Drive workers and Government officials created a very telling reversal. After confiscation, "various quantities... had to be released subsequently on the representation of various Government Departments and District Officers that the seized stocks represented purchases on their behalf by their own dealers."²⁷ Meanwhile, in the same district, the primary result of the campaign was "to drive out all hidden stocks to the exporting centers and railway stations where these were immediately snapped up by representatives of big dealers from outside, mainly from Calcutta, and promptly exported out of the district."²⁸ In the Presidency Division, which included the non-excluded suburbs of Calcutta, the report read similarly. Even the Additional Director of Civil Supplies, who was intimately involved in the operation, reported that the movement of stocks into the exempted Calcutta industrial area was widespread.²⁹ The fears of many rural Bengalis were thus confirmed.

²⁴ WBSA, Home Political, "Fortnightly Report for 2nd Half of June, 1943," file W- 39/1943

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Ibid

Accounting

The question of what role the Food Drive played in exacerbating famine in Bengal, however, is tricky to answer. By official account, the Food Drive had been a "success," but the recorded movement of rice to Calcutta during the period, according to the Famine Enquiry, had been unremarkable. Official statistics, as in the case of "denial," and all subsequent schemes of appropriation, were, however, unreliable on a number of counts. For one, the estimate of exports into Calcutta from the countryside were limited to those made by rail or river steamer. The Enquiry Commission, supporting the contention that the Food Drive had created no unwarranted dislocation of rice, noted that "in view of the difficulties which were experienced with boat transport," it was unlikely that significant stocks had entered Calcutta by country boats.³⁰ Assumably, the Commission is here referring to "boat denial" and the removal of some 46,000 country boats a year earlier. As Pinnell testified, however, as many as 20,000 had evaded "denial" and were still plying. With the removal of all restrictions on river transport in the days leading up to the Food Drive, it cannot be assumed that this traditional, and well developed method of foodgrains movement played no significant role in the transport of rice into Calcutta - as in the case of the 24 Parganas (which suffered heavy casualties from starvation in coming months), from where large quantities of rice were moved by exactly this means during the Drive.³¹

Further complicating matters is that the extent of rice denied to the rural poor by the Food Drive and other appropriation schemes, cannot be quantified merely by citing figures of rice actually *moved* into Calcutta. During the Food Drive, as well as during "denial" and other schemes, purchases by Government and industry were continuing apace. With transportation facilities strained to the breaking point by military demand, however, the actual movement of large stocks of rice, and particularly rice paddy, into Calcutta was a constant problem. Purchases made by Government and industry alike were often left with the seller for prolonged periods of time, pending transportation arrangements - and just as importantly, as a hedge against *eventual* need. Even during "denial," with the stated objective being the *removal* of rice from the coastal belt so that

³⁰ *Report on Bengal*, p. 57

³¹ WBSA Home Political, "Fortnightly Report for 2nd Half of June, 1943," file W-39/1943

(potential) Japanese invasion forces could not appropriate local resources, stocks of rice and paddy bought by Government agents were left at the site of purchase for many months. As long as eight months after governmental purchase, in fact, much of the "denial" stock had not been actually transferred from buying areas.³² This fact, which undoubtedly puts into question the entire premise of "denial," also demonstrates the difficulty of equating imports into Calcutta from the countryside with the actual quantity of rice and paddy bought up by corporate and governmental interests. While some statistics focusing on stocks actually *held* in storage facilities in Calcutta were revealed at the Famine Enquiry Commission, no evidence exists of quantities *purchased* by Government or big business. Given the scope and intensity of consecutive schemes of appropriation, however, it is entirely reasonable to assume that far more rice and (perhaps more importantly) paddy was frozen from markets by Calcutta interests than has been previously taken into consideration.

Paddy, or unprocessed rice-in-the-husk, is the initial agricultural product of the rice plant. Rice for consumption is the product of milled paddy. In Bengal, at the time, only 17% of the paddy produced was processed in commercial rice mills. The rest, as much as 83%, was processed locally by *dhenki* - a wooden, foot driven device consisting of a fulcrum and suspended weight that, with each pass, pounds the paddy, separating the rice from the husk and leaving the rice kernel to be sorted and air-dried for consumption. Because *dhenki*-milled rice would only keep for two to three months due to high moisture content, it was of little value to Government or industrial interests, who were purchasing for future security. In this sense, paddy processed by *dhenki* was "lost" to urban concerns, and fell into local consumption. Unprocessed paddy, on the other hand, can be kept for two to three *years* before it deteriorates, and as such is optimal for storage against *future* scarcity. The purchase of paddy, then, by governmental and commercial interests would effectively "bank" rice for future contingency, precluding it from local (*dhenki*) processing and guaranteeing a long-term solution to supply uncertainties. The movement of rice paddy, however, remained a chronic problem during this period, and, as such, much of the paddy that was purchased, throughout the period, remained at the site of purchase, awaiting transport to commercial mills.

³² Nanavati Papers, Testimony of D. L. Mazumdar, p. 523

Traditionally (and until the early months of 1942) paddy moved throughout Bengal, and, importantly, to rice mills and commercial markets, in relatively small quantities by a variety of means. Paddy was purchased directly from growers by small traders who went door to door, and who, in turn, sold to larger traders in the region, or directly to rice mills themselves. "In most cases," the Bengal Rice Mills Association explained to the Famine Enquiry Commission, "transport [was] arranged by the trade and a very large number of people and paddy transport vehicles (boats, carts, lorries, etc.) [were] used by scores of thousands of traders for such transport."³³ The relationships between the scores of thousands of traders with the many millions of rice producers in Bengal were complicated, often involving credit relations based on trust and tradition, and networks of capital based on familiarity and trans-regional patronage. The enactment of "denial," therefore, not only disrupted the transportation of paddy to markets by a reduction of country boats, but just as importantly created havoc in the existing market system by alienating and dislocating local traders. These disruptions led to an almost wholesale breakdown in the traditional system of purchase *and movement* of paddy, precipitating the "locking up of large quantities of paddy."³⁴ The amount of paddy "locked up" during the Food Drive, as well as during other schemes, is not known.

With the network of country boats and other local means of transportation crippled, Government and commercial agents from Calcutta, did turn to more "modern" means of transportation, which, however, also proved problematic. Even the post-Pinnell Director of the Civil Supplies, H. S. Stevens, simply could not get railway officials to move paddy. "For a very long time," he testified, "the railway priority put an absolute ban on the movement of paddy into Calcutta... there was some sort of idea in their minds... that this paddy ought to be going by more convenient lines into deficit areas... they do not like this back-tracking, as they call it, of paddy into Calcutta."³⁵ The Government of India's Regional Commissioner for Civil Supplies explained further that because of its extra weight and bulk, railways refused to transport rice paddy throughout the war.³⁶ Even the Government of Bengal's sole purchasing agent during the Drive, Ispahani

³³ Nanavati Papers, Memorandum of the Bengal Rice Mills Association, p 178

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of H.S.E. Stevens, p. 1187

³⁶ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of Justice Braund, p. 994

Limited, was unable to move paddy out of the districts and had to leave large quantities with sellers pending transport.³⁷

The problem of supplying paddy to commercial rice mills was particularly pernicious. In this context the very interesting question can be asked: to what extent did a scarcity of *commercially* milled rice available to Calcutta interests contribute to famine in Bengal? Much of the panic that fueled consecutive procurement schemes (which in turn completely destabilized markets) was, in fact, the result of an insufficient supply of commercially milled rice, in particular. Though rice supplied by commercial mills, even under optimal conditions, accounted for less than 17% of the rice consumed in Bengal at the time,³⁸ Government and commercial interests were ultimately dependent on this rice to feed Calcutta. Commercially milled rice, unlike *dhenki*-milled rice, which keeps for only two or three months, will keep for a year without significant deterioration. It is also easier to store than paddy, can be more easily transported, and is, unlike paddy, ready for consumption. Of the rice available on the "effective market" (the market traditionally open to commercial, non-local purchase) more than 50% was processed in commercial mills, and it was on this rice that Calcutta interests relied. As such, rice mills remained central to all procurement schemes. There was, however, an acute dearth of rice mills in Bengal at the time, which significantly limited commercial capacity. In all of Bengal there were only 477 mills, (while in Madras, for example, with annual production of rice 25% less than Bengal, there were as many as 3,500.³⁹) Moreover, many of the mills operating in Bengal were in a dilapidated condition, which hampered output further.⁴⁰ Of the 477 mills that were in Bengal, 350 were grouped in the area around Calcutta, while several districts had no mills at all. Meanwhile, the industrial population of Calcutta had more than doubled since the beginning of war, straining an already weak mill capacity, and the operations of a thriving black market also precluded a substantial quantity of commercial milled rice from the legitimate market.

Whether the existing mill infrastructure, even under normal conditions, could have coped with demand is doubtful. Mill output during 1942 and 1943 was, however,

³⁷ Nanavati paper, Testimony of H. S. E. Stevens, p. 1191

³⁸ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of Justice Braund, p. 990

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Ibid, 993

only 50% of normal, with some mills closing their doors altogether and others sharply reducing output in response to governmental heavy-handedness, particularly after Calcutta was bombed.⁴¹ Had the mills continued to operate even at normal capacity, it is likely that Government could have simply "sat at their doors" (a phrase used by Regional Civil Supplies Commissioner, Justice Braund) and collected much of the rice they needed to supply the Chambers of Commerce and feed industrial Calcutta. Instead the animosity that was created between Government and mill owners (as well as their traditional suppliers) crippled mill output and alienated essential trade elements, which, in turn, created a sense of panic over the supply of milled rice to Calcutta. This led to yet another round of desperate measures aimed at procurement, under the guise of the Food Drive. Given the dysfunction of the commercial milling industry, and the lack of interest that government and big business had in *dhenki*-milled rice, it has to be assumed that large scale purchases of paddy were being made to create a hedge against the difficulties with milled rice. If these factors are taken together, it can be ventured that the amount of "government" paddy laying in local storage facilities - even while Bengal starved - was undoubtedly large.

Darkening Clouds

Popular opposition to the Food Drive was also putting a wrench in the works. Country boats moving rice from the fertile 24 Parganas to the south of Calcutta (a major supply line) were attacked and paddy looting was "frequent."⁴² To address this hazard, the District Magistrate "found it necessary to institute a convoy system for rice and paddy boats under armed police guard."⁴³ To further discourage resistance to the government's scheme, collective fines were imposed on villages lining the main waterways.⁴⁴ In the Rajshahi Division there were reports of "considerable opposition to the food census," and rumors spread that "Government were going to take all the rice away."⁴⁵ Such rumors were, in fact, circulating throughout Bengal, being reported from almost every district in the province. In Mymensingh there was panic, with people not aware that they would be

⁴¹ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of Representative of the Bengal Rice Mills Association, p.

⁴² WBSA, Home Political, "Fortnightly Report for the 2nd Half of June, 1943," file w-39/1943

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Ibid

allowed to keep any stocks at all. The city of Dacca, meanwhile, "decided to announce itself by an outbreak of stabbings," which were reported to have stemmed from contentions related to the Drive. Public suspicion only escalated further when it was announced on the 17th of June that Field-Marshal Archibald Wavell, then Commander-in-Chief of Armed Forces in Asia, had been selected to replace Linlithgow as the next Viceroy and Governor-General of India. Wavell had overseen the defeats in Malaya, Burma and Singapore, and he had only recently suffered yet another humiliating failure in the Arakan. Now he would be the head of the Government of India. With military presence already pervasive, and uniformed and armed agents beating the bushes for rice, the appointment of Wavell "[came] as a surprise to most people. The average Indian regards it as the prelude to martial law."⁴⁶

But by this time a significant portion of the Bengal population was falling well below "average." Millions of Bengal's poor were face to face with extinction, teetering on the edge of starvation, and, indeed, falling over the precipice in larger and larger numbers. An incidental result of the Food Drive, with its consequent penetration into otherwise isolated rural districts, was a (however reluctant) realization that Bengal was starving. The District Magistrate of Faridpur conveyed to Government that "the drive [had] disclosed a very alarming state of things."⁴⁷ The poor were in an "extremely serious position," and starvation was being widely reported⁴⁸ In Bakargunj the Food Drive had discovered "very little rice," but, "several deaths from starvation [had] been reported, and there must have been many more."⁴⁹ Test Works had been opened in Dacca Division and were drawing large numbers (the final indicator of famine according to the Bengal Famine Code),⁵⁰ and information was received from Malda that the whole district was "on the verge of starvation."⁵¹ In Nadia and Murshidabad an urgent call for "emergent action to avoid starvation in many areas" was issued, and in Pabna fisherman were reported to be starving. In Chittagong, meanwhile, famine was only continuing to grow more grim. The District Magistrate there reported eleven verified deaths by starvation in

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Ibid

the fortnight, but admitted that the number in the rural areas was surely much larger. He emphasized his concern concisely: "I am referring literally to 'sectional famine'⁵² and not to metaphorical talk of starvation which there has been for some months past."⁵³ The question of how "metaphorical" talk of famine had been previously has already been addressed.

The panic, despair and trepidation that the march of a uniformed and armed militia, going from door to door in search of rice, must have wrought in an already starving population is difficult to fathom, but one is indeed reminded of W.W. Hunter's description of the 1770 Bengal Famines in this context:

The troops were marched from one famine-stricken part to another, the movement being represented to the king as made for his benefit; and so far from the English administration having laid in a sufficient stock of grain for the army at the commencement of the famine, the peasantry complained that the military wrung from them their last chance of subsistence.⁵⁴

As conditions in Bengal continued to deteriorate, comparisons with 1770 were inevitable. The Bengali journal *Masik Basumati* reported that day by day the situation was deteriorating and within a short time the whole province would be turned into a graveyard. In 1770, they reminded their readers:

as much as a third of Bengal had died of famine. The East India Company itself had created that famine. They paid the cultivators whatever trifling price they saw fit to pay, and took away all the crops and hoarded them jealously. And if they sold any of it back, they sold it back at ten times what they bought it for. Whatever arrived by boat from other provinces, they snatched that up too, while the starving cultivators sold off even their seed crop to survive. But there were also employees of the East India Company itself who protested this unfair situation, and their highest officers were found guilty of their sins - what can we expect from our rulers today?⁵⁵

On July 2nd Bengal Governor, John Herbert, sent an apologetic letter to the Viceroy to convey some inconvenient news. "I am sorry to have to trouble you with so dismal a picture," he wrote, but "Bengal is rapidly approaching starvation."⁵⁶ Reports of deaths were being received from all districts, and the situation, he informed the Viceroy,

⁵² a famine of regional scope

⁵³ WBSA, Home Political, "Fortnightly Report for the 2nd Half of June, 1943," file w-39/1943

⁵⁴ Hunter, p. 39

⁵⁵ *Masik Basumati*, "Khadya Samasya" Ashar, 1350 (July 1943) (translation mine)

⁵⁶ T.O.P. Volume IV, Herbert to Linlithgow, p. 44

"could only be described as alarming."⁵⁷ Employing the only, ever operative "famine code," he warned that, "unless we can get in foodgrains on something like the scale originally promised, the law and order... situation will get out of hand."⁵⁸ In the margins of Herbert's letter, Linlithgow jotted his own note: "I wonder how far he is right about the Bengal situation."⁵⁹ Linlithgow had little confidence in Herbert. Earlier that same day the Viceroy had sent off a letter of his own to the Governor, sharply reprimanding him for his handling of the Bengal Ministry and putting him on official notice.⁶⁰ The two letters had probably crossed paths along the way between Calcutta and Delhi. His later response to Herbert's telegram on the food situation was similarly terse; he congratulated the Governor on the "success" of the Food Drive, and noted that the volume of stocks seized during the drive had shown just "how much [rice was] in fact available."⁶¹

The Government of India, however, soon followed with its own warning to London, noting that food scarcity was creating an imminent threat of "internal disorder and strain, which will involve calling on defensive services for assistance in connection with internal security and thereby distracting them from their main objective."⁶² A warning from Delhi carried more weight than one from Calcutta. Legislators in London opposed to the conservative government started asking questions. On July 14th, Secretary of State Leopold Amery, made a statement in front of the House of Commons on the food situation in India - it was the first of many to come. Hardships were being felt, he admitted, but they were due primarily to hoarding by cultivators and increased consumption of food by Indians as the result of a rise in the standard of living. Prompt action was being taken to remedy the situation, and in particular, he promised, all necessary measures were being adopted to keep Calcutta fed.⁶³ Meanwhile, he began to prepare a statement on the "food situation" for the War Cabinet renewing his request for imports, knowing that his assurances were rather hollow.

The Bengal Legislative Assembly also met in July for its first session since Nazimuddin's ministry had been sworn in. Fazlul Huq addressed the floor with a long

⁵⁷ Ibid

⁵⁸ Ibid

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 45

⁶⁰ T.O.P. Volume IV, Linlithgow to Herbert, p. 41

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 45

⁶² T.O.P. Volume IV, Government of India, Food Department to Secretary of State, p. 77

⁶³ *The Statesman*, "Indian Food Situation," July 15, 1943

statement focusing on the injustices done to his ministry by Governor Herbert and the circumstances that led to his ouster. He concluded with a stark warning to the present ministry, admonishing them to address, at once, the "serious questions effecting not merely the welfare, but even the existence of 60 million of the people of [the] province."⁶⁴ The food situation had "degenerated to such an alarming extent," he warned, "that famine conditions, which are now raging in Bengal, are unprecedented in the annals of [the] province."⁶⁵ All indicators, he added, suggested that the famine facing Bengal would be even worse than "the great famine of 1770 A.D."⁶⁶ Civil Supplies Minister, H.S. Suhrawardy followed Huq and touted the new ministry's policy, particularly the Food Drive, which, he said, had "restored the confidence of the poor and... transferred the panic to the hoarders."⁶⁷ The numbers of the drive were difficult to estimate, he admitted, but somewhere in the neighborhood of 300,000 tons of rice had been appropriated and "redistributed." To whom they had been redistributed was, however, a matter of debate. The first of a projected 800 Government run "control shops" had opened, but the scheme was far from operational on any large scale.⁶⁸ Fazlul Huq had other ideas about where the rice was going, "it is true that millions are starving," he jibed at a public meeting, "but there can be no doubt that the food situation has improved a thousand-fold within the last three months - in the homes of certain personages. Sir Nazimuddin is, therefore, partially correct."⁶⁹

A censure motion was brought to the floor of the Assembly on July 14th, condemning the Ministry's response to the crisis and demanding that "Bengal should be declared a famine area."⁷⁰ The motion was defeated along party lines after acrimonious debate, and animosities in the Legislature became only further entrenched.

Last Ditch Denials

Starvation, however and in any case, was undeniably on the rise throughout the province. In *The Statesman*, it was reported on July 22nd that people were now dying in

⁶⁴ *The Statesman*, "Bengal Assembly Meets," July 6, 1943

⁶⁵ *Ibid*

⁶⁶ *Ibid*

⁶⁷ *Ibid*

⁶⁸ *The Statesman*, "Food Shop Opened," July 3, 1943

⁶⁹ *The Statesman*, "Mr. Huq's Criticism," July 21, 1943

⁷⁰ *The Statesman*, "Food debate in Bengal Assembly," July 15, 1943

the streets of Calcutta.⁷¹ "What proportion of these," the author pondered, "consists of ordinarily diseased beggars, and what of half-starved waifs immigrant into the city owing to rural food shortage, comparatively prosperous citizens have no means of gauging."⁷² A day earlier Herbert had written to Linlithgow that starvation was continuing to increase throughout the province and that "masses of beggars" were boarding trains without tickets in an effort to make it to urban centers in search of food. Such waves of starving people, Herbert noted, were a "particular nuisance" to troops stationed in these same areas and - "apart from being unsanitary" - should be understood to constitute "a danger to security."⁷³

The province was, indeed, falling into cataclysm. Not only had rice markets all but dried up, but there were also acute shortages of sugar, kerosene, coal, and - with increasingly dire consequences - cloth, across Bengal. The poor were on the move by the millions, trudging through the monsoon rains, now half-naked, falling by the wayside and dying, or straggling into urban areas to beg for food and shelter. In the Bhola subdivision of Barisal, for one, it was reported that hundreds of starving villagers were filling the streets of the town. The District Magistrate, doubtful of the reports, arrived to inspect the scene himself, and watched three people die on the spot.⁷⁴

Already there had also been outbreaks of cholera in Calcutta.⁷⁵ Though it has often been assumed that disease followed *in the wake of famine*, it would be more accurate to say that starvation and disease were constant companions throughout. During the Food Drive, all of the public health staff of the province had been removed from their posts to participate in the "census." "A glimpse of the mortality figures [attributed] to epidemic disease from July 1943," the Bengal Health Association later suggested, "will reveal how fatal it was to withdraw the staff from their legitimate task for that period."⁷⁶ In any case, the public health system was in shambles, under-organized, under-staffed and lacking in basic supplies.⁷⁷ Public health workers could not contest with public health concerns in normal times, and these were not normal times. Under-paid as they

⁷¹ *The Statesman*, "Intolerable," July 22, 1943

⁷² *Ibid*

⁷³ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Herbert to Linlithgow, July 21, 1943.

⁷⁴ *Famines in Bengal*, p. 97-98

⁷⁵ *Arani*, 24 Ashar, 1350 (July 7, 1943) (translation mine)

⁷⁶ Nanavati Papers, Memorandum of the Bengal Public Health Association, p. 236

⁷⁷ *Ibid*

were themselves, they were often enough struggling just to maintain their own subsistence. "[Government] could organize the vast A.R.P. organization [in Bengal] because they apprehended danger of bombing by the enemy," the Bengal Public Health Association noted, "but they did not take the gravity of [public health] seriously."⁷⁸ In all of Bengal, with a population of at least 60 million, there were 4000 doctors, with 2,500 of those working in Calcutta.⁷⁹ Meanwhile, even in Calcutta, sustenance for hungry children could not be organized, and already in July there were reports that infants were dying on the streets for want of milk.⁸⁰

Other arrangements for the maintenance of "security" in Calcutta were, however, underway. Complaints about the "filth" of the city had been making the rounds for many months. With the war in Southeast Asia increasingly taking center stage, meanwhile, the international image of Calcutta was also gaining an increased diplomatic importance. Towards the end of July details of the scheme to round up Calcutta's "beggars" (which had been in the works since at least January⁸¹) were finalized. On July 30th, Governor Herbert promulgated the Bengal Vagrancy Ordinance of 1943. The Ordinance, it was reported in *The Statesman*, "provide[d] for the police to arrest any person who appears to be a vagrant."⁸² Though no clear depiction of what a "vagrant" might look like was offered, begging in public was cited as a primary indicator. The Ordinance, it was noted, was "[not] intended in practice to apply to persons who have only recently been reduced to begging by the abnormal rise in the cost of food," but no guidelines were suggested to determine the longevity of any given individual's beggary.⁸³ Such judgments were left to the discretion of the police officer on the scene. Once he was duly satisfied that the person he was dealing with was indeed a "vagrant," that person would be removed to a "receiving center where the vagrant [would] be medically examined and classified before being sent on to the appropriate Vagrants' Home."⁸⁴ Such facilities, however, were still under construction, and so a large warehouse building on the eastern outskirts of Calcutta

⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 239

⁷⁹ *Casey's Diaries*, p. 43

⁸⁰ Nanavati Papers, Memorandum of the Bosepukur Relief Committee, p. 203

⁸¹ See Chapter Three

⁸² *The Statesman*, "Vagrancy Ordinance in Calcutta," July 31, 1943

⁸³ Ibid

⁸⁴ Ibid

was commandeered as a temporary "home" for "vagrants." It was intended "to put 1,000 vagrants at once into this home."⁸⁵

But the numbers of "beggars" on the streets of Calcutta was rising rapidly - and would only continue to rise. On the 4th of August, Secretary of State, Amery, presented his memorandum on the Indian "food situation" to the War Cabinet in London. Heeding Linlithgow's increasingly dire warnings, Amery's memorandum was forceful and insistent:

The Indian economy is being strained almost to the breaking point by the enormous demands laid upon it in its dual role as a source of supplies and of men for the Army, and a base for military operations. The large sums of money which have had to be poured into the country, against which there have been no offsetting volume of imports, have created a serious inflationary situation, one of the manifestations of which is a tendency to hold commodities on the part of millions of producers scattered all over the vast countryside. India is essentially a primitive country with only a veneer of developed finance and industry, and the administrative system, although adequate for normal times, is a mere skeleton.⁸⁶

Famine conditions, he noted, had already begun to appear and were spreading. Such a state of affairs, Amery warned, could easily lead to, "a marked reduction in the production of munitions and supplies in India... with consequent detriment to the maintenance of the forces in, and drawing their supplies from, India."⁸⁷ Furthermore, troops in the Indian Army, the Secretary of State cautioned, could easily fall prey to "subversive activities... if accompanied by reports from home that their families are starving."⁸⁸ In short, Amery concluded, operations in, and depending on, India would be seriously jeopardized if people began to starve on a still larger scale. He asked the War Cabinet to accede to the Viceroy's request for the immediate shipment of 500,000 tons of foodgrains to avoid such eventualities.

The Cabinet agreed, instead, to a possible portion of 30,000 tons of wheat that was available in Australia, "some margin [of which] might be available for India after meeting whatever requirements for Ceylon and the Middle East might be judged necessary."⁸⁹ It also approved the shipment of 100,000 tons of barley from Iraq. Though

⁸⁵ Ibid

⁸⁶ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Document # 67

⁸⁷ Ibid

⁸⁸ Ibid

⁸⁹ T.O.P. Vol. IV, "War Cabinet W.M. (43) 111th Conclusion," p. 155

lacking any statistics to substantiate the claim, the War Cabinet found that there was no "physical deficiency" in India, and that "hoarding" by *cultivators* was to blame. They recommended a more vigorous propaganda campaign to dislodge hoards and more "attention" to the inflationary situation, finding, in conclusion, "that no further action should be decided on at the present time."⁹⁰ Amery, feeling he had been merely "fobbed off with 100,000 tons of barley from Iraq,"⁹¹ was deeply frustrated. Discussion had begun on the wrong foot, he wrote in his diary, "led off by [Minister of War Transport] Leathers, the Cabinet generally treated the matter as a bluff on India's part."⁹² More exasperating to the Secretary of State, however, had been the antagonism of Churchill's personal advisor, "The Professor," Lord Cherwell. Cherwell held no official position in government, but had become ever-closer to Churchill, gaining the Prime Minister's almost dogged trust, and advising him on any and every matter, from "Dehousing"⁹³ in Germany, to sterling balances in South Asia. Cherwell also had developed a statistical committee, and it has been suggested that by a complicated matrix of his own design, he was able to determine the status of a nation's food supply almost at the snap of his fingers. In the War Cabinet's session Amery "fought hard" against the "nonsense talk by Professor Cherwell whom Winston drags in on every subject and who obviously knows nothing of economics, but, like Winston, hates India."⁹⁴ Amery lost his case.

The Viceroy, who had already delivered his farewell speech to the Assembly in Delhi a few days earlier, was dismayed by the news from London. The quantity of imports suggested, he informed Amery, would do nothing at all to meet India's "essential demands." As such, he continued, "I cannot be responsible for the stability of India now."⁹⁵ Linlithgow was a tired man and wished for a better farewell. The situation in Bengal, he reminded the Secretary of State, was spiraling out of control. A few days earlier he had sent off yet another angry telegram to Governor Herbert.⁹⁶ He had received reports, he scolded Herbert, that the streets of Calcutta had become a mess, with the "non-collection of refuse" going entirely unchecked. Revenues in Bengal had been

⁹⁰ Ibid

⁹¹ *The Leo Amery' Diaries*, p. 933

⁹² Ibid

⁹³ Footnote on dehousing.

⁹⁴ *The Leo Amery' Diaries*, p. 933

⁹⁵ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 169

⁹⁶ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Linlithgow to Herbert, p. 164

flagging, and nothing was being done to collect more. The "food problem," moreover, was being hopelessly mishandled. Word had also reached Delhi that "Birla and the Marwaris" were opening relief canteens, upstaging Government's own weak efforts. What were the initiatives being taken by new Director of Civil Supplies, N. M. Ayyar, I.C.S., Linlithgow queried. A rationing advisor, W. H. Kirby, would be sent from Delhi presently, he informed Herbert, to look into the situation. "You will understand," he concluded, "that I am far from happy about the present situation in Bengal."⁹⁷

Herbert, shaken by the Viceroy's scolding tone, responded promptly. The clean-up of Calcutta, he promised, was underway. Extra petrol had been sanctioned to the Calcutta Corporation so that its "conservancy" vehicles could ply twice a day, and in the same breath he assured the Governor General that, "under the Bengal Vagrancy Ordinance, 359 beggars have been rounded up, and further action continues daily. Many others have left the city fearing arrest, and these steps have brought about a welcome change for the better."⁹⁸ The Governor agreed with the Viceroy about the "necessity for additional taxation," and supported a doubling of the sales' tax, as well as the imposition of an additional agricultural tax. As far as the Director of Civil Supplies went, Ayyar was doing a fair job, though, the Governor confessed, he "should have preferred a European officer for the post."⁹⁹ The arrangement of supplying charitable organizations, "including Birla and certain Marwaris," he also assured the Viceroy, was taking place under strict official supervision. (A few days later an order was passed barring any private organization from feeding more than 50 people a day in Calcutta.¹⁰⁰) With Kirby now in Calcutta, Herbert added, a governmental rationing scheme would, of course, soon be organized.

Special Rationing Advisor, Kirby, however, was meeting with considerable difficulties. He had conferred with the Chief Minister, Nazimuddin, but had been sorely frustrated. "The general atmosphere in the minister's office," he later testified, "was so difficult that I had to tell [the Governor] that I could make no progress."¹⁰¹ Kirby wanted to utilize the existing market structure to begin a rationing scheme at once, but the Chief

⁹⁷ Ibid

⁹⁸ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Herbert to Linlithgow, p. 166

⁹⁹ Ibid

¹⁰⁰ WBSA, Intelligence Branch, file # 165-41 (1)

¹⁰¹ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of W. H. Kirby, p. 361

Minister would not hear of it: "his attitude became so uncompromising," Kirby testified, "that I had to tell him on two occasions that we could not proceed further." Nazimuddin was dead set against the use of the private (mostly Hindu-owned) shops that were currently being operated as "control shops." If rationing was to be introduced it would be through Government shops, or nothing. But the few Government shops that had been opened could do little to meet needs. At the same time members of the Hindu community, arguing from expediency as well as self-interest, were lobbying hard for the use of private shops. The problem was, Kirby summarized, "that since 90% of the retailers in Calcutta were Hindus, the Minister very much wanted to encourage the Muslim trader [by utilizing Government shops], and [on the other hand, because] the staff that would be appointed to the Government shops would be mainly Muslim, there were strong protests from the Hindu trading community on that particular point."¹⁰²

"Famine"

Meanwhile Bengal was in freefall. Dire reports of mass starvation were coming in from District Officers posted all over the province,¹⁰³ and, much more alarmingly to the colonial state, the spectacle of famine could no longer be contained in the countryside. Waves of starving villagers were accumulating on the streets of Calcutta and dying there in increasing numbers. On the 8th of August, Ian Stephens, Chief Editor of *The Statesman*, wrote and published a scathing editorial roundly condemning Government denial. "By mumbling that food shortage did not exist," Stephens charged, "they willed themselves into belief that the dread spectacle would vanish."¹⁰⁴ But the scenes enacted on the streets of Calcutta were only becoming more spectacular. Though the word "famine" itself had been banned from use, Stephens continued boldly, urging the Government of India to "take due cognizance of bitter realities in the war-threatened Eastern areas, where what may fairly be called famine prevails."¹⁰⁵ New Delhi took little notice to this first salvo. Azizul Haque, the Government of India's Food Member, continued to defend central government efforts and returned the blame to provincial

¹⁰² Ibid, p. 364

¹⁰³ See Appendix VI, *Report on Bengal*, pp. 225-227

¹⁰⁴ *The Statesman*, "Plight of a Province," August 8, 1943

¹⁰⁵ Ibid

authorities, transportation problems, and environmental difficulties.¹⁰⁶ Meanwhile on the 16th and 17th of August, alone, 120 corpses (by official account) were collected from the streets of Calcutta, and many more bodies, in the final stages of starvation, were removed to government hospitals.¹⁰⁷ Then, on the 18th of August, official reports of corpse removal were suspended.

Frustrated with the lack of response to earlier warnings, Ian Stephens took the courageous decision to publish a photo-spread of starving Bengalis on the streets of Calcutta. Though any direct reference to the *word* "famine" was prohibited, the Emergency Rules were ambiguous regarding photographs. In a single afternoon a crew of photographers sent out by Stephens collected a shocking dossier of famine pictures, some so horrifying that the editor himself found them "utterly unpublishable."¹⁰⁸ Those that were a bit less appalling, were run in a photo-spread published in the Sunday edition of *The Statesman* on August 22, 1943 - and in some definite sense the event since referred to as the "Bengal Famine of 1943" was born. *The Statesman*, published both in New Delhi and Calcutta, was the most established and well-read newspaper in India. It had a long history of editorial integrity and independence. Though British owned, it was respected as a relatively objective source of information - particularly regarding eastern India - by Europeans and Indians alike. Scraps with Government censors had been common throughout the war period, but, perhaps owing to a unique privilege associated with white ownership, the paper continued to push for greater editorial freedom without the same intense scrutiny which Indian newspapers had to endure. The publication of famine photographs in August of 1943, however, was regarded by many as a singular act of journalistic courage and conscientiousness, without which many more lives would have surely been lost.

The Bengal Famine, as it was soon to be known, had been announced to the world and could no longer be ignored. By Monday, in Delhi, second-hand copies of the paper were selling at several times the new-stand price.¹⁰⁹ The same morning the Government of India, Chief Press Adviser, telephoned *The Statesman* office in Calcutta with indignant

¹⁰⁶ Stephens, p. 180

¹⁰⁷ K.C. Ghosh, p. 119

¹⁰⁸ Stephens, p. 182

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, p. 186

reproaches. The Emergency Rules, however, were indeed ambiguous about the publication of photographs, and so no immediate action could be taken. Emboldened by the lack of penalty, Stephens prepared another photo-essay for the following Sunday, with an accompanying editorial, entitled "All-India Disgrace." In Calcutta alone, he wrote:

Scores of persons collapsing from under-nourishment are daily picked up from the streets; recorded deaths from starvation cases in hospitals between August 16 and August 29 were 143; 155 dead bodies are known to have been removed from public thoroughfares by the authorities' new Corpse Disposal Squad during the ten days ending on August 24; during the week ending August 21 mortality was 1,129 as against an average of 574 in the corresponding weeks of the previous five years. Cholera, epidemic since June, is again on the increase; there were 140 cases and 74 deaths during the seven days ending on August 21. Typhoid spreads; dysentery is exceptionally prevalent.¹¹⁰

But however bad conditions had become in Calcutta, Stephens continued, conditions in the *mofussil* were still much worse. The editorial blamed famine on "the complacency and misjudgment, greed, myopia and political spite" of the ruling and commercial classes, both Indian and British, and coupled to it a "horrifying catalogue of administrative shortcomings."¹¹¹ Remedy, however, was, as of yet, a long way off.

A day before the second *Statesman* photo-essay came out, Bengal Governor, Jack Herbert, wrote to Governor-General Linlithgow that he was satisfied with the way things were shaping up in Bengal. Despite "unhelpful tales of horror in the Press," he assured the Viceroy, "[Government could] claim to have made good progress with [its] plans and organization."¹¹² Arrangements for the use of A.R.P. evacuation centers on the outskirts of Calcutta for the "detention" of "beggars" had been made, and round-ups were continuing apace. The use of the bamboo A.R.P. shelters, moreover, was preferable to earlier warehouse schemes because they could be easily "destroyed to prevent infection and rebuilt for their original purpose."¹¹³ In addition, plans "for getting control" of the summer *aus* crop were almost complete. Government "relief" centers, Herbert also informed Linlithgow, had gotten off the ground, and firm control of private relief operations had been established. The remaining problems, Herbert complained, were the

¹¹⁰ *The Statesman*, "An All-India Disgrace," August 29, 1943

¹¹¹ *Ibid*

¹¹² T.O.P. Vol. IV, Herbert to Linlithgow, August 28, 1943

¹¹³ *Ibid*

fault of political intrigue in the Ministry and sensational reports in the Press which were only designed to spread "despondency and panic." In a final note to the Viceroy, Herbert mentioned that he would be entering the hospital shortly to have his appendix removed and would be out of office for a few days. He never returned.

In any case, Linlithgow had never felt that Herbert had "carrie[d] the guns or [had] the intelligence to deal with that difficult province."¹¹⁴ The true severity of Herbert's illness (which was confirmed on his admission to the hospital) the Viceroy suggested to the Secretary of State, might "prove a blessing in disguise."¹¹⁵ However, he also warned, "there is a weak Civil Service; Indianization has further weakened a cadre not too good in any circumstances; the Ministry is not a strong one; the food position is critical; and a pretty firm hand and much experience will be called for."¹¹⁶ Instead, the Governor of Bihar, Sir Thomas Rutherford, was drafted as a temporary replacement for Jack Herbert. That Rutherford had no experience with Bengal, and, in fact, little executive experience in India whatsoever, may have contradicted the Viceroy's preference, but the emergent situation, now receiving increasing international attention, demanded expedient action. Sir Thomas's appointment was signed by the King on the 4th of September and he assumed office on the 6th. At the same time, Linlithgow was pressing his Executive Council to declare a state of emergency in Bengal, dissolve the Ministry and grant the new interim Governor Emergency Rule in the province under Section 93 of the Defence of India Rules.

Discussions in the Council broke along communal lines, with Muslim members strongly opposed to deposing the Muslim League Ministry and Hindu Members arguing for just such an intervention. The acrimony of the debate discouraged the Viceroy from proceeding along strictly constitutional lines. Instead, he informed Amery, the path to Emergency Rule might be paved by more coercive means. Accordingly the Central Government might :

impose requirements on Ministerial Government in Bengal of such a nature either (a) that no self respecting Government could or would carry on consistently with them since they would represent such an interference with that Government's responsibility [that it would be forced to resign]; or (b) that e.g. the Nazimuddin

¹¹⁴ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 195

¹¹⁵ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 192

¹¹⁶ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 195

Government would lose its Hindu supporters and might no longer have the requisite majority in the House.¹¹⁷

But this move would be time consuming and tricky, particularly as communal sentiment in Bengal was becoming increasingly embittered in the context of famine. In fact, and as the Viceroy noted to Amery, the entire issue of Bengal's "food situation" was rapidly entrenching communal sentiment even at the central governmental level. The matter of suspending provincial government, then, had to be handled "with extreme care."¹¹⁸ In the meantime the Viceroy trusted to his new Governor the responsibility of getting Bengal "around the corner."¹¹⁹

But little was being done, either in Delhi or London to round off that long corner. Amery, heeding Linlithgow's increasingly strident concerns, pressed the War Cabinet again to consider immediate imports of food grains. In his initial discussion with Minister of War Transport, Lord Leathers, the Secretary of State was disheartened by the response. Leathers was unmoved by Amery's urgent appeal: the necessary shipping space simply could not be arranged. With Field Marshall Wavell as the incoming Viceroy, however, efforts were made to enlist high ranking military officers to back the demand for imports. Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army, Claude Auchinlek, convinced of the urgency of the situation, telegraphed Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Field Marshall Alan Brooke, to recruit high-ranking support in London. "So far as shipping is concerned," Auchinlek assured Brooke, "the import of food is to my mind just as if not more important than the imports of munitions."¹²⁰ The lack of any humanitarian language in Auchinlek's correspondence is no surprise. The question of what famine would mean to the war effort was the only code with which famine had been discussed for some time now. Brooke, together with the other Chiefs of Staff, presented a memorandum to the War Cabinet. In it they warned that "unless the necessary steps are taken to rectify the [food] situation, the efficient prosecution of the war against Japan by forces based in India will be gravely jeopardized and may well prove impossible."¹²¹ Amery authored his

¹¹⁷ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 231

¹¹⁸ Ibid

¹¹⁹ Ibid

¹²⁰ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Auchinlek to Brooke, p. 217

¹²¹ T.O.P. Vol. IV, War Cabinet Paper, p. 260

own report to the War Cabinet a few days later, urging, "the fact is to be faced that there are famine conditions in some Eastern Districts and that in Calcutta hundreds are dying of starvation."¹²² The situation, he wrote, was grim: "the conditions so described are becoming a menace to supply operations and to the movement of troops. The sight of famine conditions cannot but cause distress to the European troops..."¹²³

The War Cabinet met two days later, and with Winston Churchill as Chair, decided against the Viceroy's request for at least 500,000 tons of imports. Churchill, for his part, made the point that "the starvation of anyhow under-fed Bengalis is less serious than [that of] sturdy Greeks."¹²⁴ Of the 150,000 tons promised on August 4th, only 30,000 tons of Australian wheat had, as of yet, reached India. The 100,000 tons of barley promised from Iraq had also not yet been shipped. At length the War Cabinet agreed to add an additional 50,000 tons of foodgrains which, together with the 120,000 tons outstanding from the War Cabinet's decision of August 4th, would be delivered "by the end of 1943."¹²⁵

Starvation

In the countryside, as well as in Calcutta, the ravages of starvation and disease were becoming more and more horrific by the day. At the point of starvation, a body does not simply wither up and die. Rather, starvation is a complex battle of forces that excoriate, deform and eventually annihilate the bodies and minds that it is allowed to prey upon. It is a humiliating, indecent and apocalyptic *process* of deterioration and eventual demise. The body becomes weakened to the point of complex breakdown, with organs failing one by one, a host of opportunistic diseases taking root, and madness often accompanying. But as the official Surgeon General's report on the Bengal Famine concluded, "[though] very few patients suffered from starvation alone... this does not mean, however, that starvation was not the predominant feature... and it was often starvation which was the ultimate cause of death."¹²⁶ In acute form those starving were "mere skin and bone,

¹²² T.O.P. Vol. IV, War Cabinet Paper, p. 305

¹²³ Ibid, p. 304

¹²⁴ *The Leo Amery Diaries*, p. 943 (at the same time, due to war in Greece, famine conditions were impending there.)

¹²⁵ T.O.P. Vol. IV, War Cabinet, W.M. (43) 131st Conclusion, Minute 1, p. 319

¹²⁶ *Medical History of the Bengal Famine*, p. 13

dehydrated, with dry furred tongues, sores on lips, staring eyes, usually with... sores, or ulcers, frequently passing involuntary stools."¹²⁷ Scabies was especially a problem, with as many as 90% of victims covered from head to toe in ulcerous sores. Acute edema of limbs was also a common factor, and anemia was universal. They wandered the streets, the Surgeon General wrote, "clad in filthy rags, and a peculiar body odor emanating from them was often noticed. They were apathetic, oblivious of their surroundings or cleanliness and sometimes unconscious; the pulse was rapid and feeble, and temperature subnormal."¹²⁸ Meanwhile, within the body a battle to the death was raging. Even to a non-specialist unfamiliar with the anatomical terms below, the following description makes clear the havoc in process:

Cloudy swelling of the liver and kidneys is a common finding. Congestion of a marked degree is met with in sections of the lungs and the kidneys. In addition, in some of the cases, the lung alveoli present evidence of exudate, chiefly composed of mononuclear cells. The intestinal mucosa shows denudation of epithelium, particularly over the villi. The villi themselves are implicated with mononuclear cells to an abnormal extent. It appears that the cholesterol contents of the suprarenals diminish, as the usual vacuolated appearance in the appearance of the cells of the cortex is not conspicuous. Liver and spleen show evidence of congestion and in cases where malaria [is] consistent, deposits of haemozine pigments are also found in the cells of the reticula endothelial system.¹²⁹

Malaria was, more often than not, present. As were several other fevers, including kal-azar and those associated with acute dysentery and several prevalent pulmonary diseases. A condition known as "famine diarrhea," which leads to an escalated pace of wasting and is extremely difficult to treat, was likewise endemic. Hookworms, round worms, and other intestinal parasites, also played their role in further devitalizing bodies. Cholera, and - increasingly - smallpox, also found the famine-stricken exceedingly easy prey. How so many actually *did* survive such conditions is really a wonder of human endurance.

But human endurance has its limits. Whether from the sheer horror of famine, or whether as a result of biological processes associated with famine (and most likely a combination of both), mental disorder and madness was yet another nagging and

¹²⁷ Ibid, p. 14

¹²⁸ Ibid

¹²⁹ Ibid, p. 121

widespread symptom of starvation. "One of the most distressing features of the famine," the Surgeon-General's office noted in retrospect, "was the mental attitude of the more advanced cases of starvation."¹³⁰ The report continues:

The more desperate cases of hunger became childish in mind, wandering from place to place in search of food, ransacking rubbish heaps, and sometimes absconding from hospital where food and relative comfort and security were obtainable... these unfortunates seemed to be guided by an instinct compelling them to move on in fruitless and erratic attempts to find food. Irritable and unreasonable, childish and apathetic, difficult to nurse and filthy in habit, the starving sometimes cried for food even when food was before them. In one destitute hospital an emaciated man was observed to be crying and snarling like an animal. He was sitting on a hospital bed with a brimming plate of rice and curry in front of him, making no attempt to eat. Enquiries revealed that he was crying for food. He could not realize that there was already ample food to eat in front of him and his instincts compelled him to cry for more and more food. Oblivious to his surroundings and more animal than human, emaciated, dry lips drawn back over decayed and septic teeth, coated tongue, uttering inhuman cries, filthy and scabrous, he represented the nadir of human misery and the epitome of famine.¹³¹

A report by the Calcutta University Anthropology Department, released towards the end of September, confirmed the now starkly manifest disintegration of the entire social fabric of Bengal due to famine as well. Across the province, a team of researchers had found, "husbands have driven away wives and wives have deserted ailing husbands; children have forsaken aged and disabled parents and parents have also left home in despair; brothers have turned deaf ears to the entreaties of hungry sisters, and widowed sisters, maintained for years together by their brothers, have departed at the time of direct need."¹³² In Malda a scene, the likes of which was becoming increasingly common by mid-September, was reported in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*:

One Bhogurdi Mandal of Lahapur, P.S. Nawabgunj, Malda, was charged under Sec. 302 I.P.C. for murdering his only son Mozaffar, aged about three years on September 16 on the ground of his inability to feed him and other members of the family, who, it is reported, had no food for 3 or 4 days. The accused was tried by District and Sessions Judge, Malda, and was found guilty by the jurors. He was sentenced to transportation for life but having regard to the tragic circumstances

¹³⁰ Ibid, p. 48

¹³¹ Ibid, p. 49

¹³² Survey of destitutes in an around Calcutta by Department of Anthropology, Calcutta University, issued September 27, 1943. In K.C. Ghosh, p. 83-4.

of the case the Judge recommended to the Government to exercise their prerogative of mercy.¹³³

On the 12th of September an Assistant Inspector of Police in Faridpur was brutally murdered by a mob when he tried to enforce a new (and again, ad hoc) Control Order.¹³⁴ The General Head-Quarters' own Weekly Intelligence Report had earlier confirmed that "cholera, small-pox and starvation are causing hundreds of deaths daily [in and around Dacca] and similar conditions prevail over a large area of East Bengal, and have given rise to widespread incidence of thefts and dacoities. Suicides and child-selling have also been reported."¹³⁵ On the 15th of September the United States Council General in Calcutta cabled to the U.S. Secretary of State in Washington. He wrote:

I would suggest to high-placed officials in Delhi, who deprecate the over-dramatization of the sufferings of the people of Bengal to pay a visit to the province... at one of the kitchens in Faridpur I noticed a man lapping up gruel like a dog. I saw abandoned children in the last stages of emaciation... a man vainly wandering for food collapsed on the doorsteps of the Collector's court room. As the body was being removed, a woman huddled in a corner thrust out a bundle and cried "take that also." It was her dead child...¹³⁶

Throughout the countryside corpses were piling up too fast to count or properly dispose of. In September, the District Relief Committee in Noakhali reported, "Men women and children are dying daily in great numbers, some on roads and at other public places. Disposal of the dead bodies has become a problem with the living. Sometimes dead bodies are thrown into the river instead of being properly buried or cremated."¹³⁷ In Dacca, the Associated Press reported, "cremation of Hindu dead bodies has become quite a problem for want of fuel. Dead bodies of destitute persons are often thrown into the river or buried."¹³⁸ In Midnapur a worker for the Friends' Ambulance Unit described the situation in mid-September vividly:

During the last fortnight there has not been a morning on which I have not seen, as I went out of the town on my jobs, dead bodies by the roadside. A fight between vultures and dogs is not a rare sight... disposal of dead bodies has

¹³³ *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, September 26, 1943

¹³⁴ Greenough (1982), p.121

¹³⁵ Extract from G.H.Q., India, Weekly Intelligence Report. Included in War Cabinet Paper W.P. (43) 407, reprinted in T.O.P. Vol. IV, p. 272

¹³⁶ Venkataramani, p. 30

¹³⁷ K.C. Ghosh, p. 108

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 109

become a problem. In the villages the affairs are worse; people are dying in large numbers of malaria and starvation. There are not enough able-bodied men to burn the dead, which often are just pushed into the nearest canal. If you go down the canal from Contai to Panipia, you will feel sick; for the bloated dead bodies you will see will be numerous.¹³⁹

"Sick Destitutes"

The image of Calcutta, however, remained of critical importance. The spectacle of famine could not continue to play out on center stage, and bodies could not be simply thrown into canals and ditches. Calcutta was now one of the most important supply-fronts in the entire Allied war effort, accounting for as much as 80% of the armament, textile and heavy machinery production used in the Asian theater. Hundreds of thousands of Allied troops were moving through the city to the front, and returning there on leave, fueling a thriving "rest and recreation" industry that included dance halls, restaurants, bars, and a mushrooming prostitution industry. Huge profits were being made, both in war-related industries and entertainment, and the city was, in fact, more cosmopolitan than ever before. By 1943, Calcutta, in Ian Stephens words:

was a great war-base... a vortex of humanity into which men doing war-jobs from all over the world, uniformed or not, were being sucked... American forces started arriving; and with their high living standards and total ignorance of India probably felt most alien of all. There were Chinese troops, some 30,000 or so, who'd passed through the Bengal-Assam hills on their retreat from Burma... and Chinese merchant seaman, some thousands too... there were Australian, New Zealand, and Canadian Air Force types... [and] coal-black troops from West Africa under British officers... and, of course, masses of young men from Britain of every social class... and (also) Indians, mostly from the subcontinent's North-West or South and therefore feeling almost as foreign in Bengal as the so-called white men.¹⁴⁰

Calcutta, in a definite sense was in the international spotlight. Famine, and the associated accumulation of famine stricken bodies on the city's streets, came as a dreadful inconvenience.

The Bengal Vagrancy Ordinance of 1943 had made little progress. Meanwhile, as conditions in the countryside continued to deteriorate, the influx of famished villagers into Calcutta only gained momentum. Bodies in the last stages of starvation were

¹³⁹ Ibid, p.

¹⁴⁰ Stephens, p. 102-103

removed to government hospitals, but facilities to cope with the flood of famine victims were vastly inadequate. Emaciated individuals and families on the move lined the roadways of Bengal in their thousands and converged on the already over-burdened city, collapsing on street corners and by-lanes, filling the air with plaintive moans for food, and dying in increasing numbers. Slit trenches dug for air-raid shelter became festering gutters where malaria mosquitoes bred in unimpeded abundance, and meanwhile the A.R.P. had commandeered vast quantities of bleaching powder for decontamination after possible gas attacks, which might have otherwise been used to sanitize the trenches.¹⁴¹ The A.R.P. air-raid shelters, which were being used now for famine relief, were likewise, filthy and ill-prepared.¹⁴² More than half of the tube wells sunk in 1941 for "emergency measures" were also out of order, and cholera was running rampant.¹⁴³ Sweepers, amongst the lowest of the social groups in Bengal, were themselves unable to obtain sufficient food at the prevailing prices and were deserting from their posts in search of subsistence elsewhere. Doms, the caste whose traditional role was the handling of corpses, were similarly (if ironically) rendered destitute, and were found to be in increasingly short supply.¹⁴⁴ And the number of corpses to be disposed of just kept rising.

Rutherford, on his arrival in Calcutta as the interim Governor, found the scenes in Calcutta "ghastly." The removal of the dead, in particular, presented, a delicate problem. That there were so many corpses piling up in Britain's "second city" was a politically sensitive issue. They represented a threat to "law and order." Accordingly, the State itself assumed custodial authority over all corpses, and the police remained in "constructive possession" of the dead.¹⁴⁵ Police officers, however, had little means to cope with the number of corpses which fell into their custody, and the bureaucratic necessities of disposal only further prolonged removal. Towards the end of August, therefore, two private organizations, the Hindu Satkar Samiti and the Anjuman Mofidul Islam, were contracted to dispose of corpses according to religious affiliation. Hindu corpses were taken to the burning ghats and Muslim bodies were taken to the burial grounds. How distinctions between "Hindus" and "Muslims" were made, given the

¹⁴¹ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of Col. E. Cotter, Public Health Commissioner, p. 386

¹⁴² *The Statesman*, "Corporation and Starvation," September 10, 1943

¹⁴³ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of D. Fraser, Inspector of Medical Services, p. 498

¹⁴⁴ Nanavati Papers, Memorandum of the Calcutta Relief Committee, p. 69

¹⁴⁵ Nanavati Papers, Memorandum of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation, p. 198

abject condition of the bodies at the time of death, however, is extremely difficult to comprehend.¹⁴⁶ Though in life these victims had been deprived of the barest means of survival or dignity - stripped of all local affiliation, dispossessed of all lands and possessions, and, indeed, due to the prevailing scarcity of cloth, all but naked, if not wholly so - in death they were still "Hindu" or "Muslim." All that was left of the dead, at least by official account then, was this one, assumably inextinguishable, marker.

Whatever the arrangements, delays in the disposal of corpses continued with unsightly and unsanitary consequences: rotting corpses on the streets of Calcutta continued to undermine "morale." Moreover, the official publication of the numbers of famine victims dying on the streets of Calcutta (however inaccurate¹⁴⁷) was extremely bad PR for the colonial government, particularly during wartime. Since *The Statesman* had published its pictures, "The Bengal Famine" had become an international news story. Corpses in Calcutta were easy fodder for the media frenzy. On the 9th of September, therefore, the government decided to withhold official death statistics from the press. Such statistics, the central government argued, could serve no particular purpose, and furthermore, in the midst of an acute paper shortage, newspapers might, indeed, "welcome" the suppression of statistics as an opportunity to save space on their front pages for more important stories.¹⁴⁸ Due to quick protest from the press, however, the order to withhold famine statistics was repealed after only two days. The statistics reported after the stop-order, however, were of a different kind. The word "starvation" had been removed, and the term "sick destitutes" was substituted. The number of "sick destitutes" who had died on the streets of Calcutta was accompanied by an appendix that assigned various causes of death to the corpses collected. Most of the deaths, in these

¹⁴⁶ Most of the "destitutes" were, at this point, wholly or partially naked. For adult males, circumcision may have been an indicator, but for women, and small children, it is difficult to understand how distinctions were made.

¹⁴⁷ In its daily publication of the official statistics *The Statesman* noted that there was a conspicuous "uncertainty" regarding the official numbers, which (ostensibly) accounted for bodies disposed of by the Police Corpse Disposal Squad, and the two private organizations. The A.R.P. was also disposing of bodies at the time, and these numbers were not included, nor is there any record of how corpses collected by the A.R.P. were disposed of. Given that the government had every reason to *underestimate* the number of corpses collected from the streets of Calcutta, it is fairly safe to assume that the actual deaths in the city were considerably higher than reported.

¹⁴⁸ *The Statesman*, "Lessons in Secrecy," September 14, 1943

new reports, were euphemistically attributed to "chronic ailments, neglected in the past."¹⁴⁹ This, presumably, did not mean hunger.

Those still living on the streets of Calcutta posed an even more complicated problem. Despite his efforts, Rutherford admitted to the Viceroy on the 23rd of September that little progress had been made in "forcibly removing" destitute immigrants from the streets of Calcutta, due, he said "to preoccupation with [the] Assembly which was a riot yesterday."¹⁵⁰ The "riot" in the Assembly, predictably, revolved around relief measures, Ispahani's purchasing, and charges that the "opposition" was intentionally creating panic in rice markets. The budget debate was stalled and walk-outs and shouting matches continued for the next several days. Rutherford, frustrated with the antics in the Assembly, was pressing for emergency powers to circumvent their authority. A separate Relief Commissioner was appointed, and the task of "cleaning up" Calcutta was given top priority. On the 28th of September, the Bengal Council (Governor's advisory committee) passed yet another Vagrants Bill, giving Government sweeping powers to round up "sick destitutes" in Calcutta. The Council further urged that the A.R.P. and Civic Guards be used energetically in the campaign.¹⁵¹ In a related effort, Mr. O.M. Martin, I.C.S., the newly appointed Relief Commissioner, issued an appeal to "legitimate" residents of Calcutta on October 1st, requesting them to "refrain from indiscriminate charity" that would only encourage the "sick destitutes." Poor houses outside the city, he assured Calcuttans, were being rushed into operation, and relief kitchens in the city, in the meantime, were sufficient. "These unfortunates," Martin suggested, "are now more in want of shelter than food... As poor houses are established, one after another", he added, "it will be advisable to curtail the number of food kitchens so that vagrants may become accustomed to look for relief in the poor houses rather than in other places."¹⁵²

In other places, however, famine deaths were becoming too numerous to properly count. Newspapers reported deaths from starvation in 25 of the 27 districts in Bengal through October 11th.¹⁵³ Rice had all but vanished from local markets, and villages in

¹⁴⁹ Ibid

¹⁵⁰ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Rutherford to Linlithgow (in Linlithgow to Amery), p. 316

¹⁵¹ *The Statesman*, Bengal Council Passes Vagrants Bill," September 29, 1943

¹⁵² Ibid

¹⁵³ See T.O.P. Vol. IV, Enclosure to No. 180, p. 399

many districts had already become hollowed out by famine. On the 1st of October the Associated Press reported from a village in the Dacca Division:

An unclaimed dead body of a Hindu boy of about 12 years partly devoured by jackals and vultures was found yesterday morning lying in front of the Government Grain Shop near Chashara Police Outpost at Narayangunj. It is suspected that the boy was molested by jackals and vultures in the preceding night when he was in a precarious condition owing to starvation.¹⁵⁴

In Burdwan a similar scene was reported by the united Press, "the dead body of a famished man was found almost entirely eaten up by vultures and lying by the side of Banisagar tank... the body was removed by police to the burning ghat."¹⁵⁵ In Faridpur, the new District Magistrate, F. A. Karim, had arrived to find the streets "absolutely choked with famine-stricken people." On one street corner an old man had collapsed. Karim approached and looked into the man's glazed eyes sadly, while all around him "people were laughing and saying 'The old fellow is dying! The old fellow is dying!'"¹⁵⁶ Death had become a public spectacle, and little more. *Biplabi* reported from Midnapur that on October 10th "a man driven by hunger was eating foodgrains scattered along the railway track... seeing this members of the railway police started pelting him with stones. The man started running and fell into a ditch alongside the track where he died."¹⁵⁷

Round-ups and Resistance

Meanwhile, by the beginning of October, Viceroy Linlithgow was making preparation for his departure from Delhi after his seven and a half year tenure as Governor-General of India. In a desultory report to Amery on October 14th he looked forward to seeing the Secretary of State in person in London. "Then... I shall not propose to weary you," he wrote, "with arguments or representations on any aspect of the Indian problem; for I shall be *functus*,¹⁵⁸ and it will be for my successor to carry the burden. But broadly speaking, I can feel as I lay down this great charge that I leave the country in pretty good trim."¹⁵⁹ Secretary of State Amery, for his part, was still in the hot seat. On

¹⁵⁴ K.C. Ghosh, p. 86-7

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 91

¹⁵⁶ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of F.A. Karim, p. 1375

¹⁵⁷ *Biplabi*, p. 297

¹⁵⁸ *functus officio*: finished with official duty

¹⁵⁹ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 349

the 14th of October he appeared before the British Parliament and estimated that as many as 1,000 people were dying a week in Bengal (including Calcutta.) This absurdly low figure drew rapid fire from the Indian and international press alike. *The Statesman* wrote that "the Secretary of State for India seems to be a strangely misinformed man."¹⁶⁰ Acting Bengal Governor, Rutherford telegraphed Amery to warn him of the stir that his statement had created and admitted that his own numbers, reported to London, had perhaps been misconstrued. After more carefully considering the statistics, it was clear that no fewer than 9,000 people were dying "due directly or indirectly to starvation" *each day*.¹⁶¹

Meanwhile Churchill was the keynote speaker at a farewell ball for Field Marshall Wavell, Linlithgow's replacement. In his speech Churchill valorized Britain's colonial mission in India in grandiloquent terms, heeding the world as a whole to "recognize the great achievements of Britain in India."¹⁶² Famines, he suggested, had passed away, and pestilence had been defeated. With the "incredible result," Churchill continued, "[though] not by any means a satisfactory result or a beneficial result, [that] in ten years the population of India, under the 'blighting' rule of Britain, [had] increased by 50 million - 50 million!"¹⁶³ Enthralled at the Prime Minister's exuberant judgment, the gathering broke into a chorus of enthusiastic applause.

Wavell himself was known to be a rather dry and austere man, unimpressed by ceremony and unafraid to speak his own mind. He was sworn in on the 20th of October, and set to work on the famine situation at once. He, like Linlithgow, judged clearing Calcutta to be of primary importance, but (in fairness) he also seems to have been the first British official to view the loss of innocent life in Bengal as a moving priority as well. He set up a Distress Relief Fund within days of assuming office and, whereas Linlithgow had failed to visit Bengal himself at any time during the famine, Wavell was "off to Calcutta" within a week to assess the situation first hand.¹⁶⁴ Wavell landed in Calcutta on the afternoon of the 26th and began an "incognito" tour of the city that same evening. He met with "sick destitutes" himself, some of whom, despite the effort to

¹⁶⁰ *The Statesman*, "The Death-Roll," October 16th, 1943

¹⁶¹ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Rutherford to Amery, p. 399

¹⁶² T.O.P. Vol. IV, Churchill's Speech at Farewell to Wavell, p. 376

¹⁶³ *Ibid*

¹⁶⁴ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 407

disguise his rank, were "scared by the visit, and ran away... others, including those in very bad condition, were indifferent."¹⁶⁵ The next day, again traveling "incognito," the Viceroy flew out to Midnapur to survey relief centers, emergency hospitals and general conditions there. On the following day, shaken by what he had seen, the new Viceroy announced that full use of military resources would be expended to mobilize immediate and extensive famine relief efforts in Bengal.¹⁶⁶

A day earlier, while the Viceroy was touring Midnapur, the Governor - having won support from the Ministry - promulgated the Bengal Destitute Persons (Repatriation and Relief) Ordinance. This new ordinance empowered: "any officer authorized by Government to apprehend any person who, in the opinion of such officer, is a destitute, and detain him or her in a place provided for the purpose until the person is repatriated."¹⁶⁷ Temporary collecting centers, basically detention camps for "sick destitutes," could house up to 8,000 people. A more permanent facility north of Calcutta, near the army barracks at Dum Dum, was prepared for the uptake of 4,000 persons immediately. These were the "poor houses" that the Relief Commissioner promised would be opened "one after another." Those in the most acute stage of starvation were to be removed to hospitals immediately, though in Calcutta only 2000 hospital beds were sanctioned for famine victims. In the next three days the police, aided by A.R.P. officers - and other deputized agents of the state¹⁶⁸ - rounded up as many as 3,000 "destitutes" from the streets of Calcutta and moved them to Government "reception centers."¹⁶⁹

The initial round up of only 3,000 famine sufferers, however, proved a disappointment to authorities. Government had estimated that there were at least 150,000 "sick destitutes" clogging the thoroughfares and by-lanes of Calcutta, and the pace of removal needed to be vastly accelerated.¹⁷⁰ The chief problem, Relief Commissioner, O.M. Martin explained, was that "people did not want to go into shelters."¹⁷¹ Though they had been "rescued" by the government and taken to "poor houses" where "they got

¹⁶⁵ *The Statesman*, "Lord Wavell Sees Plight of Destitutes in Calcutta," October 27, 1943

¹⁶⁶ *The Statesman*, "Viceroy to Approach Army for Aid in Famine Relief," October 29, 1943

¹⁶⁷ K.C. Ghosh, p. 123

¹⁶⁸ It was noted in the press release that the government was also receiving "non-official aid" with the roundups, though few specifics of the organizations involved was forthcoming.

¹⁶⁹ *The Statesman*, "Repatriating Calcutta Destitutes," November 1, 1943

¹⁷⁰ *The Statesman*, "Policy of Repatriation of Destitutes," November 6, 1943

¹⁷¹ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of O. M. Martin, p. 529

two good meals a day and also got clothes - they kept running away."¹⁷² That people so thoroughly depleted by the ravages of famine, having traveled a perilous journey in search of bare sustenance, and having watched so many die along the way - family members, friends and strangers - were able, with the last of their energy, to resist the authority of the state by such measures, is again, an important counter-point to all studies that have asserted the "passivity" with which famine sufferers perished. Government food kitchens in the "repatriation camps" were, in fact, severely under-staffed and ill-equipped. Moreover, the rations given amounted to approximately 800 calories per day - a quantity far from sufficient, or even humane.¹⁷³ "You pretend to keep people alive by subsisting on that ration," T. G. Davies of the Friends Ambulance Unit decried, "but all the time [you are] slowly starving [them] to extinction."¹⁷⁴ Escape from such facilities surely saved lives.

In the first few days the police, with the assistance of the A.R.P., tried to use "persuasion" with reluctant destitutes, but after five more days they had only managed to round up an additional 7,000. Consequently, on the 5th of November the Bengal Government announced in a press release that, of necessity, stricter measures would be adopted. Because their efforts, so far, had "produced negligible results," and the "sick destitutes" continued to resist, force would have to be used to collect and detain them. This measure, it was explained, was "in the interest of the destitutes themselves as well as of the citizens of Calcutta."¹⁷⁵ Blame for the resistance shown by famine victims, in the press release, was allotted to opponents of the government, who were organizing to "defeat Government's policy of persuading destitutes to leave the streets, by spreading canards among them." The objectives of these "designing persons," it was further claimed, was that "of keeping Calcutta streets full of destitutes so that the situation may be exploited for political and other purposes."¹⁷⁶ With this new policy outlined, "destitute repatriation" took on the aspect of forcible round-ups of famine stricken men, women and children, by police, civil defence, and military personnel in broad daylight,

¹⁷² Ibid

¹⁷³ *Medical History of the Bengal Famine*, p. 16

¹⁷⁴ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of T. G. Davies, p. 1069

¹⁷⁵ *The Statesman*, "Policy of Repatriation of Destitutes," November 6, 1943

¹⁷⁶ Ibid

roving the streets of Calcutta in official vans and lorries, often chasing down their targets and loading them into removal vehicles by main force, against active resistance.

That rumors continued to spread is not entirely surprising. B. K. Guha, Relief Co-ordination Officer in charge of collecting destitutes, for one, was having a hard time convincing the starving, half-naked, and diseased wretches that he was assigned to "repatriate," that Government was operating in their best interest. Even children remained skeptical and resisted state custody. When an orphanage for famine refugees had been set up outside Calcutta, it fell to Guha to find orphans to occupy it. From Calcutta he was assigned to send eight or ten children. After three or four days, however, he became increasingly frustrated: "at first some of the orphans were persuaded to agree, but thereafter they would not go and when we inquired what was the reason, we were told that they had been told that they were being sent to Asansol and if they went they would be killed."¹⁷⁷ For adults, Guha sadly informed the Famine Enquiry Commission, suspicions were equally hard to suppress. Many of the "sick destitutes" had fixed on the idea, he lamented, that "Government [would] take you to these centers and from there send you to Arakan or Assam [the war front]... and you would be sacrificed there."¹⁷⁸ When asked who could have been spreading these rumors, Guha confessed that he could not be sure, but they were prevalent. To some extent these apprehensions, however, seem to have been based on fact.

Royal Engineer, Alan Shaw, stationed with 345 Company Command, was working on the Imphal Road in the vicinity of Assam. He remembers that during the famine:

the streets of Calcutta were cleared of starving men who were formed into labor battalions and sent up the Line of Control. About two hundred of these unfortunates were placed under 345 Company command and occupied additional bamboo huts in our lines. We were ordered to use them for clearing jungle instead of the usual teams of Indian Tea Association laborers of which there was a battalion of one thousand every ten miles along the Imphal Road, each commanded by an ex tea planter Indian Army Captain. The "refugees" were accommodated in bamboo huts separate from our troop lines, but benefiting from the same carefully chlorinated drinking water and sanitary arrangements. At first they were pathetic sights, too weak with starvation to do useful work. But even after months of proper feeding most had little inclination to work, were a potential

¹⁷⁷ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of B. K. Guha, p. 772

¹⁷⁸ Ibid

threat to military discipline, and required more supervision than we could afford.¹⁷⁹

On the open streets of Calcutta, Guha suffered similar disciplinary challenges. There was reluctance on the part of the destitutes to go to the poor houses, he told the Famine Enquiry Commission, "when we used to come with police lorries, they used to get frightened, the mother would run in one direction and the child in another."¹⁸⁰ The separation of families, particularly of mothers and children, was a recurrent problem that created chaos and protest during removal operations. As O. M. Martin testified, however, that such dislocation were all but inevitable: "when we picked up people under compulsion it very often happened that some persons were separated from their families... if anybody on the street said that his daughter or wife was lost, he was told to go to that particular poor house [set up for women and girls separated from families] and find her out."¹⁸¹ At length Guha discovered that the "dispersal of families" was particularly bad public relations; and so his organization had to change tactics and began operating under the cover of night. In this way, he remembered, "sometimes we found them sleeping together and then we could collect the whole family."¹⁸²

The determinations of who were, indeed, "sick destitutes" were, moreover, imperfect at best. The testimony of a representative of the All-India Women's Conference Relief Committee is illustrative. "A maid servant's daughter in my sister's family," Dr. Maitreyee Bose told the Enquiry Commission, "was sitting on the doorstep waiting for her mother to finish her job. A lorry came and took her forcibly in sight of the mother, thinking her to be a destitute child. No one would listen that she was not a destitute child. It was afterwards, with the help of A.R.P. officers, that the mother and child were reunited."¹⁸³ With maid servants and many other menial workers in Calcutta making only starvation wages themselves, such mistakes were, perhaps, not uncommon. How many of Calcutta's "own" poor were picked up and locked in poor houses under the "repatriation" campaign, however, remains unknown.

¹⁷⁹ Alan Shaw, archived in connection with the BBC oral history project "WW2 People's War." Found at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar/user/89/u894689.shtml> (Last accessed May 20, 2010, 7:49 PM)

¹⁸⁰ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of B. K. Guha, p. 772

¹⁸¹ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of O. M. Martin, p. 534

¹⁸² Nanavati Papers, Testimony of B. K. Guha, p. 772

¹⁸³ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of Representatives of the All-India Women's Conference Relief Committee, p. 783

In order to demonstrate that undue force was *not* used during the round-ups, B. K. Guha related the following rather revealing, if disjointed, story to the Famine Enquiry Commission:

I had information that a large number of destitutes had collected in South Calcutta, and I was asked to take charge of them because they had gathered in the portico of a retired government official and made the place filthy. He could not drive them out. The destitutes consisted of mother, children and grown up girls. On seeing us the police lorry, they all dispersed and raised a hue and cry. I was surprised at this. I tried my best to collect them. They ran into an adjoining house. I approached the lady of the house and explained my mission to her. She persuaded them to board our lorry. While in the lorry they shouted and cried and actually created a scene. They were shouting that they were being killed. As a matter of fact, if any criminal charges were to be laid, it should be against me personally.

Once in the poor houses, the destitutes continued to create scenes; refusing food, resisting regimens, stealing blankets and other items, and continuously attempting to escape. As Relief Commissioner, O. M. Martin, explained, there was a certain "mental demoralization... that made [the] problem very difficult." The situation may have been worst of all with children.

The wandering habit amongst the children," Martin noted, "was difficult to be stopped. Famine orphanages had to have prison rooms. Children - skin and bone - had got into the habit of feeding like dogs. You tried to give them a decent meal, but they would break away and start wandering about and eat filth. You had to lock them up in a special room... they [had] developed the mentality of wandering. People got awfully cruel."¹⁸⁴

Imagination fails when attempting to fill in the silence between the penultimate period and the last, and chilling sentence with which O. M. Martin concluded his testimony before the Famine Enquiry Commission.

In the context of famine, establishing a "right" to remain in Calcutta often meant the difference between life and death. A right to Calcutta meant a territorial claim. The round up and removal of "sick destitutes" from the streets was, in this sense, only a more stark and authoritarian means of establishing "priority." The question of who "belonged" in Calcutta and who did not, who was to be granted residence and who removed, who was "essential" and who disposable - all these had been central to patrolling the urban

¹⁸⁴ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of O. M. Martin, p. 540

space of Calcutta at least since the onset of the war. Famine only heightened the stakes of "belonging." These same question, thus intensified during famine, would continue to breed contention and violence for many years to come.

Bengal in Ruins

"Repatriation," in any case, was a shibboleth. By November of 1943, much of the countryside of Bengal had been decimated. There was very little to go back *to*. Lands and meager possessions had been sold off in mass, and deaths and desertions had emptied out entire regions. No accurate statistics of deaths were available, but mortality figures compiled at a later date have conformed that mortality during this period was immense.¹⁸⁵ The low-paid village *chowkidars*, who kept vital statistics in normal times, themselves had died or deserted in numbers.¹⁸⁶ Where rice was available at all, its price was out of reach of the majority of population. Starvation had already claimed many hundreds of thousands of lives, and malaria and cholera were running rampant, preying on already debilitated survivors and beginning to wipe out those who had so far survived starvation.

A special correspondent from *The Statesman* went on a tour of the 24 Parganas south of Calcutta, from where many of the "sick destitutes" in Calcutta had come. He found the region starkly depopulated. "The countryside at present," he wrote, "tells a strange story of desertion and despair."¹⁸⁷ The long-awaited *aman* crop was ripening, he wrote, "but who will harvest it?" The peasant who in normal times would be looking forward to the harvest, the correspondent wrote, "sits on his doorstep, bewailing his lost family, and in many cases is too tired and too disease-ridden to take courage and hope out of the fast-ripening paddy."¹⁸⁸ In a typical village the reporter found, "all the members of families lying ill with malaria or dysentery and no one to tend them," other houses he

¹⁸⁵ The Famine Enquiry Commission's *Report on Bengal* pegged the "excess mortality" for the second half of 1943 at 1,000,000 (p. 108-9.) This estimate is the most conservative available. The University of Calcutta Anthropology Department, after extensive surveys, put the toll at 3.5 million for 1943. And exhaustive analysis of these numbers is contained in Amartya Sen's, *Poverty and Famines*, "Famine Mortality: A Case Study."

¹⁸⁶ *Report on Bengal*, p. 109

¹⁸⁷ *The Statesman*, "The Deserted Village," November 21, 1943

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid*

found, "lying desolate as all the occupants had died."¹⁸⁹ The idea of "repatriation" under such conditions could have very little meaning.

Scenes in Midnapur were similar. In November the artist Chittaprosad made his epic journey through the district, composing sketches of famine victims that were to become iconic with the Bengal Famine. Chittaprosad, hailing from Chittagong, had been contributing pen and ink drawings to the Bengali communist weekly *Janayuddha* for some time. During the early months of 1943 he began focusing his attention on the food administration in Bengal, composing satirical sketches of the nexus between government employees, control shops and black marketeers. As conditions in the province continued to deteriorate, his sketches turned towards depicting the sufferings of famine victims. In his journey through Midnapur Chittaprosad, like *The Statesman* correspondent, found village after village depopulated and the few survivors reeling in despair and disease. In the larger towns "destitutes" had gathered hoping to find food. In Midnapur town he found a small family who had abandoned their village in June. When asked when they would go back, they told the artist,

To speak the truth, babu, with what hopes can we go back to our village? Last year's harvest was not poor, yet we couldn't get food in our own village. Two days after harvesting, the paddy disappeared. When we say we *will* go back to our village, it is because we are afraid of the military. No one knows where they will send us or the children if they catch us. What use is it to us if they send us back to our village?¹⁹⁰

Chittaprosad published this, and his other accounts, together with his sketches from his tour in Midnapur in a book entitled *Hungry Bengal* shortly after his return from the district. The book was quickly banned by the Government of India and 5,000 copies were confiscated and destroyed.¹⁹¹

In the worse hit districts of eastern Bengal, where mortality was still higher, the scenes were, undoubtedly, still more desolate. In certain sub-divisions in Barisal, Tippera, Faridpur and Chittagong, a careful study by the Indian Statistical Institute estimated that close to or above 10% of the population had been entirely wiped out in

¹⁸⁹ Ibid

¹⁹⁰ *Hungry Bengal*, p. 3

¹⁹¹ Nikhil Sarkar, p. 5

1943 alone.¹⁹² The Institutes estimates were that across the province two million people had died of famine in 1943, most in just a few short months.¹⁹³ Noted Bengali social reformer, Jnananjan Niyogi, surveyed the grim landscape and lamented:

Gone are the cultivators, gone are the householders, rice is gone from the houses. There are no longer cows to give milk. The deities are starving, for there is no worshipful service. The cultivators have sold their draft cattle for the sake of subsistence and somehow manage to survive, yet even they don't understand how to carry on. The ponds have dried up, turning to mud. Water is scarce and pure water completely lacking. Numerous diseases have broken out, and the former spontaneous joy of the Bengalis is absolutely ruined... the noose of poverty has entangled them body and soul, and they have become paralyzed.¹⁹⁴

Bengal was in ruins.

The Good Viceroy

But substantial help, no matter how late, and how insufficient relative to the immensity of the catastrophe that had befallen Bengal, was on its way. Field Marshall Wavell was good to his word, and perhaps more importantly, understood the famine to be a humanitarian disaster that demanded immediate and large-scale action. The new Viceroy had been shocked at the inertia and apathy which he had found in Calcutta. Acting Governor, Sir Thomas Rutherford, was unhappy with his assignment and was only biding his time until he could be relieved of the monstrosity of Bengal and return to Bihar.¹⁹⁵ Wavell found him to be "second rate, at best" and told the Secretary of State, "I do not think he is really trying very hard in Bengal.. and the impression he left on me was very poor."¹⁹⁶ The Bengal Ministry, meanwhile was tying itself in knots, with Ministers "more concerned in their political rivalries than with the famine."¹⁹⁷ And in London, there was only more denial.

The very day he returned from Bengal, Wavell telegraphed the Commander-in-Chief for India and requested immediate, and substantial, military assistance to cope with famine in Bengal. His request was granted without hesitation, and on the second of

¹⁹² Greenough (1982), Appendix C, p. 311

¹⁹³ Ibid, p. 309

¹⁹⁴ Quoted in Greenough (1982), p. 182

¹⁹⁵ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 413

¹⁹⁶ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 494

¹⁹⁷ *The Viceroy's Journal*, p. 39

November he could inform the India Office in London that operations were already underway. Commander in Charge of the Eastern Command, General Mosley Mayne was put in general charge of military aid to Bengal and Major-General A.V. T. Wakely, was put in command of the all-important movement of supplies. At their disposal was a full Division of British troops, comprised of 15,000 soldiers. Military lorries, priority rail arrangements, and the Royal Air Force, all of which were already well represented in the region, were also deployed. Major-General Wakely, putting the lie to statements made both by the Bengal Government and the later Famine Enquiry Commission report, was able to quickly hire 7,000 country boats on contract to facilitate the movement of relief into remote, riverine districts.¹⁹⁸

Only three days after his return to Delhi, then, Wavell could inform London that troops were being located throughout the hardest hit districts and supplies were moving out of Calcutta and into the countryside at pace. Additionally, arrangements were being made for large-scale medical relief, and materials for temporary shelters for the homeless were being sent. The alacrity with which Wavell organized these relief efforts was, at once, a testimony to his own initiative, as well as a very troubling contrast to the apathy and indifference with which at least a million people had already been left to starve. Linlithgow himself, in his discussions with Wavell before turning over authority, had predicted that as many as one and a half million were likely to die of famine in Bengal before the end of 1943, which, he admitted, "would be getting off better than [I] had thought was possible."¹⁹⁹ In the end, there is no question that Wavell's prompt and comprehensive engagement saved an inestimable number of lives, but the situation in Bengal had been allowed to deteriorate to such a degree that the relief initiated in November of 1943, for many, was far too little and far too late. And the cards were still stacked against Wavell's own initiative.

The War Cabinet again met on November 10th, with "The Bengal Famine" now an international sensation. Very little of that famous Iraqi barley had made its way to Bengal, and because hostilities in the Middle-East had taken a turn for the worse, the

¹⁹⁸ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of Major-General Wakely, p. 1019

¹⁹⁹ *The Viceroy's Journal*, p. 34

remainder of the shipment was doubtful.²⁰⁰ The Secretary of State asked for commitment of 50,000 tons of food grains per month for the forthcoming year, together with an additional 50,000 tons from Australia for immediate shipment. When the War Cabinet met, however, with the Prime Minister, again "in the Chair," Churchill broke into "a preliminary flourish on Indians breeding like rabbits"²⁰¹ and, in the end, the Minister of War Transport, Lord Leathers, found Amery's request for immediate shipments "impracticable."²⁰² It was furthermore "made clear" that there could be no promise to undertake "a long-term program" of food grain shipments to India.

At the same meeting, a Canadian offer for the immediate shipment of 100,000 tons of wheat to India was considered. Canadian Prime Minister, McKenzie King, had informed Amery that the wheat was available and the ship was ready to be loaded and could depart on the 12th.²⁰³ The trouble was, Amery wrote in his journal, "that Winston so dislikes India and all to do with it that he can see nothing but waste of shipping space."²⁰⁴ Leathers concurred with Churchill that Canadian shipping could be utilized to better effect, and the War Cabinet "invited" the Prime Minister to send King an immediate telegram "deprecating the proposed allocation of a Canadian ship."²⁰⁵ Which he did - and the shipment was promptly cancelled.

Meanwhile, Amery was making the best of Wavell's decisive action. On November 11th he informed the House of Commons that the "military machinery for detailed distribution [was] already working," and surmised that "there [was] good reason to be satisfied with the progress made."²⁰⁶ Military relief programs were operating efficiently and aid was getting into the far reaches of the Bengal countryside. Even mules were being used to pack rice into remote villages.²⁰⁷ Just as importantly, the *aman* crop was fast ripening and it looked to be a healthy and abundant harvest. Amery reported to Wavell that his efforts had made an excellent impression in England.²⁰⁸ To the Viceroy's

²⁰⁰ T.O.P. Vol. IV, War Cabinet Paper W.P. (43) 504, p. 450

²⁰¹ *The Leo Amery Diaries*, p. 950

²⁰² *Ibid*

²⁰³ *Ibid*

²⁰⁴ *Ibid*, p. 951

²⁰⁵ T.O.P. Vol. IV, War Cabinet W.M. (43) 152nd Conclusion, Minute 3, p. 466

²⁰⁶ *The Statesman*, "Mr. Amery on Famine Relief Work," November 12, 1943

²⁰⁷ *The Statesman*, "Food Distribution in Bengal," November 13, 1943

²⁰⁸ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Amery to Wavell, p. 452

own continuing dissatisfaction with how things were progressing, the Secretary of State responded sympathetically, "It is true that you draw a pretty disquieting picture of the Bengal food situation, of the epidemics that may follow, of Rutherford's fade-out, and of the hopeless corruption and inefficiency of the Bengal administration at large, but I do feel that you are really taking hold and that your initiative, both through the Army and through the Governors, will get things into ship-shape condition before it is too late."²⁰⁹ At what point the situation might have been understood as "too late" is anybody's guess. Disease was running rampant, quinine, for treating malaria was extremely scarce, cholera was epidemic, the public health system of Bengal was in shambles, the price of rice was still highly elevated, hundreds of thousand, if not millions had already died, millions more had been weakened by hunger to the point of collapse, the Bengal Ministry was still entangled in embittered debate, no rationing scheme had yet been established, starvation was still claiming thousands of lives, the "cloth famine" had practically denuded the entire suffering population of Bengal, and the cold season was on its way.

But by the first week of December, Calcutta had been largely cleared of "sick destitutes," and the Secretary of State for India was assuring the House of Commons that progress was being made. Major-General D. Stuart, who had been put in charge of famine relief, announced on December 4th that, due to Government's efforts, there was now "no shortage of food in the majority of the famine areas."²¹⁰ In official imagination the Bengal Famine was all-but over. On the ground in Bengal, however, imagination could only go so far.

But on December 5th 1943 war again took center stage.

²⁰⁹ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Amery to Wavell, p. 485

²¹⁰ *The Statesman*, "Army's Help n Relief Work," December 5, 1943

Chapter Five: Japan Attacks

The Forgotten Chapter

Analysis of the social, economic and political impact of World War II on India, as Indivar Kamtekar has rightly pointed out,¹ has often been relegated to footnotes in the history of modern India. With attention more frequently focused on the macro-politics of nationalism, the Pakistan movement, negotiations for self-rule, and the mass movements associated with the independence struggle, the extent to which war shaped priorities, national alliances, and imperial policy in India during the 1940s has been largely overlooked. The impact of World War II, in this sense, has been a somewhat forgotten chapter in the annals of colonial India. And yet, as argued above, whatever were the concerns, contentions or calamities that confronted the Indian population during the period; the functioning of the colonial state remained deeply enmeshed in a calculus of *total war*. Defence, mobilization, security, and "morale" remained the primary mantras of authority in India - and particularly in Bengal - throughout the first half of the decade, and the exigencies of war allowed an authoritarian resolve that served to accentuate and, in fact, accelerate the entrenched racist dynamics of colonial rule - even as Empire itself was crumbling. In this sense, and as Kamtekar has argued, "the state's new burst of energy and activity [with the outbreak of war] provides a flare of light enabling us to see its features more clearly."²

The spotlight of war was nowhere in India as bright as it was in Calcutta. On the frontlines of the war, particularly after the fall of Burma, Calcutta, by 1943, was critical to the Allied fight against Japan - the primary staging ground for the push east against a formidable enemy. Governmental priorities in Bengal, from the beginning of the war,

¹ See the introduction to Kamtekar's "A Different War Dance: State and Class in India, 1939-1945" in *Past and Present*, No. 176 (August 2002) pp. 187-221

² Kamtekar (August 2002), p. 189

were consistently established in direct relation to overarching concerns of "defense." As many as 200,000 Bengalis were recruited into the A.R.P., Civic Guards and Home Guards to form an ad hoc provincial police force under the ambiguous banner of "security." Coastal regions had been "denied" transportation facilities, as well as stores of food grains. Manipulation of provincial politics had destabilized the organs of self-rule, and commercial firms, reaping record profits in war-related industries, had scoured the countryside to appropriate supplies of rice for their mushrooming workforces. Government partnered with commercial interests in consecutive rice procurement schemes, that created panic and distrust throughout the province. And, finally, famine, in its most acute form, had arisen out of the mix of wartime inflation, commercial and governmental myopia, and administrative chaos - devastating the province and creating social, political, and economic chaos that would haunt Bengal for many years to come. And yet, in most histories of the period, the impact of war on the socio-political configuration of pre-independence Bengal has been all but ignored. That Calcutta itself was bombed is seldom mentioned, and at times is completely forgotten.

This fact was extremely surprising to me when I began my research on this period. From a young age I had been acutely aware of the Japanese bombings of Calcutta during World War II, having heard stories from my father about the air raids many times; the terrifying sound of the bombers overhead and the earth shaking concussions of heavy explosive shells that cracked foundations and shattered windows. Listening to my father's stories, I had internalized the sudden impact of the bombs, the ear splitting report, and the dust spattered darkness between attacks, as universally understood facts. The bombings, I also knew, continued to haunt my father. They recurred in his dreams and continued to awake a whole family, 6,000 miles and several decades removed from 1943 Calcutta.

He was 11 when Calcutta was first bombed. The house that he lived in at the time, my grandfather's house, was less than a mile from the Kidderpore docks. The docks, as I later learned, had been the primary target of Japanese attacks. Having been in such close proximity to the bombings, they had made a lasting impression on my father. The house shook, the foundation cracked, and the sky burst into flames. The sound of the

first bombs smashing into the docks, had deafened my father for several days. After the first round of bombings, each and every air raid warning, thereafter, sent him into paroxysms of fear. Sometimes he cried too much and had to be physically suppressed to maintain silence during black-outs. His sister-in-law, only a few years his senior - a child herself at the time - remembered many years later that he had been a "coward."³

My own inherited impressions of the bombings, learned from my father's recounting - and perhaps even more importantly gleaned from the fear that continued to haunt him - was, perhaps, out of proportion with events. I have found nothing in the historical record that mentions the Calcutta bombings as anything but incidental and unimportant. Though the first bombings had spurred a panicked exodus from Calcutta and had resulted, also, in the forceful - and fateful - requisitioning of rice in the city, the bombs themselves had caused "little damage." The eighth and heaviest bombing, with which this chapter is concerned, did significantly more material damage, but, again, damage was reported (and has been re-reported) as "light." Yet, the impact that these bombings had on one 12-year old boy, continues to impress me. If the force of a few historically "incidental" bombs falling on a far away city, can imprint an impression on a small child strong enough to span generations and geographic specificity, then any judgment that dismisses that event as non-consequential is too narrow.

On December 5th, 1943, in the midst of a devastating famine, with hunger-stricken bodies still accumulating on Calcutta's streets, the city was bombed in broad daylight by two consecutive waves of Japanese aircraft. It was the heaviest bombing of the war. Even by London standards of the time, it had been a sizeable strike.⁴ With America now well entrenched in the Asian theater and the overall tide turning in the Allies favor "damage control" was efficient and the bombings have been understood, since that time, as peripheral, at best. The event does, however, shine a uniquely revealing "flare of light" on the nature of administration in Bengal at the time. Much of the prejudice, indifference and dehumanization that lay at the foundation of colonial ideology was crystallized, in microcosm, during this particular "emergency," and much of the rhetoric of concern for Indian welfare and security was revealed shallow. In this

³ Interview with Dolly Mukherjee

⁴ Ian Stephens suggests this in *Monsoon Morning*, p. 148

sense it is related, on a deep structural level, to both the famine that preceded it and to the continuing violence that followed. The air raid is thus a window into the barbarity of colonial rule at the twilight of empire.

The Port of Calcutta

The Calcutta docks are situated on the west side of the Hooghly river about a mile and a half downstream from the city center and 100 nautical miles upstream from the mouth of the river at the Bay of Bengal. In 1780, Colonel Henry Watson, Chief Engineer of the East India Company under Warren Hastings' Administration, received a Government grant of land to build the first deep water docks in Calcutta to supplement a series of jetties and moorings along the Hooghly that facilitated the East India Company's fast-growing trade in Bengal. This original grant for the docks project at Kidderpore was "for the establishment of wet and dry docks and of a marine yard, in which every facility should be created for building, repairing and equipping vessels of war, and merchantmen."⁵ In the coming decades, and into the 19th century, trade continued to increase and the docks at Kidderpore were fast becoming obsolete. In the early days of Company rule, trade with Bengal had consisted mostly of the export of finished textiles produced by highly skilled handloom artisans throughout the vast hinterland. Trade at that time, as such, was a fairly limited and select venture. Throughout the 19th century, however, as Bengal was increasingly de-industrialized, the extraction of large quantities of raw materials - particularly opium, cotton, coal, jute, indigo, oilseeds and tea - became the economic engine that fueled colonial profit. At the same time, piece goods, finished products and luxury items, were now being increasingly imported *into* India through the port facilities at Calcutta. With both exports and imports on the rise, the dock capacity at Kidderpore was proving insufficient.

By the later half of the nineteenth century, with the opening of the Suez Canal and innovations in steamship travel, international trade continued to grow exponentially and further strained Calcutta's capacities. Extensive work on the Indian railway system had been undertaken, and far reaches of the Indian sub-continent were now linked up with

⁵ Blechynden, p. 187

international markets. All three major railways lines, the East Indian Railway, the Eastern Bengal State Railway and the Bengal-Nagpur Railway converged on Calcutta, but the port still remained rudimentary, with just four jetties and an antiquated wharf system. In 1870 a Board of Port Commissioners was appointed to oversee the development of the docks to meet current needs. By the time the new docks opened in 1892, locks at the mouth of a greatly expanded basin protected the inland dock area from tidal fluctuations, and other improvements included an extensive network of storage sheds, mechanical cranes, and 27 deepwater berths able to accommodate larger seagoing vessels. By the time these developments were complete, with over 8 miles of railway track also serving the port,⁶ the docks at Calcutta were the busiest in India. The King George Docks at Garden Reach, with 10 more deep sea berths, 3 dry docks and heavy cranes serving another enhanced complex of warehousing structures, were added in 1929, and the Port of Calcutta was now on par with any other dock system in the world. Ten years later, on the cusp of World War II, shipping traffic through the Calcutta Port, now comprised of the Kidderpore and Garden Reach complexes, amounted to nearly ten million tons a year.⁷

As the docks grew, the area around them developed into a thriving commercial/industrial hub, with textile factories, jute and cotton mills, coal depots, iron works and tea warehouses lining the banks of the river around the port. Calcutta's expanded "docklands"⁸ had developed into a sprawling industrial quarter of the city. The near-by, densely populated neighborhoods - Kidderpore, Watganj and Mommenpur to the east, and Garden Reach and Metiabruz to the west - became thriving, if poor, residential districts. The Hooghly River, to the north of the docks, had extensive moorings and remained lined with ships waiting to enter the locks at Kidderpore all year round. To the south, a channel led out to "Tolly's Nullah," connecting the docks to an extensive canal system used by country-boats that connected the port to the rice and jute-rich regions of eastern Bengal along 1,127 miles of navigable waterways. According to the Imperial Gazetteer of India, this network of water communications, by 1909, was "one of the most

⁶ Madhubani Ghosh, p. 38

⁷ Ibid. (Ghosh's figure is 9,965,911 tons.)

⁸ The docks at Kidderpore and Garden Reach, together with the industrial and residential complexes that surrounded them, were referred to in Government and A.R.P. reports as "the Docklands."

important systems of river canals in the world, judged by the volume of the traffic, which averages 1,000,000 tons per annum, valued at nearly four millions sterling."⁹

The demographics of "dockland," were accordingly, highly diverse. By 1940 several major jute mills, including the Hooghly Jute Mills, the Victoria Jute Mills and the Angus Jute Mills, operated in the immediate vicinity of the docks. The Keshoram Cotton Mill, owned and operated by the Birla family, was close by in Metiabruz. Bird and Company (Government of India's War Transport Member, Jeremy Benthall's, concern) ran several important collieries on the docks, as well as overseeing the supply of their own jute mills further up river from Kidderpore. Tea plantations from North Bengal and Assam also had offices and warehouses in the dock area, as did several iron works factories and other engineering works. The Port Commission itself was a major operation with its own substantial payroll of employees and its own police force and fire brigade. The mills recruited labor from far and wide, with Biharis and Oriyans particularly well represented. European firms, like the Victoria and Angus Mills, had white upper management and engineers. Bengalis often worked as clerks and mid-level supervisors, but by this time rarely as laborers. Marwari businessmen, the Birlas primary amongst them, were highly active in the import/export trade and as such were also well represented in and around the docks. Additionally, the importance of international shipping meant that sailors, captains, and deck hands of many nationalities also moved through the area in numbers. As such, the dock area was perhaps the most cosmopolitan quarter of Calcutta.

Labor

Laborers, at this time, comprised the vast majority of the population of the docks and - as of labor in Calcutta more generally - were officially understood to be "essential" and protected during the period.¹⁰ Rhetoric about the welfare of the industrial labor-force in Calcutta, moreover, was central to an ideology that justified various schemes of appropriation and differential distribution, which, in turn, contributed significantly to the

⁹ The Imperial gazetteer of India, 1907-1909 (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1909)

¹⁰ Representatives of the Bengal National Chamber of Commerce boasted at the Famine Enquiry Commission that "there was not one single case of death among industrial laborers from famine." (Nanavati Papers, p. 1089.) This presumption, I am here arguing, is highly misleading as the relative "security" of industrial laborers in Calcutta was highly contingent.

acute impoverishment of the Bengal countryside, and ultimately famine. An evaluation of the treatment of dock laborers during the December bombings will go some way towards testing this rhetoric. As will become clear, the "priority" associated with labor in industrial Calcutta during the war was, in fact, highly contingent. Just who was, in the last analysis, "essential," and who disposable, was often a matter of expediency rather than principle.

The exact numbers of laborers associated with the docks is not easy to ascertain with any degree of certainty. The Bengal Chamber of Commerce, in its report after the bombings, put the number of "dock laborers" at 11,000.¹¹ Presumably this figure represented the number of permanent workers at the larger firms, such as Bird and Company, who worked on the docks as "regular" employees, and as such were represented by the Chamber of Commerce. Port Commissioner, Sir Thomas Elderton (I.C.S.), in his separate report, put the number of dock workers at 18,000.¹² This discrepancy is puzzling, but more puzzling is that Elderton himself subsequently informed the Governor of Bengal that "30,000 workers enter the dock area every day."¹³ Many of these workers, it seems, were apparently not counted as "dock workers." To make matters still more complicated, in his own analysis based on Intelligence Branch files eminent historian Suranjan Das notes that in December of 1942, at a time when traffic through the port was less than it was a year later,¹⁴ there were 60,000 dock laborers in Kidderpore.¹⁵ Of these 60,000 workers, Das explains, some 15,000 were on strike at the end of 1942, demanding higher wages, dearness allowances and War Bonuses.¹⁶

This last bit of information suggests that the numbers given by the Chamber of Commerce and the Port Commissioner reflect only *permanent* workers, laborers on company or Port payrolls whose conditions of employment did, in fact, grant them a certain "priority." One such privilege of being regularly employed may, indeed, have

¹¹ WBSA, Home Confidential, file W-30/43 (III)

¹² Ibid

¹³ Casey's Diary, p. 152

¹⁴ In his analysis of shipping traffic through the Calcutta port during the war, Madhubani Ghosh, notes that the volume was particularly low in 1942 due to the war, but that "in the second half of 1943, the port once again was busier with brisk movement of army stores." Ghosh, p. 38

¹⁵ Suranjan Das (1995), p. 62

¹⁶ Ibid

been the possibility of collective action against employers for wartime concessions, which could explain the numbers given by Das. A vast number of dock workers, however, were less than "regular," and as such appear not to have been "prioritised" by the same commercial and governmental bodies that exalted "labor welfare" to an ideological principle during wartime. These were unskilled and transient laborers, who worked on a contract basis that afforded them none of the benefits of "essential" employment (such as food, shelter or clothing.) Labor security, in a more general sense then, was nothing more than a myth. But if this is so, what were the real motives behind the forces that created famine in Bengal?

Jeremy Bentham's Bird and Company, alone, employed as many as 16,000 contract laborers in its collieries at the Kidderpore docks.¹⁷ Given that Bird and Company was supplied by the Bengal National Chamber of Commerce, it is interesting that the number of contract laborers employed by this one firm alone exceeds the number of workers that the Chamber identified in its reports following the air raid. Most of these contract laborers were "coolies," lowly paid, unskilled, mostly immigrant workers who toiled long hours, sometimes in intense heat or driving monsoon rain, for poor wages; many without any provision for housing or messing - and none with any job security to mention. Though mechanical cranes had been installed at the docks, much of the loading and unloading was still done by hand, particularly given the low cost of human labor. J.W. Stanworth, of the British Merchant Navy, passed through the Kidderpore Docks during the war and witnessed a typical operation. His vessel was sent to load 10,000 tons of coal for export from Bengal to Shanghai:

This was all loaded by hand. Long planks of timber were placed from the quay to the deck of the ship and an endless belt of human misery ran up one plank with a basket of coal, threw the coal down the ship's hold and ran down the other plank. Some people were filling the baskets and partners of two lifted the baskets on the shoulders of the endless belt of men. It was stifling hot on the ship as the port holes had to be closed to keep the coal dust out as much as possible. No one could sleep as the coal was being loaded 24 hours a day, non-stop, so after consultation we were taken to the Seamen's Club where we could bathe and sleep in cool rooms.¹⁸

¹⁷ WBSA. Home Confidential, file W-30/43 (III)

¹⁸ BBC oral history project "WW2 People's War." J. W. Stanworth at www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar/stories/36/a6021136.shtml (Last accessed June, 2010, 5:25 PM)

Given Benthall's position as War Transport Member of the Government of India, and his firm's dominance in the coal business at Kidderpore, it is entirely likely that the operation that Stanworth witnessed was run by Bird and Company.

But Bird and Company was not alone in its labor practices. The railways, tea plantations and textile companies also utilized contract labor to a large extent, as did Jute Mills - the cornerstone of industrial labor in Bengal. Exact numbers, however, are not easy to compile. Labor practices were anything but transparent, and as Dipesh Chakrabarty has pointed out, "individual workers [in the mills] remained largely undocumented."¹⁹ Workers frequently abandoned positions without notification, employment cards were typically not kept, and circular migration to native villages meant a highly unstable and indistinct core workforce, which obscures efforts to characterize the population with any degree of specificity. "It is important to emphasize," Chakrabarty notes, "that the industry did little to help these migrant workers to settle down in the city, and thus develop a permanently stable work labor force."²⁰ Mill owners, both European and Marwari, above all sought to maximize profits, particularly during the war boom, and relative to profits, labor was cheap and ultimately replaceable. Consequently, laborers felt little loyalty, either, to the firms that employed them, and would switch mills frequently.

Labor conditions even for those who enjoyed company "benefits" as permanent employees, were, in any case, anything but luxurious. Working hours were long, and in both the factories and colliers, environmental conditions were harsh and housing arrangements woefully insufficient. Even the housing provide by employers to regular workers was woefully substandard.²¹ Only an approximate 39% of *reported* workers were provided with housing at all. The majority of workers lived in the "coolie lines," - privately constructed, congested, slum-like encampments, with rows of corrugated tin or bamboo-mat shacks built haphazardly in empty lots close to the factory doors. They were notorious for their poor ventilation, lack of clean drinking water, insufficient sanitary arrangements and dangerously cramped quarters. There were also no provisions for health care to speak of.²² The "coolie lines" were also often run by unscrupulous

¹⁹ Chakrabarty (1983), p. 291

²⁰ Ibid, p. 301

²¹ Arjan de Haan, p. 159 (The figure given for factory housed workers in 1946 is 39%)

²² Ibid, p. 158-9

local strongmen, who demanded exorbitant rents, and lent money to the perennially indebted "coolies" at similarly extortionate rates. Further exploding the myth of the "priority" afforded to industrial workers in Calcutta during the war is the fact that - even while industries were logging record profits²³ - due to wartime inflation the real wages of already severely impoverished²⁴ industrial workers *fell* by as much as 30%.²⁵

Obviously the hardships on contract laborers - who comprised a majority of the urban labor population - were the most difficult of all. Along with unskilled factory and dock workers, several other groups of workers fell into the same category. The *doms*, whose caste distinction included the handling of corpses, are noteworthy in relation to an analysis of the bombings, as are the *khalasis*, a caste of itinerate Muslim seamen, hailing mostly from the Chittagong and Noakhali districts of eastern Bengal. *Khalasis* were renowned throughout the region for their sailing skills, and were an essential element in the riverine commercial networks of Bengal and beyond. They not only plied country-boats through the inland passages of the province, consisting of a myriad of tidal inlets and dangerous and unpredictable rivers, but also manned small ocean-going vessels that worked the coast between Bengal and Burma. Like itinerant boat people in many places in the world, they were known to be tough and resilient. Though "denial" policy had amounted to a wholesale attack on their livelihood, some 20,000 country-boats had managed to evade the Government scheme. The majority of *khalasis*, however, were driven to Calcutta. In and around Calcutta they worked the docks and jetties, transporting commodities, raw materials, and food supplies from import wharfs to markets, and from factories to the docks for export. They were, however, mostly employed on a contract basis that afforded them little security in perilous times. The Bengal Steamer Khalasis Bill of 1943, brought before the Legislative Assembly in January, called for the recognition of *khalasis* directly by companies, which would afford them the protection of "priority" status. The bill was defeated, however, by opposition from assembly members affiliated with the Bengal Chamber of Commerce. As such, the *khalasis* remained unprotected throughout the vicissitudes of war and famine.²⁶

²³ Kamtekar (August 2002), p. 203

²⁴ Mitter, p. 526

²⁵ Kamtekar (August 2002), p. 210

²⁶ Dutta and Mridula, p. 82

Added to the eclectic mix that characterized the docklands, were now Allied soldiers of every stripe. With major operations planned in Southeast Asia, the American presence, in particular, was mounting throughout the fall of 1943. The Calcutta docks were critical to all operations. On the southwest corner of Kidderpore Dock II, a large American Army depot was constructed, and heavy mechanical cranes were added to the King George's docks at Garden Reach by the American armed forces. The British Army had a depot of its own on the docks, and barracks for soldiers of both nations, as well as those of many other Allied nations, were scattered throughout the area. As a member of the Calcutta Police who was stationed in the area remembers:

the docks boiled with activity (and crime) as vast amounts of military ordinance poured in, and the Burma front and Nationalist China (via the Ledo Road) were kept supplied by troop and 'military special' trains through the Herculean efforts of the East Bengal and Assam-Bengal Railways. Soldiers, sailors and airmen from all the Allied nations wandered the streets in search of "rest & recreation" which usually consisted of a feed, a fight and sex (in any order) inevitably necessitating much police intervention.²⁷

Neighborhoods

The eastern boundary of the docks was defined - appropriately enough - by the Eastern Boundary Road, running approximately two miles from the Hooghly River in the north to the Boat Canal in the south. Over time, however, the "coolie lines" crossed over the Eastern Boundary Road and expanded east, spilling over into the adjacent neighborhoods. Kidderpore, the locality which gave its name to the docks, was an old quarter of the city which grew in direct relation to the growth of the dock complex. Mominpore (to the south of Kidderpore) and Watganj (to the north) were essentially outgrowths of Kidderpore. The amalgam of these three neighborhoods; bounded by the docks to the west, the Hooghly river to the north, the Boat Canal to the south and Diamond Harbor Road - the primary arterial highway running south to the mouth of the Hooghly - to the east, defined a distinct quarter of the city with a more or less composite character.

²⁷ Peter Moore, "Policing War-time Calcutta," at <http://www.oldmartiniansassociation.co.uk/memories.html> (Last accessed May 4, 2002, 1:45 PM), p. 2

Though once a rather affluent "native" quarter of Calcutta, due to its proximity to the profitability of the port trade, the Kidderpore area, by the early twentieth century, had become one of the poorest and most desperate areas of the city.²⁸ Not only had the "coolie lines" themselves quickly expanded outside the boundaries of the port, but around them sprawling *bustees* sprang up to accommodate the overflow. As these slums on the western fringe of the quarter continued to grow, a progressive blighting of the entire area ensued, with congestion and poverty coming to define the landscape. By the second decade of the twentieth century, the Kidderpore area had the worst living standards in the city and the highest death rate.²⁹ Furthermore, labor recruiters often affiliated with an underworld of strongmen and toughs, were the de facto town planners, lending an atmosphere of criminality and exploitation to an already desperate environment.

The impoverished *khalasis* who had long made the Kidderpore area their base of operations in Calcutta, took to sometimes violent labor actions against their putative employers,³⁰ which, in turn, contributed to the "rowdy" reputation of the area. Frequent labor actions in the factories and warehouses in the port area also furthered the image of Kidderpore as a "disturbed" quarter. Muslims comprised a full three-quarters of the labor population of the Calcutta Port, and, as such, the Kidderpore area reflected both the poverty and the communal composition of the port. The precinct was, in fact, one of the largest Muslim neighborhoods in Calcutta, which, together with its reputation for volatility, resulted in an all too easy equation, for some, between Muslim habitation and violence. By the middle of the century, Kidderpore was presumed to be in the heart of what Suranjan Das has called the "traditional riot zone of Calcutta."³¹

To what extent the desperation that sometimes erupted into violence in Kidderpore had to do with religious conflict, however, and to what extent it had to do with other factors is questionable. During the first World War (as in the Second) a sharp rise in the prices of essential commodities had made life difficult in Bengal. Cloth, in particular, became exceedingly scarce and conditions approaching a "cloth famine" prevailed. In Kidderpore a "cloth riot," begun by "the unemployed or semi-employed

²⁸ Suchetana Chattopadhyay, p. 229

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Suranjan Das (2000), p. 294

Urdu-speaking Muslim poor and directed against a section of non-Bengali Hindu rich [Marwaris - who were prominent in the cloth trade]" erupted.¹ The violence of the "Muslim mob" was easily attributed to "communal" sentiment, but little reflection is required to conclude that there were rather more complex economic, ethno-linguistic, and class factors at play. In 1925, on the occasion of the Muslim festival of Bakr-Id, there was another "riot" in Kidderpore with the Muslims of the quarter again targeting Marwaris and "up-country" Hindus.¹ Though the communal nature of this "riot" seems more straightforward, to underestimate the underlying economic and class tensions that simmered below the surface, particularly in the context of a variety of unsettled immigrant populations, would be a mistake.

As well as contributing significantly to the poverty and turmoil of the quarter, close proximity to the docks also provided incentive for capital development. Along with the larger industrial warehouses and manufacturing plants on the western fringe of the Kidderpore area, a host of smaller, mostly Indian run, factories came up. Metal workshops, smaller collieries, machine presses and oil mills were prevalent along the alleys and by-lanes of Kidderpore. The quarter was also known for its lively markets and bazaars, stocked with a wide array of cheap commodities, often "overflow" from the port itself. In fact, the capital intensity in the vicinity resulted in a more diverse atmosphere than its reputation for prevailing poverty might suggest. Middle-class garden houses and multi-story brick-and-mortar shop buildings lined the major thoroughfares, providing a stark contrast to the sprawling *bustees* that nestled in the shadows. The Muslim capital-class, as well as the Muslim intelligencia, both Bengali and Urdu-speaking, were also well represented.³²

However, limits on the prestige of the neighborhood kept real estate prices low, and the area's reputation for crime, poverty and communalism discouraged many non-Muslims from associating with the quarter. My grandfather, ex-Calcutta policeman, Ramakrishna Mukherjee, however, seems to have been an exception to the rule. By the time of his retirement from the Calcutta police in 1937, he had amassed a relatively sizeable cash fortune - far in excess of his official income. Much of this small fortune he sunk into real estate- with extremely poor returns. It was owing to his connections with

³² See Suchetana Chattopadhyay, p. 229-230

the Crime Unit of the Calcutta Police that Ramakrishna Mukherjee had links with the Kidderpore area. It is also, perhaps, was owing to the fact that he hailed from the Satkira sub-division of Khulna, a Muslim-majority district in modern-day Bangladesh, that he ventured where few middle-class Hindus in Calcutta dared to go. Although he had remained in the city for many years, he was still a rustic man with "old world" ideas. He was superstitious and stern, and maintained a distinct sense of noblesse oblige. On his family's modest tract in Khulna, Muslim tenants worked the land and paid their rents, sometimes at the butt of a lathi. In the city he had secured a position of authority and prestige, which reinforced the sense of privilege which he had carried with him to Calcutta. It was perhaps this combination of traditional patrician rusticity and sanctioned urban entitlement that compelled him to invest his reserves in the Muslim "docklands."

Those who knew him remember that Ramakrishna Mukherjee bought several tracts of land in the Kidderpore area during the 1930s with cash that he had accumulated during his service in the Calcutta Police. The transactions themselves were something less than "regular," involving complicated court cases that captivated more and more of the ex-policeman's time and energy after retirement, as well as depleting more and more of his progressively dwindling financial resources. The properties that he had purchased, with full knowledge of how dubious were the deals, he had gotten cheap. But the expenses of extricating clean deeds from the nebulous bureaucratic labyrinth of Bengal's colonial property laws were formidable. Along the Eastern Boundary Road he had purchased *bustee* tracts, inhabited by Muslim dock workers and "coolies." Rents were minimal and difficult to extract. The monthly rounds that he made, lathi in hand, to collect from his tenants by the docks, were, in some definite sense, more ceremonial than they were remunerative - particularly as the cost of living began to rise sharply with the advent of war. Additional *bustee* tracts that he had purchased in the Muslim slums of Park Circus were similarly economically unproductive.

The house that he had settled his large family in was less than a mile distant from the docks, on the main road in Mominpore. It was not an extravagant house, but certainly impressive in relation to his official means, and much more lavish than he would have been able to manage elsewhere in Calcutta. It was a two-story, cinder block and plaster home, approximately 3000 square feet, with an additional 1500 square feet of rooftop

overlooking bustling Mominpore Road. On the ground level was a "parlor" for receiving friends and acquaintances, a few store rooms rented out to local merchants, a small kitchen, staffed by cooks brought from the village in Satkira, and a *thakur ghor*, or idol room, with an unusually large and fiercely depicted Kali goddess, in which Ramakrishna held regular *pujas* and animal sacrifices. The kitchen led out into a back alleyway where a few cows were tethered, providing milk for the family. The family's quarters were on the second floor; four bedrooms with simple, oversized cots that accommodated, in 1943, approximately 30 people, including my father, the second youngest amongst 13 children, 5 of whom still lived in the family house at Mominpore. Ramakrishna's oldest son Narendrakrishna, at this time 24 years old, had graduated from college with a degree in Human Resources Management, and was gainfully employed with the Calcutta Shipping Corporation, as well as the A.R.P.. Narendrakrishna was, even at this early stage in his career, the primary earner and provider for the family - a status that had become increasingly demanding, and would become ever more so in the coming years.

When Japan attacked Burma in 1941, Ramakrishna, like so many others, had sent his family to the village. Only he and his oldest son remained behind in Calcutta. When the predicted Japanese attack failed to materialize, the rest returned to the city. When the docks were bombed in 1942, the impact shook the house and shattered the windows. The plaster on the walls cracked and fell in dusty chunks to the floor. My father was 11 years old at the time. The bombings had terrified him inordinately. During repeated air raid warnings and black-outs in the coming weeks he was dangerously inconsolable. He was sent, again, to the village in Satkira, along with his younger brother and mother. But in early 1943, famine was already devastating the countryside, and the increasing pressure of government appropriation schemes was breeding anxiety and violence in the districts. He was again brought back to Calcutta, as, it seemed, the threat of Japanese attack was (again) waning. The streets of the city, by this time, were filling up famine refugees - and corpses. Driven from the more affluent and reputable neighborhoods of the city, the starving congregated in less "European" (meaning poorer) neighborhoods of Calcutta such as Mominpore. Their plaintive moans rent the air, as their broken bodies lined the streets. The images of famine, my father told me so many times, were etched into his

memory like acid on soft metal. But the memories of the bombings, in this one case at least, were deeper still.

Japan Attacks

On Sunday, December 5th, 1943 Calcutta awakened to its ongoing tribulation of famine. Three of the six "corpse disposal" vans, originally commissioned to the Government of Bengal for air raid casualties, were making their rounds, manned by police officers and A.R.P. personnel, collecting "sick destitutes" in various stages of starvation and disease and removing them from the streets to "repatriation camps" outside the city.³³ The irony of removing the *dying* from the streets of Calcutta in vehicles commissioned for the removal of the dead is telling. That tools allocated to deal with war were busy with famine "relief," is similarly instructive. Two more of these vans, one each, were with the Hindu Satkar Samiti and the Anjuman Mofidul Islam for the removal of Hindu and Muslim corpses - respectively. The sixth van, in a state of disrepair, was with the Calcutta Corporation awaiting re-commissioning. In the face of famine, disease and despair - as well as profit, political intrigue and indifference - the war with Japan had faded into the background, both in popular and official imagination. Although the air raids of December 1942 had entailed profound socio-political impacts, those impacts were somewhat removed from the actual material damage inflicted. Nearly a year had elapsed since Calcutta had been bombed, and the momentous events of that year had greatly attenuated popular concern about the war.

Calcutta was still, however, very much critical to the pursuance of war, with troops moving through the city at an ever-increasing pace and the production and movement of war materials to the front heavily dependent on the port. But the actual defense of Calcutta had failed to become a priority. The Indian Command had been requesting better equipment to defend the city for some time, but despite the continuing rhetoric of "security" which dominated administrative policy-making and implementation, military preparations to defend India had evolved little since 1941.³⁴ After the first bombings of Calcutta in 1942, elite "Beaufighters" had been rushed in from

³³ WBSA Home Confidential, "8th Raid," file W-30/43 (Note by Secretary of the Government of Bengal, E. W. Holland on corpse disposal.)

³⁴ Stephens, p. 217

the Middle-East to complement a few squadrons of dilapidated "Hurricanes," and as recently as November of 1943, three squadrons of highly effective "Spitfires" were also sent to the region. Both the Spitfire and Beaufighter squadrons, however, were shifted to advanced positions along the Burmese border for offensive maneuvers by mid-1943, and Calcutta was left defended by nothing more than a handful of obsolescent Hurricanes and a few equally out-of-date batteries of anti-aircraft guns scattered at strategic locations around the city.³⁵ Meanwhile, the Allied war in Europe was going well, and with increased American involvement in South-East Asia - despite the dismal failure of the Arakan campaign earlier in the year - optimism was running high.

When the air raid sirens began to wail at 11:15 A.M. on the morning of December 5th, therefore, there was little excitement. Interrupted from his morning work, *Statesman* Editor, Ian Stephens, remembers feeling "no more than a vague annoyance."³⁶ A.R.P. drills were still a regular part of life however insignificant the war seemed in relation to the monstrous difficulties of daily existence in Calcutta. The air raids that had taken place the year before, moreover, had been night raids and the possibility of Japan mustering the audacity to launch a daylight raid on Calcutta seemed remote. It was also a Sunday morning, and the city was even more "at ease" than it might have been on a weekday. At 11:27, however, the sirens began sounding the "red alert," which meant that an attack was imminent. Within 20 minutes of the red alert, the sky filled with the rumble of Japanese bombers, as many as 250 planes in all, stepped up at three levels and descending from a cruising height of 20,000 feet down unto the docks of Calcutta.³⁷ The bombers had launched from central Burma and then had angled south across the Bay of Bengal, completely avoiding Allied defenses, which were bunched along the Burmese front at Chittagong and Shillong. By 11:45, out of a clear blue sky, a massive, broad-daylight attack on Calcutta by the Japanese Air Force was underway.

Heavy explosive and anti-personnel bombs began pounding the docks only 18 minutes after the red alert had sounded.³⁸ The bombers, meeting no opposition, streaked

³⁵ Ibid, p. 224

³⁶ Ibid, p. 215

³⁷ Ibid, p. 216

³⁸ The sequence of events described below is all taken from the A.R.P. reports contained in WBSA, Home Confidential, file W-30/43. "8th Raid." A map is also included in the file, which pinpoints the locations of

in low and picked targets at will. Within a few short minutes the docks were in flames and continuing bombardment was rending the air, as Japanese planes continued their unopposed onslaught. A series of heavy explosive bombs hit the coaling berths on the western edge of the south basin of the Kidderpore docks, igniting the coal and turning the wharf into a blazing inferno. The impact from the heavy explosive bombs, which left impact craters 12 feet wide and 6 feet deep, blew out the overhead electric lines as well, and the heat from the coal berth fires spread to the adjacent goods' sheds rapidly. A second primary target, the Bengal Nagpur Railway depot, a few hundred yards north of the coaling berths was also under heavy attack. Anti-personnel bombs, which burst into high velocity fragments of steel and shrapnel immediately on impact with the ground, rained down on the depot, and pierced steel rail webs at ranges of up to 30 feet, destroying the railway's mainline. Fifty railway wagons, one engine and the goods yard were also struck and partially or totally damaged - as was the quarters of the "lower paid staff" of the railway. A heavy explosive bomb was also dropped on the offices of Bird and Company, sandwiched between the coal berths and the railway depot. The Hooghly Jute Mill, within the port compound itself, was hit with as many as seven bombs and suffered extensive damage. Barges waiting to load or unload, anchored in the dock basin, were targeted as well, and the fires that resulted jumped from barge to barge quickly.

By 11:57 - only twelve minutes after the bombing had began - at least 11 barges were "blazing furiously" on the water. Anti-personnel bombs had also fallen on the "coolie lines," and fires from the coaling berths and goods sheds spread throughout the workers' quarters. The sweepers quarters of the Bengal Nagpur Railway was demolished, and the river dock of the Government Timber Depot was also destroyed. Either by default or by design the destruction was not contained within the boundaries of the dock area itself. Damage from anti-personnel fragments spread out in a 300 yard radius from the site of the bomb blast. Shops, private residences, and small factories outside the dock gates suffered collateral damage, or were struck directly by misguided bombs. The Clive Jute Mill in Garden Reach was also hit and heavy explosive bombs fell in residential areas of Watganj and Kidderpore. A petrol pump, the A.R.P. barracks, a "coolie market,"

the bombs. A chronology of events is given in the Calcutta Fire Brigade's report in the same file. Where relevant, reference will be given to the specific documents from this file.

the Tramway Depot Drivers' Quarters, and the ration shop were also hit. Bombs also fell outside the general dock vicinity, with reports of heavy explosions in Bhawanipur and Alipore, more than a mile away, and in Bowbazar, central Calcutta, a heavy explosive bomb left a gaping creator in the middle of the main thoroughfare.

On the docks, which remained the primary target, there was panic and total chaos as soon as the attack began. Along the docks and in the attached Bengal-Nagpur Railway yard, "coolies" took cover wherever they could find it, many going "to ground in or under any form of structure which had the effect of hiding them from overhead. Corrugated iron sheds, wagons and latrines were all used and were, of course, entirely useless."³⁹ Anti-personal bomb fragments ripped through the walls of these same structures killing many instantly, and wounding many more. In its A.R.P. report, the Railway noted that those who died without sufficient shelter were, in fact, "mainly non-B.N.R. employees." The B.N.R., its General Manager assured the government, had adequate shelter for 100% of *its* employees. The difficulty in the dock area, the report continued "was that there was not always shelter for the *outsiders* who were present in the goods yard."⁴⁰ The manager of the railway, however, gave no indication of what percentage of the labor working in its own yard at the time of the bombings were "outsiders." Such disavowal of responsibility, however, clearly demonstrate the limits of the "priority" given to industrial labor in and around Calcutta during the entire period.

The Port Commissioner, Sir Thomas Elderton, admitted that the port itself had adequate shelter for only 14,000 of its 18,000 "employees." Some extent of the number of dock workers left out of this equation can be gleaned from the fact that when the bombs began falling the Port's shelters were quickly "crammed to suffocation," with "shelters meant for 50 generally containing upwards of 200."⁴¹ If the Port had, in fact, adequate shelter for more than 75% of its own employees, and shelters were crammed to four times their capacity, the number of workers in the immediate area who were understood as "outsiders" was something on the order of 3 to 1. But even "regular" employees did not fair well. At the Hooghly Jute Mill, immediately adjacent to the main dock, the shelters provided by the company were "extremely defective," lacking any

³⁹Ibid, B.N.P. Final Report

⁴⁰ Ibid, Note from B.N.R. General Manager to Government of Bengal, Home Department (emphasis mine)

⁴¹ Ibid, Note on Labor Reaction

proper covering wall, and even inside these shelters, workers were killed by flying fragments.⁴² Whatever slit trenches were in the area remained unclean, and, without proper sanitation facilities in the dock area, were little better than open latrines, and as such these went unused. Slit trenches, in any case, would have provided no protection from overhead. Given the lack of preparations made for workers safety in the event of an air raid - four years into the war, and after seven previous bombings of the docks - one is forced to wonder at the temerity of later statements, in several analogously worded reports, that lamented, "casualties would mostly have been avoided had people taken proper cover."⁴³

The luckiest of the workers, perhaps, were those who successfully escaped the dock area once the shelling began. These laborers, it seems, may have been following the lead of the American military personnel in the area, who made great haste for the dock gates when the bombs began to fall. The Commissioners for the Port of Calcutta penned a complaining note to P. D. Martyn, Secretary of the Government of Bengal, a few days after the bombings. In it the Commissioners testily requested that "orders be issued that soldiers working in the Dock area must take cover in the Dock area. We want coolies to do this but they certainly will not as long as men in uniform rush for the gates immediately when they hear sirens." The "behavior of the American Negro troops," the Commissioners noted in particular, "was disgraceful."⁴⁴ It does seem that disparagement of American black soldiers may have been a recurrent theme in explaining the chaos on the docks. The report of a Kidderpore Fire Brigade worker, stationed near the dock gates, was careful to assigned blame to American troops more generally:

While reporting to control on the siren from the chummery, I happened to be near the above entrance. There was in front of me a jeep and American truck [and here it is penciled into his typewritten report: "with white Americans"] proceeding towards the dock. As soon as the dock siren was audible the truck immediately stopped and turned in the opposite direction, away from the dock, and in turning I went passed and saw a man lying in a precarious condition on the road, where the truck had backed and turned.⁴⁵

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Ibid, B.N.R. Final Report

⁴⁴ Ibid, Port Commissioners to Bengal Secretariat

⁴⁵ Ibid

British soldiers appear to have "stood to" with more fortitude, but contributed considerably to the panic. A Military Police Security Control Officer on the spot describes the scene near the coaling docks as chaotic. Military lorries, parked too close together relayed the coal berth fires across to the warehouse sheds. Other lorries had flat tires and blocked emergency vehicles from entering the area. Troops poured in from ships and adjacent areas and "using their own stretchers, gathered the casualties together, sending them off to Hospital in army lorries."⁴⁶ This practice led to a later opacity concerning the numbers killed or injured. In other places British soldiers "seized Port A.R.P. stretchers, vehicles, etc., blocked roads by parking vehicles haphazardly, and generally speaking made it impossible for the Port A.R.P. to function in an organized fashion."⁴⁷ Both the Port A.R.P. Controller and the 24 Pargana Controller (responsible for the immediately adjacent areas) complained that the military had grossly interfered with their operations.

This subordination of the A.R.P to military personnel during the bombing - after four years of training, exercises and pay-rolling - is a telling demonstration of the true level confidence that had been invested in this organization of "local" loyalists. The A.R.P. had been widely utilized by Government as a vehicle of propaganda, co-opting influential Hindu citizens into the "war-effort." Their "drills" had been planned (even before Japan entered the war) to instill a sense of "emergency" in the population. They had been used to police the urban populations of Bengal during disturbances that had nothing to do with Britain's war. They had also been posted in front of control shops to "keep the peace" when citizens of the city were clamoring for food, and, during the "food drive," they had been deputized to seize supplies of rice from private citizens. Once famine victims began to "pollute" the streets of Calcutta, they were sent out to round them up, by force if necessary, or to cart off their dead bodies to the nearest crematorium or burial ground. Now that bombs were falling and decimating the docks, however, the Air Raid Precautions services were unceremoniously pushed aside and superceded.

Not that the A.R.P. wasn't having considerable difficulties of its own. In what would become a highly controversial report a Military Police Control Officer stationed on

⁴⁶ Ibid, M.P.S.C.O.'s Memorandum 21/sco/80 to the Chief of the General Staff

⁴⁷ Ibid

the docks observed that "during the period between the first bomb and the 'all-clear,' Civil Defence Departments were conspicuous by their absence; the entire fire fighting, first aid, and rescue work being done by the fighting services."⁴⁸ A general lack of coordination, coupled with public distrust, contributed significantly to the A.R.P.'s ineffectiveness. A.R.P. Controller for Bengal, A. S. Hands, for one, was in bed with malaria on the 5th of December when the bombs began to fall and so could not oversee the local operations in the port and its surrounding areas.⁴⁹ Additionally, the Controllers for both the port and the 24 Parganas complained that they were unable to contact the Chief Civil Defence Commissioner at any time during the raid to request advice or reinforcement. A call had been made in the very short interval between the red warning and the commencement of bombing, but after that "there was no response on the telephone."⁵⁰ The office of the Port A.R.P. was thus totally isolated in its efforts, even though it "badly needed assistance." The A.R.P. first aid stations in the port were similarly "swamped," and wholly unable to cope with the crisis at hand.

Outside of the dock area, the scenario was almost comically similar to the "drills" of 1939.⁵¹ Warning sirens were not distinctly heard in many places, and in Howrah the sirens failed to sound at all. In most localities of the city, the Calcutta A.R.P. Controller noted, citizens were averse to following directions from A.R.P. officers, and disorder ruled the day. Though several bombs did fall in Calcutta proper, causing at least 34 casualties, the public remained skeptical of A.R.P. authority. Slit trenches, left uncleaned for many months, were almost entirely ignored, and in many areas of the city inhabitants refused to take any shelter at all, preferring to watch the spectacle of the Japanese attack from their rooftops. In Bhawanipur "people were out in the open and some groups were gazing towards the sky."⁵² In the Park Street area, "coolies" ignored the siren and continued to work. In a telling redaction in the report on the same, the original: "a Warden collected 50 coolies who were not in shelter, formed them up into a line, and marched them in a military manner to a public shelter at 30 Park Street;" was

⁴⁸ Ibid, Memo 21/SCO/80

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ See Chapter One

⁵² WBSA, Hone Confidential, file W-30/43.

changed to "...marched them in an *orderly* manner... ." ⁵³ The slippage between the policing and the protecting function of the A.R.P. revealed by this rewrite is apt: the exercise of ad hoc "emergency" authority over a refractory population needs to be relayed not as a "military marching" - which would imply martial control - but as an "orderly" shepherding in the name of "security" - which would imply patriarchal concern.

At 1 P.M., after two waves of heavy bombings, the All-Clear signal was sounded. The docks lay in almost total ruins. The coal berths had been razed by fire, along with as many as 15 of the 29 storage sheds lining the perimeter. The Bengal-Nagpur Railways yard had suffered extensive damage, with at least 50 wagons and one engine destroyed in the attacks. The tracks leading out from the yard had also been heavily damaged by anti-personal shrapnel and heavy explosive bombs. In the basin the burned out hulks of 11 barges, 3 ships (the SS Matheson, SS Nauchung and the SS Irtria), 1 dredger, and 4 tug boats smoldered on the water. Large sections of the "coolie lines" along the Eastern Boundary Road had been devastated by fire and the electrical supply to the dock area had been cut. The area was also strewn with hundreds of corpses, both human and animal, untended and unclaimed, that began to rot in the afternoon sun. The gates of the docks remained unmanned and within a few hours hundreds of curious on-lookers were entering the area to survey the damage and collect "souvenirs." There was no security within the dock complex in the wake of the bombings, and "crowds were allowed to collect around the [dead] bodies, resulting in very exaggerated rumors."⁵⁴ Confusion, chaos and disorganization, as well as an administratively expedient rewriting of events, continued for many days to come.

At the same time, a steady flow of traffic *away* from the dock and industrial areas was picking up pace - even though the Essential Services Maintenance Ordinance of 1941 had made it a crime punishable by up to a year in jail for dock and factory laborers to "abandon" their place of employment. Along Garden Reach Road, the main axial roadway running through dockland, a column of approximately 7,000 workers was reported moving towards points unknown. Along the Grand Trunk Road, the main highway out and into the districts, another group of an estimated 2,000 "coolies," with

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ Ibid, Port A.R.P. Report

bullock carts loaded down with personal belongings, was fleeing the city. From Bird and Company's dock complex as many as 10,000 contract laborers "absconded immediately after the raid," leaving the firm with less than half of its workers, and workers employed by the Port Commission directly also fled in large numbers, only 1,800 of the enumerated 11,000 laborers staying behind. From the Hooghly Jute Mill, 80% of workers quickly decamped or otherwise "disappeared," and the surviving portion of the B.N.R.'s heavily bombed out sweepers' quarters also "ran away" in mass. Reports from the Chamber of Commerce suggested that many, if not most, of the workers who had "absconded" were "lying up" in the adjoining neighborhoods of Kidderpore, Mominpore, Watganj and Garden Reach. What percentage of these same workers had actually been killed in the bombing is a question that is extremely difficult to answer, and is one to which I will return.

However ill-compensated, ill-protected and marginally affiliated much of the dock, railway and mill labor was, they still remained "essential" - at least in theory - to the prosecution of war and profit. As such the "morale" of the dock and industrial labor was carefully monitored and engineered - by force - where possible. The post-raid A.R.P. report from the Bengal-Nagpur Railway noted that "an attempted exodus on the part of *outsiders* by the Shalimar Ferry [which would have taken them across the river to relative safety] was checked."⁵⁵ Under what authority and by what means the B.N.R. was able to arrest the movement of laborers who were not in their direct employment is not specified. Nor is it mentioned by what means and under what conditions these same workers were detained within the dock complex against their will. Stevedores and other essential dock hands were, on the other hand, "housed in camps under military control," and, as such, could be more easily restrained from fleeing. In this context a note from the Port Commission that several hundred of its own "essential labor" had been "accommodated in a warehouse shelter as a measure to instill confidence," also hints at a euphemistic usage of "accommodation." If the living remained essential to labor management, however, the dead had become anything but a "priority." As night fell on Calcutta, corpses still littered the docks, unclaimed, unidentified and untended. At night the crowds of "sightseers" were replaced by crowds of looters who stepped over the

⁵⁵ Ibid, B.N.R.'s Post-Raid Report (emphasis mine)

bodies to ransack the docks for any unburned coal or other commodities left behind by the bombs and fires.⁵⁶

Damage Control

In the morning many of the corpses remained where they had fallen, and front page headlines in *The Statesman* relayed the official report from the Government of India in New Delhi that "a number of bombs" had been dropped on "the Calcutta area," but that the damage had been "slight."⁵⁷ The scenario may have been much more grim, the government communiqué went on, had the defence of the city not been so stalwart: "Our fighters intercepted the enemy aircraft and a heavy and effective a-a barrage was put up."⁵⁸ No further information or specifics were given. The report was, in fact, an exemplary model of succinct vaguery and misleading understatement - in close keeping with official orders. In April of 1943, after the earlier air-raids on Calcutta, a Defense Circular was sent to all Provincial Governments and Chief Commissioners outlining the official protocol for reporting on raids. The Joint Secretary of the Government of India directed that "the vital necessity for the most careful wording" of post-raid reports "should be impressed upon local military commanders."⁵⁹ Instructions on the exact wording to be used were included. No specific mention should be made of the specific target of the bombing: "this will be in general terms, i.e. 'Calcutta area,' not 'Docks Calcutta.'"⁶⁰ The extent of the destruction should also be left indefinite: "where necessary to publish any mention of damage the general terms 'slight,' 'moderate,' and 'heavy' or synonyms of these will be used. *These terms will have no relation to any specific numbers of casualties.*"⁶¹ As to the number of casualties, the instruction went on, "an underestimate is better."⁶²

Such obfuscation, however, failed its first test. The lack of information, and the discrepancy between the information officially and unofficially circulated, created resentment and only served to heighten anxieties. Rumors quickly began to spread about

⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷ *The Statesman*, "Jap's First Daylight Raid on Calcutta," December 6, 1943

⁵⁸ Ibid

⁵⁹ WBSA, Home Political, file W-296/43

⁶⁰ Ibid, (emphasis in the original)

⁶¹ Ibid (emphasis mine.)

⁶² Ibid

extensive damage to the docks and heavy casualties, and that much of the labor force associated with the docks had "melted" into surrounding residential areas only accelerated the dissemination of unofficial information. Dock workers had witnessed the attack first hand, and the fear that they carried with them out of the docks was contagious. They, themselves, were in a state of "extreme nervousness as a result of the casualties which took place among them."⁶³ It was well known, moreover, that damage to the dock area had been anything but "slight," with plumes of smoke and ash from the attack being seen as much as two miles away.⁶⁴ Additionally, as the gates of the docks had been left unprotected, hundreds of "sightseers" had surveyed the wreckage and seen corpses still littering the docks and had carried these impressions back home with them. That "very exaggerated" reports of damage quickly took hold amongst the population of Calcutta, then, is not all that surprising, particularly in relation to the obviously specious official declarations published in the press. Even labor managers complained of an "almost complete lack of [accurate] authoritative information," which made it impossible to rally "morale."⁶⁵

The claim, furthermore, that the attack had been effectively countered by the Royal Air Force (R.A.F.) and anti-aircraft fire, also rang extremely hollow. In none of the subsequent A.R.P. reports were either mentioned. Rather, the report from the Bengal-Nagpur Railway was typical in citing consternation at the fact that "so many planes were allowed to fly over targets in perfect formation and drop bombs with no apparent opposition."⁶⁶ *The Statesman* accused the armed forces of complacency and speculated that perhaps "the well known British disposition for relaxation over the week-end" might explain the manifest lack of opposition with which the Japanese attack was met.⁶⁷ The Calcutta A.R.P. report outlined more general sentiments:

Indian opinion is strongly critical of the R.A.F.'s failure to protect Calcutta; the success of the raid has caused some to think that the stories of R.A.F. successes elsewhere are exaggerated; others think that the British cannot defend Calcutta from air-attack. British opinion is even more strongly critical and is indignant

⁶³ Ibid, "Bengal Chamber of Commerce Labor Conditions"

⁶⁴ Ian Stephens, in *Monsoon Morning*, remembers that clouds of smoke and ash could be seen emerging from the dock area shortly after the bombing began. Stephens was at the Statesman building, approximately two miles distant from the docks.

⁶⁵ WBSA, Home Confidential, file W-30/43

⁶⁶ Ibid, B.N.R. Report

⁶⁷ *The Statesman*, "Sunday Morning," December 6, 1943

that Calcutta, stacked with war materials, its docks full of ships, should be left unprotected.⁶⁸

Efforts at damage control only further destabilized a precarious situation. On the morning of December 6th, at 9:20 A.M., the air-raid sirens began to wail again, and again chaos ensued. The remaining dock labor ran for the nearest exit gates and the military, again, also fled in fear. The sky, however, remained empty. Hooghly Jute Mills, which was trying to get up and running with only 20% of their staff reporting, gave up the effort for the day and waited. In the adjoining neighborhoods there was anxiety and trepidation, but still no sign of Japanese bombers. The morning passed in a state of dread. Then, at 1 P.M., the All-Clear siren sounded. It had been a false alarm. Exactly how or why the sirens had sounded was a mystery. That it was an "unauthorized" sounding was confirmed later, but no explanation was forthcoming. The Port sirens had been the first to go and this warning had set off a chain reaction throughout the surrounding areas. The Chamber of Commerce complained that their efforts to rally labor morale had been "frustrated" by the false alarm, and the Commissioner of Police began an investigation. The delay in the sounding of the "all-clear" had been purposeful, however. Seeing the reaction to the initial alarm - even when it had been confirmed that it had been a false one - the Port A.R.P. hesitated to sound the "all-clear," potentially adding to the chaos. "It is true that coolies cannot distinguish between the Warning and All Clear," the Additional Secretary wrote to the Port A.R.P. Controller, "but others can and the fact that the signal heard was the 'Raiders Passed' would soon be known to all. The sounding of the 'Raiders Passed' would certainly cause temporary panic, but in the long run it would be better than keeping up indefinitely the state of uncertainty."⁶⁹ The following morning there was another false alarm, which was followed by a more prompt "all-clear" sounding, but little could be done, at this point, to shore up confidence. Later in the afternoon publicity vans made their rounds through the docks, broadcasting assurances that all was well and that it was perfectly safe to return to work. However, less than 20% of the dock labor showed up for work on the third morning, and Bird and Company reported that its labor was still "lying up in and around Calcutta." Boosting morale was a

⁶⁸ WBSA, Home Confidential, file W-30/43

⁶⁹ Ibid

hard sell. The attack itself had been devastating, very little warning had been given, no defense had been mounted, shelter had been inadequate, the official line on the attack had been patently specious, rumors were spreading unabated, and, to make matters worse, dead bodies, uncollected and unidentified, still littered the docks, even on the third day, and had begun to stink in the December sun.⁷⁰ Besides the inconvenience of the odor of rotting co-workers (and perhaps family members), the disregard shown these corpses stood as an all-too-obvious material example of the true "priority" that had been granted to their ranks.

Bodies

In an ancient - but still popular - Indian folk tale, "The King and the Corpse," a famous and powerful king becomes indebted to a wandering beggar who has paid him unexpected tribute. For the riches that the beggar has bestowed on the king, the Sovereign agrees to do the beggar a favor. The favor that the beggar asks of the king is for him to bring a corpse to the burning ground, where the mendicant, who is also a sorcerer, will perform certain rites on the corpse to enrich his own power. The king dutifully goes to a site in the forest where the corpse is hanging from a tree, cuts down the corpse, heaves it over his shoulder, and begins his long march to the funeral ground. The corpse, however, is possessed by a spirit that awakens when it is slung over the king's shoulder. As the king proceeds, the spirit quizzes him with a series of morality tales, in the form of riddles, that test the king's enlightenment. With each correct answer, the corpse slips from the king's grasp and returns to the tree from which it was originally found hanging. Each time the king, again, cuts down the corpse, heaves it over his shoulder and heads off to the cremation ground to meet the beggar. But each time, again, the corpse tests the king and, again, ends up slipping from his grasp. The tale can be interpreted in a number of ways, but here I reference it only to point out the relationship between sovereign power and the corpse. That the idea of the corpse as the king's recurrent burden and moral interrogator is well entrenched in Indian literature, is interesting - and is of special relevance to this analysis.

⁷⁰ Ibid

In many ways, 1943 could be considered the "year of the corpse" in Bengal. In the latter half of the year, in particular, the corpse had become a ubiquitous and *material* "social fact." That there were as many as 1.5 million lives lost to famine in 1943, also means that there were as many as 1.5 million corpses that remained behind and had to be dealt with - or not. The tremendous *weight* - in both material and socio-political terms - of these corpses put an enormous bio-political strain on Bengal society and administration. The management of corpses represented a recurrent moral riddle that had to be solved. In the preceding chapter I outlined the treatment of corpses during famine. Some were retained in "constructive possession" of the state, others were turned over to religious organizations for removal, and still others were thrown unceremoniously into rivers and canals. Many remained untouched where they had fallen and became a feast for wild dogs and vultures. Overall, the relationship of the corpse to "the king" during famine, it can be said, was dependent on its differential relation to power. Corpses that proved compromising to colonial power - primarily those in Calcutta - where "unclean" and had to be removed promptly and through official channels. Corpses that did not impinge on the functioning of the state were left to fate.

The treatment of the corpse, moreover, also provides a clue to the value attributed, by the state, to the life that once resided in it. Because the corpse consists of *only* the material aspect of being, without the contingency of agentive contradiction or contest, it is a kind of *tabula rasa* upon which the script of power is most clearly inscribed. The corpse, in this regard, represents the limits of essentialism. The ways that corpses were labeled, enumerated, categorized, and disposed of, demonstrate what was officially imagined to be the unchanging essence of the existence that the corpse now represents - whether useless, dangerous, insignificant, or otherwise. In this sense corpses represent an ideological map to the psychological terrain of power. The way that bodies were handled during and after the air raids, moreover, was both an example of all that had been learned during the famine - and was also a template for what was to come. Most importantly the primary - and at times sole - distinction that was made by the state was whether the corpse was "Hindu" or "Muslim." This simplistic binary distinction had become so ingrained in administrative thought that it was understood, by this time, as the only necessary categorization. The colonial state was, in this sense, reifying a cultural

difference, by means of corpses, that would parallel the political distinction that was used to "divide and rule" India. The idea that Hindu-ness or Muslim-ness adhered to the very body of the population, moreover, was a subtle license to violence against the *bodies* of the "other."

The A.R.P., it should be noted, had its own corpse disposal squads, which had been drilled and trained in accordance with the A.R.P. Services Ordinance of 1941, and further authority had been granted to the organization to constitute its own mortuary services early in 1943.⁷¹ The removal of corpses thus was understood to be a central responsibility of the Civil Defence Services. The A.R.P., moreover, had gained extensive experience removing corpses from the streets of Calcutta during the famine. Their lorries, in fact, were still removing starvation victims from the city's streets when the December 5th bombing took place. Those on the verge of death, however, though also handled by the A.R.P., could not be taken to A.R.P. hospitals, where hundreds of beds remained vacant, despite the acute lack of medical facilities. These hospitals were reserved for air raid casualties only.⁷² When the bombing actually took place, however, it appears that both the A.R.P. corpse disposal squads, as well as the A.R.P. hospitals, served little purpose, which led to an obfuscation, also, of the number of lives lost during the bombings. The earliest reports from the A.R.P. Controllers of the Port and the B.N.R. note that the R.A.F. interceded in casualty recovery efforts at every juncture, and began loading bodies onto military transport vehicles, almost immediately, and removing them to unknown destinations.⁷³ Seth Drucquer, the Office-in-Charge of the Post Raid Information Services, responsible for gathering casualty statistics, noted on the 6th that the removal of "large numbers" of casualties by military personnel to *military hospitals*, severely hampered efforts to count the dead and the injured. Bodies were also shifted to several other non-A.R.P. hospitals, and even moved between unauthorized medical facilities without explanation or official documentation.⁷⁴ Moreover, the vast majority of

⁷¹ WBSA, Home Political, file W-112/43 "Constitution of Mortuary Services under the A.R.P. Services Ordinance, 1941."

⁷² Casey's Diaries, p. 338

⁷³ Ibid, first reports from the Port A.R.P. and the B.N.R. A.R.P.

⁷⁴ Ibid, Civil Defence Information Office, Final Report

these casualties, both the dead and the injured, remained "unidentified," which led to further confusion.

Drucquer himself, when he received word through unofficial channels that bodies had been taken to the Indian Military Hospital, "by members of the armed forces without the knowledge of the Port Commission A.R.P. authorities," visited the hospital to collect statistics. There Drucquer found considerable "irregularities in the situation."⁷⁵ No list of persons admitted had been kept, no record of treatments administered was existent, and no attempt to identify the casualties had been made. The Deputy Supervisor of the Port precinct also visited the Indian Military Hospital and reported that the Military Officer in charge could not even tell him of the exact number of casualties brought in, nor how many were dead or alive. The treatment given to the injured was also far from adequate, "nothing but tincture iodine being applied in many cases."⁷⁶ Nor were there beds available for these mostly poor and marginal "essential workers." They were housed outside the hospital in army tents, and held throughout the cold December night "without adequate clothing or blankets." Those interviewed by Drucquer complained that they had not been given food and no proper sanitation facilities had been arranged. In effect, conditions starkly analogous to those prevailing throughout the famine-stricken province were recreated in microcosm at the Indian Military Hospital. The evidence pertaining to casualties of the raids taken to the British Military Hospital is less documented. When Drucquer paid a visit to this hospital he was simply "refused admittance," and no information at all could be collected. At the private, Campbell Hospital, Civil Defence Information Office staff were similarly denied access and hospital administrators "refused to give any details regarding the dead bodies collected there."⁷⁷

Other bodies, not taken into military custody, were the subject of considerable uncertainty as well. Concerning these corpses confusion reigned between the police, the A.R.P., and the Calcutta Corporation as to their "respective responsibilities."⁷⁸ Despite the fact that the port had been the target of all previous attacks on Calcutta, and casualties

⁷⁵ Ibid

⁷⁶ Ibid

⁷⁷ Ibid

⁷⁸ Ibid

had been inflicted in these bombings as well, the Bengal Nagpur Railways A.R.P. Controller complained that no clear instructions on removing dead bodies had been given. The Port A.R.P., for its part, followed the famine model, making over bodies to the Hindu Satkar Samiti and the Anjuman Mofidul Islam, ensuring proper funeral rites to the dead in relation to religious community - though the majority of those killed were otherwise recorded as "unidentified." The B.N.R. A.R.P. also recorded the religious community of the dead that were collected under its auspices, but little else. In his initial report, the A.R.P. Controller for the B.N.R. noted that A.R.P. "sanitation sweepers" had assisted R.A.F. personnel and "other European officers" in lifting bodies onto R.A.F. lorries, but admitted later that it had lost track of many casualties in the process.⁷⁹ The police, for their part, removed an unspecified number of corpses to the nearby Mominpore morgue, where the bodies lay for several days in tight "files," again without identification or enumeration. And then there were also an unspecified number of corpses that somehow fell out of the jurisdiction of all the official parties involved and "had never been touched" - even three days after the raid.

Obviously, under such conditions, even a rough estimate of the number killed during the bombing of December 5th, 1943 becomes extremely difficult. In his final report, Drucquer - on a line penciled in and rough with erasure marks - reported the total number of dead, "as revealed," at 335. To put this in perspective, it might be noted that during the first air attack by the German Luftwaffe on England during the "blitz," 436 Londoners were killed, and it was considered a catastrophic event. The number killed on the docks, however, remains highly inconclusive. The Secretary to the Home Department of the Government of Bengal, himself, remained skeptical, reporting to the General Secretary that the Port A.R.P numbers were "very doubtful." He warned that government would have to "explain that the removal of large numbers of casualties to a military hospital has made the compilation of accurate statistics virtually impossible."⁸⁰ The Secretary replied that he would issue the necessary caveat about the dead removed to military hospitals, and also noted that a "considerable number of casualties... occurred on

⁷⁹ Ibid. For the assistance of sanitation workers see B.N.R. Initial Report, for losing track, see Final Report.

⁸⁰ bid, Kitchin to Martyn

board ships and on freighters and barges."⁸¹ He presumed that these would be recorded by the Port A.R.P., but the Port A.R.P.'s numbers in its final report failed to include those killed on the water - many of whom were most likely *khalasis*. Nor was there any attempt to estimate those bodies that had been consumed by fire or otherwise destroyed, leaving no remains behind at all. Fires in the congested "coolie lines," in particular, raged unabated for several hours and large portions of the encampments lay in complete ruins by late afternoon. A Military Security Control Officer, stationed in the area, noted that during the bombings he had seen "*nothing* being done by Civil Defence Services. It is understood," he continued, "that the firefighting services were busy elsewhere, but the coolies, who were a high percentage of the casualties, received no help from First Aid, Rescue, or Ambulance Squads until after the 'All Clear.'"⁸²

The pervasive disregard, disrespect and even disgust, with which the bodies of these (poor) laborers were treated reveals important aspects of the colonial mindset at the time - aspects which contributed significantly to the mentality of debasement, erasure and *de*-prioritization that led to famine. While these bodies served any economic or political purpose, they were touted "essential." Once their utility had been negated - as corpses - they became a "security risk," endangering the war effort (by registering the success of Japan's attack), encumbering the administration (by the awkward materiality of their corpses), and generating rumors (that threatened efforts at damage control.) Their bodies, for the most part, had to be whisked from public sight, denied, obscured and, ultimately, forgotten. Far from being protected or prioritized, they had been defiled, degraded, or entirely neglected once their utility had been - violently - revoked. This fact exposes the myth of patriarchal concern for the industrial labor of Calcutta that consecutive programs of appropriation, "denial," and militarization all banked on, and reveals the emptiness of the rhetoric that justified much of the official policy that precipitated mass starvation in Bengal. Ultimately, during the air-raid, these "essential workers" fared little better than poor villagers during famine. Their violent deaths, except for the risks to "security" that was entailed, meant next to nothing to the colonial state. Despite claims to the contrary; they were expendable, insignificant and very easily dehumanized.

⁸¹ Ibid

⁸² Ibid, Secret Letter 56/SCO/31

But something perhaps even more troubling was revealed in terms of the "essence" assigned to these dead bodies by the colonial state. Of the 335 corpses officially counted in the Post Raid Information Service's (P.R.I.S.) Final Report, 260 were recorded as "unidentified." In other words, nothing at all was known of their names, ages, places of origin, marital status or employment affiliation. The Officer-in-Charge of P.R.I.S. attributed this shortcoming to several different causes. Non-A.R.P. hospital, he complained, had made no attempt to gather information on the bodies brought to them. In many cases, "they were allowed to die without identification even though there would have plenty of time to ask their names [at least] before they died." A.R.P. wardens, moreover, had entirely failed to do so themselves at the time when the injured were collected. Drucquer also pointed out that "identity discs," which were supposed to be issued by employers, were nowhere to be found. The B.N.R. Railway, in particular had a large number of unidentified casualties that might have been positively identified had discs been issued. In addition, denial of access to the bodies, quick disposal, and improper preservation had obviated identification by family members after the raid. Tarak Nath Halder, for one, was admitted to the Indian Military Hospital on the 5th. The Deputy Supervisor had recorded his name and condition when Halder had been brought in, but when his father arrived the next day to locate his son, "no trace of Tarak Nath Halder could be found and the doctors were unable to state whether he had died in the meantime."⁸³

The police, as well as the A.R.P. and hospital authorities had also failed to take necessary measures that might have facilitated identification of corpses, though according to official protocol it was ultimately the responsibility of the police to identify the dead. Of primary importance in this regard, was the task of photographing corpses so that subsequent identification could be made by relations of the deceased. These photographs were to be forwarded to the Post Raid Information Service, which had been operating in the same capacity for several months in relation to the identification of famine victims. In this regard, famine had "accustomed the general public to coming to [their] offices... in search of information."⁸⁴ Drucquer, in his report to the Chief of Civil Defense Services,

⁸³ Ibid

⁸⁴ Ibid

noted that the police had not gained access to many of the bodies until several days after the raids, and noted that though "there [was] a provision for the Police to photograph unidentified dead bodies after raids... by the time the Police arrived, they were too much decomposed for such photographs to be of any value."⁸⁵ In a hand written and parenthetical addendum Drucquer added that "probably the Police, like the P.R.I.S., were not informed of the whereabouts of casualties until it was too late."⁸⁶ The Police Commissioner himself also defended the record, denying delay on their part, while placing blame elsewhere. Their primary concern, he reported, had been "to have the dead bodies removed from sight as early as possible." They had attempted to take photographs at the Mominpore morgue, where many corpses had been stacked, but "there was difficulty in arranging the dead bodies for photography... [as] the doms refused to move them into proper position."⁸⁷ This rebellion on the part of the *doms* against carrying out their normal role is a telling indicator of the times. The *doms* - the most marginal of all "employees" - were, at this time, suffering themselves from the ravages of famine and disease, but could not be persuaded, even by police authority, to do the dirty work of Empire.

Although the corpses accounted for were thus disposed of without name, physical description, or any personalized record that would facilitate future identification, there *was*, in the last analysis, one single mark of classification assigned to most of the bodies. Given that these same bodies had been left to rot, had been denied care, and had been all but systematically denied, the trace of "identification" that *was* recorded has to be understood as the state's most "essential" distinction of all - one that would adhere to even an anonymous body, deprived of all social connection, dignity or recognition. That last trace, interestingly enough, was religious affiliation. As in the case of famine deaths, however, the method of determining the distinction between a "Hindu" and a "Muslim" corpse is difficult to fathom. Because the only physical characteristic (which is limited to male corpses) that *might* be of value in this regard is to check males for circumcision - Muslims are generally circumcised, whereas Hindus are not - a genital examination of the corpses seems to be the only means by which such determinations could possibly have

⁸⁵ Ibid

⁸⁶ Ibid

⁸⁷ Ibid

been made. Apart from the very questionable ethics of such a means of "identification," one is forced to wonder how it is that, though the bodies of many of the dead had been allowed to decompose to a point that photographs were "useless," a genital examination would have provided positive "proof" of religious identity.

In any case, an "essential" assessment along these lines was somehow made, and remained the sole identification that the majority of corpses were granted - much to the chagrin of the Officer-in-Charge of the Post Raid Information Service. In his Final Report to Government, Drucquer explains:

The labels which the Police tie on to unidentified dead bodies and of which a copy is given to P.R.I.S. contain a column for marks of identification on the body. A very large number of labels received did not have this column filled up, only one words being entered, such as; "Muslim," or "Hindu." This is of no use at all in establishing identification subsequently.

It is a chilling fact that in the dehumanizing darkness of war and famine, this one simple and explosive distinction was all that was required any longer in demarcating the disposable citizens of Calcutta. It is furthermore, a similarly telling and chilling foreshadowing of the darkness still to come. It serves too as a reminder of the administrative dividing line, at once taken for granted and cynically deployed.

Settling Accounts

The Essential Services [Maintenance] Ordinance of 1941 had made it a criminal offence for any worker engaged in "essential" war-related industries and enterprises from abandoning their station of employment without "reasonable excuse," under penalty of imprisonment. "The fact that a person apprehends that by continuing in his employment he will be exposed to increased physical danger," it was noted, "does not constitute a reasonable excuse."⁸⁸ The threat of imprisonment it was understood, however, would do little to assuage the fears of current workers and might actually discourage labor recruitment. The War Injuries Insurance Ordinance, promulgated in the same year, was, in effect, a companion - and counterbalance - to the Essential Services Ordinance. Under the War Injuries Ordinance any individual "gainfully occupied" in war-related industries was entitle to compensation in the case of injury "caused by the impact on any person or

⁸⁸ Bhattacharya, p. 41

property [by] any enemy aircraft."⁸⁹ Reparation was to be worked out in accordance with the Workers' Compensation Act of 1923, and as such, the risks of war were associated with the occupational risks of employment. In the case of death, compensation would be made to the nearest of kin according to the same payment scheme. The War Injuries (Compensation Insurance) Act of 1943 reinforced the provisions of the earlier ordinance, clarifying that the liability of compensation was to rest on employers, who were subsequently to be reimbursed under the provision of the (mandatory) War Risks Insurance Ordinance.

In the days following the December 5th air raid, both the central and sub-area offices of the Post Raid Information Service were swamped with relatives of dock workers who had gone "missing" during the attack. The agency, however, was only able to satisfy a "very limited number of enquiries... owing to the large number of unidentified cases."⁹⁰ Applicants missing relatives had come not only to locate the whereabouts of their kin for sentimental reasons, but also to file insurance claims against the deaths of their family members - in extremely hard times. It was the responsibility of the P.R.I.S., its Officer-in-Charge explained to the Bengal Secretariat, to assist "relatives of persons killed in filling up forms for claims under the War Injuries Scheme."⁹¹ However, Drucquer informed his superiors, the lack of identification of the majority of corpses had made it "impossible to enable claims to be filed."⁹² It is likely that this state of affairs saved the capital interests operating in the dock area from the inconvenience of having to formally declare that the enumerated dead found on their premises after the raids, were "outsiders." It is also likely that the lack of "identity discs" that contributed to the number of unidentified dead, further exculpated these same interests from paying compensation for their more "regular" employees who had been killed in the raid, but who had been left "unidentified."

The exculpation of the Civil Defense Services, the R.A.F. and the Port Commissioners for their contributions to the extent of damage and loss of life, as well as the chaos and mishandling of "rescue" efforts, was a much more delicate bureaucratic

⁸⁹ War Injuries Ordinance, 1941. At: http://bdlaws.gov.bd/print_sections_all.php?id=192 (Last accessed July 8, 2010; 12:32 P.M.)

⁹⁰ WBSA, Home Confidential, file W-30/43, P.R.I.S. Final Report

⁹¹ Ibid

⁹² Ibid

affair. A memo by one particular Military Police Security Control Officer, forwarded to the Chief of the General Staff, stated in paragraph #7 that, "during the period between the first bomb and the all clear, Civil Defense Departments were conspicuous by their absence - the entire fire-fighting, first aid and rescue work being done by the fighting services."⁹³ This memo created quite a stir. The Chairman of the Port Commissioners, Sir Thomas Elderton - a well connected man and also the A.R.P. Controller for the Port - took sharp issue with the charges made by the military officer. He wrote an indignant memo to the Bengal Secretariat deploring the accusations, and ensuring the Secretary that Civil Defense forces in the Port had acted swiftly and courageously. The Bengal Secretariat, in turn, issued a note to the central Civil Defense Department of the Government of India, "to record its most profound disapproval of the action of the Military Security Control Officer."⁹⁴ The Additional Secretary to the Government of India assured the Bengal Secretariat that "suitable steps [would be] taken to impress on the officer concerned the unfortunate repercussions which may result from derogatory comments on the Civil Services."⁹⁵ The officer concerned, however, put it on record that his report had been "based entirely on personal experience," and, as such, could not be retracted. In the end, however, the now infamous paragraph #7 of his report was changed to read: "During the period between the first bomb and the all clear there was delay in getting the Civil Defence Services into operation in some areas. When they started to function, however, they worked satisfactorily." E. R. Kitchin of the Bengal Secretariat sent an apology to Sir Thomas for the "injustices of the M.P.S.C.O.'s comments," and Elderton sent him back an appreciation for his good work, noting that "anyhow the man who made the mis-statements is no longer here."⁹⁶

The question of the removal of bodies by British military personnel - rather than the A.R.P. - was a bit more difficult to resolve. The same Military Police Security Control Officer had alleged in his controversial memo that "not one Indian civilian gave help or dared to touch a casualty," and that the R.A.F. had done all the removal of bodies themselves. Alone this allegation may have been dealt with similar to the first.

⁹³ Ibid, Memo 21/SCO/80

⁹⁴ Ibid

⁹⁵ Ibid

⁹⁶ Ibid

However, both the B.N.R. and Port A.R.P. reports had complained of military interference with the removal of bodies, suggesting that their stretchers and ambulances had been commandeered by the military. Of special concern was the B.N.R.'s response to question 15 (i) on the A.R.P.'s "First Report" form: "Who did the actual handling and removal of corpses?" The - perhaps at the time, seemingly innocuous - answer was given: "R.A.F. and other European Officers volunteered to lift and remove bodies to mortuary in lorry loaded by the R.A.F.." ⁹⁷ In the subsequent days, with the number of "unidentified" bodies generating public and administrative unease, the record was summarily clarified. More than two weeks after the bombing, the A.R.P. Controller for the Railways sent a memo asking the Home Department to "kindly correct" query 15 (i) to read, in answer to who had moved corpses: "Volunteers from among the B.N.R. officials, and Indians, including a Sikh, 2 Brahmins, and Indian Christians of the B.N.R. Sanitary Staff... with the help of a lorry provided by No. 978 Squadron R.A.F.." Nothing remained of the R.A.F. but the lorry, and in the place of their personnel, now sat this somewhat comical "rainbow coalition" of colonial Indian cooperation.

The R.A.F., on the other hand, had accounts to settle of its own. Reports in *The Statesman* and other media outlets that Calcutta had been left wholly unprotected rankled the forces. Leslie Chippett of the R.A.F. remembers the accusation and its aftermath colorfully. Chippett's squadron had just returned to Calcutta from Chittagong, less than 24 hours earlier, and "although far from prepared [had] struggled to get some [obsolete] Hurricanes into the air." To no effect.

Imagine the anger of the squadron from CO to the lowest [rank] when on the following Monday the Calcutta newspaper was very scathing, "Where was the RAF, do they have the weekend off?" It was decided to show these critics [who] sat at home with their gins, that the RAF did exist. On the following weekend a particularly important race meeting was to be held at Calcutta racecourse. Imagine the members chagrin when as the race commenced Hurricanes appeared at nought feet "beating up" the racecourse. Horses went everywhere and I believe the race was concluded in the slowest time on record. I saw no further criticisms of 67 or any other squadrons. Further to this there is a story about a camera gun, film or lack of it, and discrepancies regarding a "kill" made in that raid, but I'll leave that for another time. ⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Ibid, B.N.R. A.R.P. "First Report."

⁹⁸ Archived at BBC "People's War," <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar/stories/06/a4040506.shtml> (last accessed July 8, 2010; 2:29 P.M.)

One can only imagine, also, the panic and fear that was inflicted on civilian "morale" when these same bombers came screaming out of the sky and "appeared at nought feet," exactly one week after the Japanese attack, and less than a mile from the docks.

Morale in docklands, in any case, continued to be "very low" for several weeks, despite assurances from the Defence Minister of the Government of India that "no panic ha[d] been caused by the raid and the normal life of the city is unaffected."⁹⁹ In fact, the Bengal Chamber of Commerce just a few days earlier had informed Government that, "[morale] fluctuates with anticipations or rumors of further raids: e.g. Sunday [the day the race track was "beat up"], because the last raid occurred on a Sunday, was a poor day."¹⁰⁰ The following week Bird and Company were reporting that much of their labor force was still absent, and the Hooghly Jute Mills were reporting only 30% attendance.¹⁰¹ The sweepers "quarters" in the B.N.R. yard had been demolished, and the sweepers had "disappeared." Forty replacement sweepers had to be "recruited," but they were proving shaky as well.¹⁰² The Civil Defense Services were fairing little better. An air raid alert over the docks on the 16th of December left the Captain of the Port Area Fire Service in a state of consternation. Out of 126 men at his command, 59 had deserted when the sirens sounded. To make matters worse, he added, "the men who deserted in some instances went away as much as a quarter of a mile from their stations. Although Air Raid Shelters are provided in the Dock Area, these were not used."¹⁰³

But apart from - patently specious - official assurances printed in the newspapers, little was actually done to boost the all-important "morale" of the Indian population. A concerned business owner in the area posted a letter of protest on January 10th of 1944:

Over one month has elapsed since the air raid on December 5th, and in the vicinity of our factory on Hide Road [Kidderpore], the only repairs which have been carried out appear to be those undertaken by the Calcutta Electric Supply Co. to their substation... all the small shops and *bustees* still remain exactly as they were a few hours after the raid. The ruins of a Key-man shelter which was destroyed in the Port Commissioners' Depot have not been cleared away and is not exactly a good advertisement for Air Raid Precautions. It occurs to us that at

⁹⁹ *The Statesman*, "Sir F. K. Noon's Visit," December 7, 1943

¹⁰⁰ WBSA, Home Confidential, file W-30/43

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*

¹⁰² *Ibid*

¹⁰³ *Ibid*

very small cost, and bearing in mind that in the War Risks Insurance Fund there is a sum of about 9 crores (900 million) rupees at the moment, all the necessary repairs to shops, buildings and dwelling houses in the area can be fully restored. The effect on morale and the propaganda which would be possible as a result needs no further elaboration.¹⁰⁴

The Bengal Minister of Commerce, Labor and Industry investigated the situation and found that the War Risks Insurance Fund did not apply. "Repairs to shops, buildings and dwelling houses damaged by air raids cannot be helped from this fund," he wrote, "a scheme for insurance against war damage to immovable property not covered by the [War Risks Insurance Fund] has been considered and rejected."¹⁰⁵ By the end of the war the War Risks Insurance scheme had collected 4.2 billion rupees through mandated enlistment and had paid out less than 5 million.¹⁰⁶ The Secretary of the Home Department was disappointed. "The wording of the Metal Box Company's letter may [have been] unsuitable," he responded, "but there is something in what they say, viz: that air-raid damage should not be left just as it is indefinitely for all to see... this is not very satisfactory; i.e. a general denial of responsibility all around."¹⁰⁷

Air Raid Damage

The house that my father grew up in, on Mominpore Road, was one of those dwellings that had been damaged in the raid, and was never made whole again. Apart from the cracks in the foundation that had resulted from close proximity to the bomb blasts on the docks, there was also *unseen* damage seemed to linger on indefinitely. My father carried with him, for the rest of his life, a profound and deep seated terror and anxiety that had been imprinted on him by this attack. Our family's connection to the docks and to the air raids themselves had been, to be sure, uncommonly extensive. His father, the retired policeman with dwindling accounts, had property along the docks in the *bustee* settlements of migrant laborers, whom he shook down for rent on most weekends. My father's older brother - who even at this time was more or less the head of the household at 24 years of age - was an A.R.P. warden in Mominpore. Under his

¹⁰⁴ Ibid

¹⁰⁵ Ibid

¹⁰⁶ Bhattacharya, p.40

¹⁰⁷ WBSA, Home Confidential, file W-30/43

jurisdiction the morgue, less than a mile from the house, also fell. The neighborhood itself was inhabited mostly by underemployed and impoverished laborers associated with the docks and its concomitant factories, warehouses and workshops, and had been swamped after the bombing with terrified dock laborers "lying up" in its by-lanes and bazaars. Flocks of "sightseers" had also moved through the area to observe the damage - and had moved back out bearing witness. Nowhere in Calcutta, in fact, could the "rumors," panic and trepidation have been more pronounced.

Surely the complex of factors involved must have impacted my father's young mind profoundly. But it was simply, in fact, the actual visceral, terrifying and apocalyptic *sound* and magnitude of the blasts that had shattered his nerves and continued to haunt him throughout his life. He had already lived in midst of famine, with bodies, particularly in that area of the city, piling up on the streets day by day. And he would live through, after only a very short interval, events that one would imagine would be even more deeply traumatic. But, perhaps because of his age at the time, or perhaps because of his temperament, the impression left on him from bombing of the docks was the deepest and most nagging of all. He never described (and possibly could not have even processed at such an age) the details of the event. In fact, from listening to his stories, I was under the impression that Calcutta had been bombed almost every night - as perhaps he was. He only referred to the bombings as the shattering of windows, the cracking of the foundation, and the repeated ear splitting reports that made him feel that the world itself was coming to an end. It was a story without beginning or end. No time frame or outline of events seemed to punctuate his memories and make them chronological. The bombings, in this sense, were memory without context.

Several accounts that I have heard or read from people who were children in 1943 are similar in this way. Though the bombings of Calcutta have been an almost unnoticed chapter in the modern history of India, or even Bengal, they do seem to hold a particularly prominent place in the memories of the *children* who lived through them. To give one example, below is the memory of one child at the time:

I remember as a little girl aged 8 years old living in Calcutta during WW2 in our extended family. *The Japanese bombed the city every night* at that time as it was an important city and capital of the British Raj. As it was getting dark the air raid siren used to start and we all had to go into our basement room for safety. We

often had to stay for two hours or more until the all clear was sounded. We used to have our dinner early to eat before the air raids. As a little girl I used to always get very frightened during the bombing.¹⁰⁸

The idea that the bombings took place "every night," although Calcutta suffered nothing of the sort, may, indeed, have more to do with "always being frightened" by the bombings that did occur, than with the frequency of the actual bombings. Undoubtedly there is a whole body of scholarship on the progress of post-traumatic stress in children, but that is beyond the scope of this present analysis. Suffice it to say that every time a city is bombed in recent times, and its citizens are "shocked and awed" by the impact of weapons far more powerful than those that were in use in 1943 - and I reflect that in that city (of perhaps millions) there are a large proportion of children - I think of my father - and also of my mother, who wore a pin in the 70's, that read: "war is not healthy for children and other living things."

¹⁰⁸ "Childhood in Calcutta," (italics mine) archived at BBC's "People's War," at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar/stories/34/a2780534.shtml> (last accessed July 8, 2010; 4:50 P.M.)

Chapter Six: "Second Famine"

Dark Night

Once the famine had become an international news story, reporters flocked to Bengal to bear witness. T. G. Narayan, of the Madras-based *Hindu*, arrived in September of 1943 and toured the famine-stricken districts of the province for several months. He compiled his observations in a book, *Famine Over Bengal*, published in the early months of 1944. His tour of Bengal's country-side ended in the delta district of Barisal, by which time Narayan had seen enough. "There was too much misery around," he wrote, "the air was thick, heavy and foul with unrelieved distress, disease and degradation. The famine had been more or less driven out of urban areas, but it was still there in the countryside."¹ Narayan had retreated to Calcutta to recuperate and compile his findings. In Calcutta, however, he found little respite from the anxiety that his investigations had fostered:

The city had had a raid - its heaviest - while I was away, and the air was heavy with talk about it. My heart and mind were elsewhere. I remembered the sights I had seen of human misery... and with a heavy heart I set to work to write of what I had seen. It was not easy. It was not pleasant. Ten days' effort on the typewriter brought me to the previous chapter. Thoroughly flagged out, I pushed away the typewriter, switched off the lights and got out onto the Maidan for a long walk by myself to collect my thoughts. It was pitch dark, except for occasional flashes of light from the overhead power-lines as the tram-cars' guide pulleys rolled along their joints. The stars looked down on a sleeping world and everything seemed still in sleep. But far out in the remote villages of Bengal, I knew, men, women and children were not sleeping the sleep that came to those who had a full meal after the day's toil. Many of them were fever-stricken, hunger-stricken, and would have no sleep.

I asked myself what chances they had of being relieved in the present and of being saved in the months to come... With the promise of a bountiful harvest, was Bengal to turn the corner, and did she see ahead of her the prospect of safety? Or was there danger lurking in the dark future, hatching in the womb of time, ready to descend on a hapless people and smite them again? Would there be a

¹ Narayan, p. 218

repetition in 1944 of the holocaust of 1943? Would Bengal's countryside be once again laid waste and strewn with the wrecks of her children... Were the people again going to die like trapped rats... with plenty of food all around? I found no hopeful answer, The night air was crisp, but it failed to refresh my weary spirit and I turned for home. It was very still and even the traffic had gone off the roads. The stars had disappeared behind banks of clouds and, as I stumbled in and out of the baffle walls, the night *chowkidar* flashed his torch, stirred himself and said goodnight. As a sign of recognition, he added, "It is a very dark night, *Huzzoor*, the Japanese won't come." Not wholly awake to what he said, I answered, "Yes, it is a very black night, but there are many hours to go before it will be dawn."²

"Second Famine"

By December of 1943 it was apparent that the all-important *aman* crop, harvested in late autumn, would be a bumper crop. With London's continued refusal of imports, this promising *aman* yield, above all else, was being counted on to relieve famine. The new Viceroy, Field Marshall Archibald Wavell had also managed to implement an extensive and efficient military relief operation, almost overnight. Major-General Stuart (in over-all charge of military assistance) had, at his command, twelve to fifteen thousand British troops to aid relief operations, and Major-General Wakely (in charge of movements) was given considerable transportation priority to move rice out of Calcutta and into the districts. Although the official line was still that famine had been precipitated by the hoarding of cultivators, orders were passed that seemed to belie a less perfunctory understanding of the causes of famine. The export of rice and paddy from Bengal was strictly prohibited early in December.³ Direct purchases from large industrial firms were banned,⁴ and a ban was also levied on the movement of rice and paddy out of 12 principle rice-growing districts. Perhaps most importantly of all, the Central Government in New Delhi committed itself to feed Calcutta through direct imports from outside of Bengal.⁵ These measures, combined, would take immense pressure off the countryside, which was suffering incalculable misery at the expense of Calcutta.

Wavell himself was in Bengal in December for a second tour of the province. At his first public speech as Viceroy, he encouraged members of the combined Chambers of

² Ibid, p. 223-234

³ *The Statesman*, "Exports of Rice and Paddy Banned," December 2, 1943

⁴ *The Statesman*, "Rice Purchase By Firms," December 13, 1943

⁵ *The Statesman*, "Plan for Calcutta," December 22, 1943

Commerce in Calcutta to begin thinking about the future: "I do not propose here to enter into long consideration of how we reached our present difficulties," he informed the gathering, "our business is not to look back but to look ahead."⁶ The implication was clear, the Bengal famine was to be put away to history and business would go on as usual. The Food Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council, Sir Jwala Prasad Srivastava, was even more sanguine. He was also in Bengal in December, meeting with prominent citizens in Dacca, and - despite the fact that "several members of the public," had harassed him with complaints "about the shortage of rice in the city and *mofussil*, the quantities supplied through ward committees, scarcity of milk and the non-supply of mustard oil, kerosene and coal"⁷ - he had waxed optimistic. "We are now faced with the problem of the future," he announced, "the food crisis is probably over and I wish and pray that it may never occur again."⁸ Secretary of State, Leopold Amery, from his remove in London, was more reflective. On the last day of a difficult year, he sat in his private chamber and turned to his diary:

So much for 1943... for me personally it has been a dull, uphill year with no highlights and a growing volume of abuse from India and from the Left here. Gandhi's fast and the famine - or rather the general economic overstrain of which the famine is only a symptom - have been my chief pre-occupations and my chief reward for having, from the outset, pushed on India's war effort in every direction.⁹

On the 12th of January, 1944, in an obvious effort to punctuate the political embarrassment of starvation in India, Wavell telegraphed Amery in regards to a "Bengal Famine Enquiry." The proceedings, he suggested, should take the form of a Royal Commission, which might be organized "almost immediately." He also again urged that the enquiry should "be concerned with the future rather than with the past."¹⁰ The "terms of reference" that the Viceroy suggested were succinct: "to investigate and report to the Governor-General in Council upon the causes of widespread distress, starvation and

⁶ *The Statesman*, "Lord Wavell's Assurance," December 21, 1943

⁷ *The Statesman*, "Food Member Visits Dacca," December 18, 1943

⁸ *Ibid*

⁹ *The Leo Amery Diaries*, p. 959

¹⁰ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 645

disease in Bengal in the year of 1943."¹¹ The bullet points were, likewise, pragmatically delimited. The commission would be tasked to offer recommendations on:

(a) the possibility of improving the diet of the people and the variety and yield of food crops

(b) the possibility of increasing the administrative system, *particularly in the districts*, and

(c) the need for better provision for medical relief and public health.¹²

Such a program of enquiry, the Viceroy knew, would be an essential step towards putting an "end" to the Bengal Famine. Even *The Statesman* got into the mood of closure, publishing a "Famine Retrospect" on the very same day that the Viceroy telegraphed the Secretary of State about an enquiry. The "Bengal Famine of 1943" - as it has been known ever since - was officially becoming a thing of the past.

But the view from Calcutta - or for that matter New Delhi, and certainly London - as T. G. Narayan rightly pointed out, was deceptive. Freda Bedi, a reporter for the *Punjab Tribune*, like Narayan, had been sent on assignment to cover the famine in Bengal. She arrived in Calcutta in January of 1944 to begin her tour of the province. The city, she reported, was "full of busy life... there are soldiers everywhere, and the restaurants are bursting with food and music and merry-makers. But look into the faces of the middle-class and the poor. Some of them have got a haunted look. They are thinner. 'Tell me,' I said [to one resident], 'is the famine over - at least the worst of it?' 'Good God, no' was the reply. 'They have only made Calcutta more comfortable for the rich to live in: they have pushed the inconvenient sights back into the villages.'¹³ In these same villages, Bedi found "stark hunger... everywhere." In one village near Dacca, Bedi found a hunger-bent woman cooking what rice her family could afford in the open-air:

Her shoulders were heaving as she stirred it. She covered her face, for strangers had come. I went up to her and looked in her eyes: they were full of tears. Tears were falling into the rice. It was a bare half-*seer* floating in the water. "For seven people," her husband said in a low voice. In how many villages, I wondered, [were] the poor eating their bare handful of rice slop salted with a woman's tears?¹⁴

¹¹ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 646

¹² Ibid

¹³ Bedi, p. 22

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 70

While it is true that relief efforts, coupled with the harvested rice, had eased the intensity and rapidity of starvation in Bengal, all retrospective analysis of the "Bengal Famine of 1943," was, as of yet, grossly premature. The price of rice had come down off 1943 highs, but still remained four times pre-war levels.¹⁵ At Government "free kitchens" many of Bengal's poor, who had managed somehow to survive until now, fared little better. The doles of "gruel" handed out at "relief centers" were radically insufficient - "rice and water with a little *dal*" - in quantities amounting to 800 calories a day, less than a third of the ration mandated by the (neglected) Bengal Famine Code. The Deputy Surgeon General of Bengal, himself, was confounded; "it was incredible," he admitted, "that they could have lived on [such rations]... particularly considering that many people who attended the kitchens had to walk a mile or two to get it."¹⁶ Graft, he added, was wide-spread, and much of the "excess" food was going to "the man running the kitchen... local headmen of the villages, schoolmasters and other similar types of men."¹⁷ The quality of food given was also extremely poor, and caused many to become sick after consuming it.

But the problem in Bengal in the early months of 1944, as Freda Bedi reported, "was not just the problem of the availability of rice. It [was] the problem of society in fragments."¹⁸ The ongoing grind of hunger, homelessness and nakedness, continued to claim hundreds of thousands of lives. Malaria, cholera, and - with increasing virulence - smallpox, were sweeping through the hunger-stricken population unabated. Weakened bodies succumbed within hours of the onset of disease, saving officialdom the inconvenience of reporting the continuing toll of "starvation deaths." Official medical relief had begun only in December, and remained grossly inadequate. Quinine, for treating malaria, was the new black-market craze. Record numbers of land-transfers had left millions without shelter and a scarcity of cloth had left many more millions half or fully naked throughout the winter months. In December, Army relief headquarters were fielding cries of distress from several districts "saying that people were dying, not on account of lack of food, but on account of the weather because they had nothing to put

¹⁵ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Government of India, Food Department to Secretary of State, p. 597

¹⁶ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of K. S. Fitch, p. 680

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Bedi, p. 12

on, no blankets and no clothes." ¹⁹ Even in Calcutta, mortality in January of 1944 was again on the rise, with 1,280 deaths against an average of 661 for the preceding five years. ²⁰ And still, rationing had not yet begun.

Regardless of the view from below - the continuing toll of hunger and deprivation, and the dire indications that many millions more were at risk of perishing of starvation and disease in short order - the official line that "famine" was over pervaded political and administrative thinking. An early "end" to famine in Bengal, first and foremost, served certain instrumental purposes for the British. Relations with the United States, in particular, were at a critical juncture in the context of wartime cooperation, and sharp criticism of British colonial rule in India represented a sore spot in diplomatic relations. The conclusion of famine would be one less open wound. The end of famine would also forestall further criticism of the Government of India domestically, particularly after the failure of the Cripps Mission, little progress on the constitutional front, and the bulk of Congress leaders still in jail. On the even more charged and divisive provincial level, famine had come to almost totally monopolize the political economy of Bengal. For the Muslim League, an end to famine would avert condemnation of failure, and shore up the beleaguered authority of the League Ministry by lending it the credibility of having contained disaster. The opposition, likewise, willingly adopted the rhetoric of the "end" of famine instrumentally. With the Bengal Famine of 1943 already in the box, the specter of a "Second Famine" could be hoisted and left to hang over the current Ministry like the proverbial Sword of Damocles.

Famine, in this sense, lent a dark and elemental tone to an already acrimonious debate. Predictions, forebodings and indignation concerning a "second famine" in Bengal were, in fact, rife, and served to further entrench already divisive, and increasingly communalist antagonisms in the province - not least of all in relation to relief efforts. With Congress leaders jailed, and the organization in shambles, the Hindu Mahasabha in Bengal was able to gain a foothold that had eluded them electorally. Famine provided a particularly manifest opportunity to consolidate the Hindu Mahasabha's representative claims. According to the Bengal Congress Parliamentary Party, "Congress,

¹⁹ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of Major-General Wakely, p. 1023

²⁰ *The Statesman*, "Calcutta's Mortality Raises Again," January 12, 1944

which had obvious difficulties in organizing country-wide relief owing to its entire machinery having been declared illegal, decided to accord Dr. [Shyama Prasad] Mookerjee [President of the Provincial Hindu Mahasabha] every possible support and co-operation."²¹ Under this arrangement the ideologies that the Hindu Mahasabha stood for were also entangled in famine relief efforts. Primary on the Mahasabha's ideological agenda was to promote an understanding of Muslims as inferior citizens of *Hindu* India, and primary on the political platform, at the time, was a deep seated antipathy for the Muslim League and a vituperative opposition to its primacy in the Bengal Ministry. In this context, Mahasabha leader, Dr. Shyama Prasad Mookerjee, made energetic use of the specter of a "second famine" to discredit the Muslim League, rally opposition, and lobby for supersession of the Ministry.

The Muslim League thus found itself in the untenable (and unenviable) position of having to defend an "end" of famine, which would substantiate its own claims to competence, while having to deflect attacks of misadministration and the coming of a "second famine." The ironies of its own position came to light in the testimony of the Muslim Chamber of Commerce. "The [Muslim] Mercantile Community," their memorandum to the Famine Enquiry Commission read, "has noted with pain that political organizations unfriendly to the Government of Bengal - and also the Government of India - considered it right and proper to take advantage of the people to thwart every attempt made to ameliorate the situation... the Press and the Platform were used... [to] engender fear, and even when scarcity and disease had been brought under control these reprehensible activities were turned to preach about a second famine."²² The relief measures of the Muslim League, in the form of (however substandard) government kitchens, were thus valorized as having brought famine "under control" - even while, scarcity and disease continued to decimate the province, and the first famine might have been declared "second" at any given moment.

²¹ Nanavati Papers, Memorandum of the Bengal Parliamentary Party, p. 18

²² Nanavati Papers, Memorandum of the Muslim Chamber of Commerce, p. 264

Whose Famine?

The ascension of a Muslim League-controlled Ministry in early 1943 had served - as the Viceroy himself had predicted - to exacerbate already strained communal relations in Bengal, and - particularly with Congress outlawed - "opposition" or "allegiance" to the provincial government in Bengal during the Nazimuddin Ministry increasingly became synonymous with "Hindu" and "Muslim" interests. The dire impact of famine served to galvanize animosities, congealing communalist rhetoric into material claims and counter-claims concerning the means of bare existence. Economic collapse, wide-spread destitution, despair, and ultimately death by starvation and accompanying disease, in this sense, provided a grim bio-political substrate upon which the most virulent strains of communal ideology flourished. As famine deaths mounted and the calamity of starvation in Bengal became increasingly central to political debate, communal resentments became leaden with the weight of hundreds of thousands of corpses - as well as the care of millions more who hovered on the verge of death. As already seen, these bodies themselves, were commonly understood as "Hindu" or "Muslim," with few other points of reference attached to them.

Such distinctions also became entangled in relief. With official relief operations extremely belated and inadequate, private organization had stepped in to fill the void, and these efforts too were quickly sucked into the current of communal bitterness and accusation. With Congress energies and funds channeled through the Hindu Mahasabha, its leader Shyama Prasad Mookherjee, became the de facto "Relief Commissioner" for large sections of Bengal. Under his auspices the Bengal Relief Committee (BRC) was set up, becoming the umbrella organization for a large contingent of private relief efforts. The primary objective of the BRC, however, was for the relief "middle-class Bengalis"²³ - code-words, to many, for "Hindu" sufferers. Lending credence to detractors who detected a biased approach to the efforts of the BRC, the organization set up most of its relief centers only in Hindu majority villages and wards.²⁴ A parallel organization, the Hindu Mahasabha Relief Committee, was also set up under the leadership of Mookherjee, because "many of the donors... expressed the desire that their money should be spent

²³Greenough (1982), p. 190

²⁴Ibid

through the Mahasabha [only.]"²⁵ Central to the claims of both organizations, however, was that Government relief centers employed Muslim cooks, which made it "impossible" for Hindu sufferers to take food at Government gruel kitchens.²⁶ Such assertions, it is easy to conclude, were very thinly veiled accusations of communal bias in relation to governmental relief.

Counter-accusations of bias on the part of the Hindu Mahasabha were also rife. Shyama Prasad Mookherjee was an extremely divisive figure and his directorship of private relief measures, alone, was enough to alarm Muslim citizens. The Revenue Department of the Government of Bengal, in charge of relief operations, fielded complaints that the Mahasabha was only giving relief to Hindus and issued a warning that Government would cut off their supplies if the practice continued.²⁷ Members of the Mahasabha admitted that they had given differential relief to Muslims - uncooked grains, rather than cooked food - but denied observing any "consideration of caste or creed" in relief operations.²⁸ Other, less overt, measures that would have discouraged Muslims from seeking relief seem to have been current however. When Journalist T. G. Narayan visited a Hindu Mahasabha hospital in Midnapore he found, much to his surprise, that fifteen out of forty beds were empty. But apart from few patients, he found that "every room in the hospital had a picture of Dr. Shyama Prasad Mookherjee [on the wall.] I don't know what therapeutic effect that had... [but] it would have been much better to have filled up the hospital with dying patients."²⁹

The Muslim League also had its public image much in mind in regards to relief. Because the League was in control of the Ministry, government "gruel kitchens" served, in some sense, as an avowal of the Muslim League's concern. Though the inadequacy of relief provided, the poor quality of food doled out, and the recurring issue of "Muslim cooks," drew sustained criticism; the scope and visibility of government relief kitchens did make a good impression upon the Muslim poor of Bengal, winning particular favor for Food Minister, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy.³⁰ The Muslim League itself opted

²⁵ Nanavati Papers, Memorandum of the Hindu Mahasabha, p. 257

²⁶ Ibid, p. 261

²⁷ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of Tarak Nath Mukherjee, p. 910

²⁸ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of the Bengal Provincial Mahasabha, p. 155

²⁹ Narayan, p. 172-3

³⁰ Shila Sen, p. 175

against organizing any relief operations under its direct control, in order not to "give those people [the Mahasabha] a chance of making accusations against us only to justify themselves."³¹ Instead the Muslim League channeled its resources and funds through the Muslim Chamber of Commerce. This shelter of Muslim League social and financial capital, however, proved insufficient. When word got out that Muhammad Ali Jinnah himself had sent a check through Ispahani with money stipulated specifically for "Muslim relief," controversy and condemnation ensued. The Muslim Chamber of Commerce admitted that approximately 5% of the donations it received were for Muslim relief only, but argued that it had not earmarked these same funds, since more than 5% of the recipients of Chamber relief were Muslims in any case. Such arguments had very short legs in the political climate of famine, however.

The matter of Jinnah's check quickly became an all-India controversy. In response, Hindu nationalist and ardent Mahasabha activist, Vinayak Savarkar, called for "every Hindu organization and individual to follow the brave lead of the Bombay Provincial and some other Hindu Sabhas to send all help to rescue, clothe and shelter Hindu sufferers alone...Hindus should be determined to send whatever money, foodstuffs and cloths the destitutes want and earmark the rescue of Hindu sufferers."³² Savarkar went further still and accused Muslim organizations in Bengal of withholding relief from Hindu "destitutes" unless they agreed to convert to Islam.³³ Nazimuddin defended the record acerbically at the Muslim League's All-India conference in Karachi in the last week of December 1943, deploring Savarkar's accusations and categorically denying that "conversions of starving Hindus had taken place."³⁴ The Muslim Chamber of Commerce also presented evidence to show that its own relief efforts had been ecumenical, publishing memorandums sent to District Magistrates which "imposed conditions...that money should be distributed without thinking of caste or creed."³⁵ But beneath the dark shadow of famine, accusation and counter-accusation were the order of the day and evidence did little to allay growing communal animosities.

³¹ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of the Bengal Provincial Muslim League, p. 1373

³² *The Statesman*, "Dar-el-Islam," December 12, 1943

³³ *Ibid*

³⁴ *The Statesman*, "Muslim League Session Concludes," December 28, 1943

³⁵ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of the Bengal Muslim Chamber of Commerce, p. 1078-9

The *aman* procurement campaign, of essential importance to the Government of Bengal in the winter of 43'-44' and the most comprehensive "relief" plan going, was also hampered by political division which broke along communal lines. In the Bengal countryside the ghastly depredations of famine had depopulated whole villages and had left an entire society numbed and deeply traumatized. Scarcity, homelessness, hunger and disease were the order of the day, and bodies were still lying in various states of decomposition throughout Bengal. Millions more teetered on the brink of extinction, struggling to survive by any means available. Such conditions provided fertile ground for divisive politicking. In this context, the Hindu Mahasabha began an energetic and aggressive campaign against the government scheme, warning Hindu citizens to offer "stubborn resistance" to all government efforts at rice procurement.³⁶ Their campaign, it seems, was largely effective. By March of 1943 the Government of Bengal had been able to acquire less than 15% of its target of 1.15 million tons, which put a great strain on efforts to control both prices and supplies.³⁷

The campaign against procurement, again, reverberated on a national scale. The Food Member of the Government of India, Cawnpore industrialist J. P. Srivastava - himself, an active member of the Hindu Mahasabha - criticized the Bengal Ministry's rice procurement and rationing plans stridently at the central governmental level. His criticism drew predictable ire from the Joint Secretaries of the Muslim League Ministry. The Joint Secretaries went public in denouncing the Viceroy's Food Member, "whose attitude to the Bengal Ministry's food administration has been so surprisingly similar to that of the Opposition elements in the province."³⁸ A statement issued by the Ministry itself condemned Srivastava's meddling as a campaign of propaganda, designed only to "give the Bengal Ministry a bad name."³⁹ On this count they accused the Food Member of "import(ing) politics into food questions" and demanded his resignation from the Executive Council. The Bengal Famine, was dangerously hardening communal sentiments even in Delhi. Secretary of State for India, Leopold Amery, brushed off the controversy breezily: "I am afraid this is typical of the way in which the communal

³⁶ Basu, p. 64

³⁷ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 808

³⁸ *The Statesman*, "Criticism of Food Member," January 7, 1944

³⁹ *Ibid*

question enters into everything," he wrote to the Viceroy, "I am not sure that you will not have to end up by composing your Executive entirely of Indian Christians or by inventing a new official religion to which all Government Servants and Ministers should be bound to subscribe!"⁴⁰

The implementation of rationing in Calcutta, which would also be a crucial step in controlling prices throughout Bengal, was similarly entangled in rancorous debate that broke along communal lines. The Ministry was pushing hard for the opening government shops that would be staffed according to legislated communal ratios, that mandated parity for Muslims, while interested Hindu parties lobbied vigorously for a rationing system that would run through existing trade channels, which were heavily Hindu dominated.⁴¹ The Government of India had sent their Special Rationing Advisor, W.H. Kirby to Calcutta several times in the summer of 1943, but he had made no progress. He, himself, was in favor of using any channels available, but was met by obstruction from Nazimuddin and Suhrawardy. Towards the end of 1943, the Viceroy, frustrated by the communally-charged standoff, invoked Central authority under Section 126-A of the Government of India Act and ordered the Ministry to "establish a specific number of shops and to include a specified number of trade as well as Government shops."⁴² This, in some sense, was understood as a communal compromise. The ministry reported back that it would arrange for 1,000 ration shops to be opened by January 31, 1944, of which 55% would be private retail shops (run overwhelming by Hindus) and 45% would be government (read: "Muslim") shops. These percentages were perhaps a concession to the Hindu majority in Calcutta, though still weighted, according to strict communal proportions, in favor of "Muslim" (government) shops, as Hindus comprised almost 75% of the population of Calcutta.⁴³ The plan predictably drew fast criticism from several quarters.

Srivastava, charged that the Bengal Ministry's concern was only to "admit more Muslims into the grain trade."⁴⁴ He also noted that a lack of grain reserves in Bengal

⁴⁰ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Amery to Wavell, p. 609

⁴¹ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of W.H. Kirby, p. 364

⁴² T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 561

⁴³ The Census of 1941 recorded the population of Calcutta as 73% Hindu, 23% Muslim. Census figures, however, were recognized at the time (and since) as highly unreliable. See: *Unsettled Settlers*, p. 51

⁴⁴ *The Statesman*, "Criticism of Food Member," January 7, 1944

would, in any case, make the scheme impossible and, as such, it was doomed to fail. The Joint Secretaries of Bengal responded that the proportion of Muslim shops was relatively small, but that "the inclusion of even a few Muslim shops [was] too much for the Hindu Mahasabha representatives at New Delhi."⁴⁵ They also pointed out that given the fact that the central government had agreed to undertake the feeding of Calcutta itself, the accounting of grain reserves in Bengal had little bearing on the city's ration scheme. In this context they reminded the Food Member that if there were insufficient grains to ration Calcutta, the Government of India itself would be to blame - a thinly veiled accusation against Food Member Srivastava himself.⁴⁶ Srivastava was defended from the "Hindu perspective" a few days later in *The Statesman*. Members of the Viceroy's Executive Council in New Delhi lacked the kind of authority that the Ministry were imputing on them, the author argued, and they were, as of yet, "more or less executive heads, without clear mandate from their various parties or constituents."⁴⁷ It was only due to its own imminent failure, the observer noted, that the Ministry was impelled to "raise in advance the smoke-screen of communalism."⁴⁸

N. C. Chatterji, Leader of the Hindu Mahasabha Party in the Calcutta Corporation kept up the attack. Under the Muslim League plan, he predicted, "the rationing scheme would break down and Calcutta would be faced with a great danger."⁴⁹ The distribution of ration cards had been vastly incomplete, and more importantly, "the number of shops decided upon by the Government was hopelessly inadequate."⁵⁰ The refusal of Government to allow more private (Hindu) retail shops into the scheme, he argued, would jeopardize the whole plan. The "Central Rationing Committee" of the Bengal Hindu Mahasabha weighed in on its own account, lamenting that its offer for constructive cooperation with the Ministry had been rejected.⁵¹ The Committee urged the Ministry to double the number of private shops to "ensure smooth working and efficient distribution of foodstuffs."⁵² The Government of Bengal responded to such attacks with veiled threats

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ *The Statesman*, "Political Comments by our Indian Observer," January 16, 1944

⁴⁹ *The Statesman*, "City Corporation and Rationing," January 20, 1944

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ *The Statesman*, "Mahasabha Criticisms," January, 28, 1944

⁵² Ibid

of its own. They would "value co-operation and even healthy criticism" in regards to their food policy, a press release began, but would take swift and stern measures against "any attempt to sabotage it."⁵³

Criticisms of the amount of the projected daily ration also stirred up communal sentiments. The initial plan to allot three and a half *seers*⁵⁴ of grains per person per week was regarded as woefully insufficient. The Bengal Famine Code determined a daily ration of at least 12 *chattacks* (1 *chattack* = 1/16 *seer*) per day for adults. The proposed ration for Calcutta was thus little more than two-thirds of that outlined in the Famine Code. Government agreed, after some debate, to increase the weekly ration to 4 *seers* per week and also gave assurances that provisions for supplementary rations for "heavy workers" (the "priority" classes) would be arranged at cooked food canteens.⁵⁵ Members of the Hindu community took immediate issue with this solution. Hindu workers, it was suggested, could not be expected to take cooked food from government canteens, where ritual purity could not be ensured. The Calcutta Corporation adopted a resolution on January 29th to this same effect. "In view of the fact that it is impossible for Hindus to have cooked food in canteens," the resolution stated, "Government [is] requested to increase the quota of [uncooked] rice and/or *atta* to one *seer* per day to heavy workers, and that for 2nd class workers...[to] 5 *seers* per head per week."⁵⁶ In the same resolution the Hindu-dominated Corporation demanded that an additional ration be allowed to Hindus for religious worship, particularly in regards to *bhog*, or the "feeding" of the deities. Food Minister, H. S. Suhrawardy, rejected the claim, noting that in Bombay no such provisions had been made in the rationing scheme already underway, and the gods had survived. Hindus, the Government concluded, would have to make arrangements for *bhog* by other means.⁵⁷ The Hindu Mahasabha rejoined, "the curt refusal...to sanction ration for Hindu deities...has perturbed the public mind."⁵⁸ The issue simmered for many weeks to come.

⁵³ *The Statesman*, "Purchase and Distribution of Foodgrains," January 28, 1944

⁵⁴ 1 *seer* = 2.057 lbs.

⁵⁵ *The Statesman*, "Quota of Rice Increased," January 26, 1944

⁵⁶ Nanavati Papers, Resolution included in Testimony of Calcutta Corporation, p. 1264

⁵⁷ *The Statesman*, "Quota of Rice Increased," January 26, 1944

⁵⁸ *The Statesman*, "Mahasabha Criticisms," January, 28, 1944

Despite ongoing contentions, however, rationing did finally get underway in Calcutta on the 31st of January 1944. By most accounts, and contrary to grave predictions from the opposition, the logistical arrangements proved adequate. There were other problems, however. Complaints were received from many quarters that the quality of rice being distributed at ration shops was extremely poor, some of it entirely rotten, and some contaminated with dirt and other filler. At an emergency meeting of the Calcutta Corporation, a moldering and stinking sample was presented to the Director of Public Health and held up to his nose as proof. "He reacted to it violently. He was shocked at the sight it presented and turned up his nose against it."⁵⁹ Rationing Controller, Mr. A. C. Hartley, admitted that the quality of rice being sold at ration shops was poor, but denied that it was quite unfit for human consumption.⁶⁰ Food Minister, Suhrawardy, was also inundated with complaints and had to concede that the rice being used was not up to par, but noted that reports circulating that it was causing disease and even death "could not be confirmed."⁶¹ As pitiable as it might be to feed starving people rotten food, the likely explanation for such is darker still. As milled rice can be stored for up to one year without significant deterioration, it is likely that the rice now being circulated had been in the possession of Government and/or its corporate clients' warehouses for *more than one year*. Though findings on hoarding by Government and industry were inconclusive, that stores of now rotten rice were being unloaded on the ration market in the first months of 1944 is damning evidence that any number of famine deaths may well have been averted by stocks already in hand, and that rice was, in fact, rotting in warehouses while people starved.

The quality of foodstuffs being fed to the starving masses in the countryside was still worse. In Murshidabad a Sub-Divisional Officer at Lalbagh had found stocks of *atta* sold to his precinct entirely "unwholesome." The District Magistrate suggested that it might at least be sold to local farmers as fodder for cattle. The Veterinary Surgeon, however, found the grain unfit, even, for animal consumption. Rejected as cattle feed this same rice was "reconditioned" and returned again to local markets for human

⁵⁹ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of the Calcutta Corporation, p. 1265

⁶⁰ *The Statesman*, "First Week of Rationing in Calcutta," February 8, 1944

⁶¹ *The Statesman*, "Quality of Rice at Ration Shops," February 19, 1944

consumption.⁶² In Faridpur the District Magistrate reported that "in the gruel kitchens just one kind of food was being served out irrespective of the condition of destitutes. The result was that in one case the entrails of a destitute came out soon after his taking the gruel and he died."⁶³ In many places a very coarse grain called *bajra*, more commonly eaten in upper India, was being fed to "destitutes" who had no previous experience eating such food. As Major-General Stuart later reported, eating *bajra* "led to diarrhea for about three days; after that they apparently became accustomed to it... but cholera was present at the time [and] they were frightened that it might be cholera."⁶⁴ Yet for many, there was no other option.

Governing Bengal

The Viceroy, Archibald Wavell, to his credit, understood the Bengal Famine to be the most pressing and grave responsibility of colonial governance in India. His sense of urgency - and even compassion - as well as his military connections, resulted in a commendable, if still inadequate and woefully belated, relief effort. His patience was thin, however, for the constitutional arrangements outlined in the Government of India Act of 1935, which had established "Provincial Autonomy." Like his predecessor, Wavell had little, if any, faith that the elected government in Bengal had the wherewithal or sincerity to cope with the magnitude of the crisis in the province, and was alarmed by "the reckless way in which political capital [was being] made of the Bengal trouble."⁶⁵ He found the Chief Minister, Kwaja Nazimuddin "honest but weak,"⁶⁶ and he estimated the much more formidable Food Minister, Shaheed Suhrawardy, "all big talk and small action."⁶⁷ What Bengal needed, Wavell thought, was "inspiring leadership" with a broad mandate. The only way to realize this necessity, the Viceroy concluded, was - once again - to enact Section 93, in order to abolish the provincial government and grant the Governor, under direct authority of the Viceroy himself, emergency rule in Bengal. The procedure of superceding provincial autonomy and enforcing autocratic white-rule in

⁶² Nanavati Papers, Testimony of the Official Congress Party, p. 806

⁶³ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of F. A. Karim

⁶⁴ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of Major-General Stuart, p. 1167

⁶⁵ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 459

⁶⁶ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 616

⁶⁷ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 566

Bengal, however, would be difficult to accomplish. The Ministry in Bengal, for one thing, commanded a substantial majority in the Legislature, and the abrogation of its authority would create considerable animosity with the Muslim League, and perhaps among Muslims more generally.⁶⁸ The move might additionally only encourage Hindu nationalists in the province, who had already been lobbying for the dissolution of the League Ministry. From a legal angle, as well, Section 93 would technically only be applicable in the advent of an actual breakdown in the functioning of the provincial legislature, which was not the case in Bengal.

The *resignation* of the Ministry, on the other hand, would dampen the impression of heavy-handedness on the part of the colonial state. A possible route to Section 93 by resignation had been laid out by Wavell's predecessor. Under Section 52-(I) (a) of the Government of India Act, the Governor could claim extraordinary powers in any province if the "peace and tranquility" of that province was under threat. These powers, in concert with those granted under Section 126A which allowed Central Government to "direct" the provincial legislature, might be used to create conditions that "no self-respecting Government" could or would agree to, resulting in resignation.⁶⁹ Acting Governor, Thomas Rutherford, however, questioned the constitutionality of the scheme, unwilling as he was to take on such responsibility. Wavell disappointed in the Acting Governor's refusal, wished for a permanent Governor "who [did] not worry too much about constitutional form and [was] determined to get things done."⁷⁰ He also wished that Linlithgow had taken a firmer hand earlier in the famine, "when Ministers were thoroughly frightened and prepared to do anything that they were told."⁷¹ In that case, Section 93 may not even have even been necessary. But the Ministry was now too entrenched, and so Wavell continued to call for a "vigorous Section 93" in Bengal, despite the Governor's reservations.⁷²

It is worth mentioning that given the recent history of Governorship in Bengal, Wavell's call for Governor's rule in the province was, to say the least, ironic. Sir John Herbert had caused Linlithgow considerable consternation and grief, and then just a few

⁶⁸ T.O.P. Vol. VI, Wavell to Amery, p. 614

⁶⁹ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 231

⁷⁰ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 434

⁷¹ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 614

⁷² T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 561

days before *The Statesman* published its pictures of famine in Bengal, had been removed to the hospital for an "appendix operation," which turned out to be much more serious. Hearing the news, Linlithgow grew superstitious, "Government House, Calcutta, continues to add to its lamentable reputation," he wrote to the Secretary of State, "you will remember that not only did poor Brabourne collapse there after one of these internal operations, but his acting successor, Reid, then had a serious appendix, and now Jack Herbert."⁷³ Sir Thomas Rutherford had reluctantly agreed to serve as Acting Governor until a permanent replacement could be found, but himself had made anything but a firm stand. After his first meeting with the Acting Governor, Wavell confided to Amery that he found Sir Thomas "second-class" and without "fire in his belly."⁷⁴ Major-General Mayne also expressed his "gravest doubts" to Wavell about Rutherford's competence. Rutherford, Wavell wrote, "expressed surprise at Mayne's anxiety about the general situation, and said he thought much too much was being made of [the famine.] He then retired to Darjeeling for rest."⁷⁵ A few weeks after his retreat to Darjeeling, Amery reported to Churchill, "Rutherford is not in good health and I have no confidence in his capacity to deal with the situation in Bengal."⁷⁶ A salary of Rs. 10,000 each was now being paid to two ill and incompetent governor's of Bengal - in the darkest midst of famine - even while the Viceroy continued pressing for Section 93.⁷⁷

Herbert died on December 11, 1943 and a memorial was given at St. John's Cathedral in Calcutta on the 19th. Wavell attended, and later that afternoon met with Mayne, Wakely and other senior civil servicemen, "none of them optimistic about the future of the food problem in Bengal."⁷⁸ Not only was Rutherford complaining of ill-health and seemed to have "lost-heart," but "his senior officials such as Williams, Chief Secretary, and Stevens, the Food Commissioner, [were] lacking in energy, and there [were] signs that they [were] not cooperating with the Army."⁷⁹ What was desperately needed, the Viceroy informed London, was a "first-class man who is ready to sacrifice his immediate prospects to do work of the highest importance to the prosecution of the

⁷³ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Amery to Linlithgow, p. 191

⁷⁴ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 434

⁷⁵ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 458 (emphasis mine)

⁷⁶ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Amery to Churchill, p. 488

⁷⁷ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Linlithgow to Amery, p. 296

⁷⁸ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 565

⁷⁹ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 490

war," and who had "the necessary fire...to restore morale among the officials."⁸⁰ Churchill approached Richard Casey, an Australian Parliamentarian who had been drafted into British Civil Service as Minister of State in the Middle East in 1942. The Prime Minister promised Casey that if he accepted he would submit his name to the King for a "peerage of the United Kingdom."⁸¹ Casey declined the full offer, citing his intention to run for office in Australia in the elections of 1946, but agreed to serve a truncated term, without peerage or knighthood, which might damage his prospects at home.⁸²

Hearing that he was getting a "first-class" man for Bengal at last, Wavell redoubled his efforts to get a "vigorous Section 93," turning to the Secretary of State to have emergency rule authorized by the War Cabinet in London. Amery sympathized with Wavell's desire to circumvent protocol. "Acts," he assured the Viceroy, "were meant to be evaded or overridden if necessity is great enough."⁸³ The Secretary of State prepared an extensive brief for the War Cabinet. In it he included the possibility of forcing a resignation by onerous "directions" issued under Sections 52-(I) (a) and 126A. In the event that this tactic failed, the only option was "to throw overboard regard for Provincial autonomy and get rid - by dismissal - of a Ministry with a working majority."⁸⁴ Amery argued that the "food problem" was an "all-India problem," and as such justified such extreme measures.

The War Cabinet met on the 11th of January 1943, and rejected the Viceroy's bid. Members worried that if Section 93 was introduced under such circumstances "the Hindus would be delighted," and Muslims might become "actively hostile."⁸⁵ If the Government of India, moreover, became responsible for the momentous problems of Bengal, they themselves might be stranded on "very insecure ground."⁸⁶ The use of 52-(I) (a) and 126A might be deployed and extra I.C.S. men lent to the province, but Section 93 was out of the question. The problem of food in Bengal, the War Cabinet concluded, would remain a *provincial* matter. Wavell was severely disappointed with the decision,

⁸⁰ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 434

⁸¹ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Churchill to Casey, p. 453

⁸² T.O.P. Vol. IV, Casey to Churchill, p. 454

⁸³ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Amery to Wavell, p. 569

⁸⁴ T.O.P. Vol. IV, War Cabinet Paper W.P. (44) 18, p. 618

⁸⁵ T.O.P. Vol. IV, War Cabinet W. M. (44) 5th Conclusion, Minute 1, p. 629

⁸⁶ *Ibid*

and reminded Amery that in such matters it was really incumbent upon the Cabinet to trust *his* judgment.⁸⁷ He only hoped, he added, that the War Cabinet would not be so imprudent as to reject his more important demand for substantial import of food grains.⁸⁸ Amery sought to hearten Wavell, noting that at least a "man of Casey's experience and personality had been appointed [Governor.]"⁸⁹

The mood on the ground in Bengal was less celebratory. When news of Casey's appointment reached long-suffering Midnapore, the reaction in the local journal, *Biplabi*, was caustic:

Following the death of Sir John the big bosses (Churchill, Amery, Wavell and Co.) spent much effort searching the forests and jungles of Australia and suddenly chanced upon a comparatively civilized animal by the name of Mr. Casey; in an announcement they broadcast their intention of making him the ruler of Bengal. There must be some secret reason why Churchill, Amery and Co. awarded the honor...to the land of the kangaroos...a certain class of animals...that are famous for their ability to jump considerable distances with the help of their tails and hind legs... Is it to be tolerated that we will be ruled by an inhabitant of Australia, where Indians cannot exercise any right?⁹⁰

Richard Casey was sworn-in as Governor of Bengal in the Throne Room of Government House, Calcutta on the 22nd of January 1944. After the oaths had been read, a 17 gun salute was issued from the ramparts of Fort William, and Casey, accompanied by his wife, "left the Throne Room in procession."⁹¹ Erstwhile Acting Governor, Sir Thomas Rutherford, was supposed to return to his post in Bihar, but was granted leave out of India, effective immediately, on health grounds. He had had enough. Casey, on the other hand, had his work cut-out for him, and set diligently to work, sorting through the tortured intricacies of administration in Bengal. The province was entirely new to him. He worked hard for a few days, meeting with Ministers and Secretaries, Commissioners and Commanders, but did not make it to the end of one week before he was befittingly welcomed to the realities of Bengal. On the 28th of January he ended his diary entry despondently: "I developed a fever and had to go to bed this afternoon.

⁸⁷ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 690

⁸⁸ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 647

⁸⁹ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Amery to Wavell, p. 641

⁹⁰ *Biplabi*, p. 309

⁹¹ *The Statesman*, "Casey Assumes Office as Governor of Bengal," January 23, 1944

Lieutenant-Colonel Denham White is looking after me."⁹² He was incapacitated for many days to come.

Imports

As Amartya Sen's study of famine mortality in Bengal has confirmed, "very substantially more than half the deaths attributable to the famine of 1943 took place *after* 1943."⁹³ In districts which had not been "severely effected" by starvation in 1943, according to the Famine Enquiry Commission's report, there was "a general rise in the death rate" in the first half of 1944, and in districts where starvation had been most prevalent, mortality "continued on a high level."⁹⁴ In Birbhum, Dacca, Rangpur, 24 Parganas, Murshidabad, Malda and Tippera, the death rate was 90% in excess of the quinquennial average prior to 1943, and remained 26-86% higher in all other districts, except the "hill station" of Darjeeling.⁹⁵ Moreover, there was abject destitution on a scale that beggars description. A study done by the Calcutta University Department of Anthropology early in 1944 estimated that two-thirds of the province - more than 20 million people - had been "severely affected" by famine.⁹⁶ 25-30% of cultivators with small holdings had lost their land,⁹⁷ and landless agricultural laborers, fisherman, skilled artisans, and transportation workers had also been rendered homeless and destitute in high numbers - their families fragmented by death and disease, their means of livelihoods bartered for survival, and their communities shattered.⁹⁸

As the Famine Enquiry Commission's report also affirmed: "a famine-stricken population is a sick population. Famine means not only lack of food in the quantitative sense but also lack of essential food constituents which are needed for bodily health."⁹⁹ From December of 1943, the Commission reported, there was a change in the "clinical

⁹² Casey's Diary, p. 63

⁹³ Amartya Sen (1981), p. 215

⁹⁴ *Report on Bengal*, p. 108 (Rates are compared to the average mortality rates for the five years prior to 1943)

⁹⁵ *Ibid*

⁹⁶ *The Statesman*, "Sample Survey of Famine Districts," February 28, 1944

⁹⁷ *The Statesman*, "Sample Survey of Famine Districts," February 28, 1944

⁹⁸ Greenough (1982), p. 205

⁹⁹ *Report on Bengal*, p. 120

picture" of famine.¹⁰⁰ Though people were still dying of hunger, by early 1944 famine entailed more death by disease than by starvation. Malaria and other fevers, Cholera, dysentery, and small pox accounted for many hundreds of thousands of deaths in the first six months of the year alone. Mental illness, although much less talked about in relation to the Bengal Famine, was also epidemic. Not only had the entire collective psyche of the population been scarified by death, misery and despair, but madness was, itself, a symptom of starvation. Victims were obstinate, apathetic, irrational and at times maniacal. "The mental state of many of starving destitutes," it was explained in the *Report on Bengal*, "sometimes disconcerted workers in famine hospitals, who were not aware that [madness] was a pathological condition induced by famine."¹⁰¹ The cerebral effects of malaria, including hallucinations and delirium are better known. Small pox can induce similar symptoms.

The public health system in Bengal, insufficient in normal times, all but totally collapsed under the pressure. Doctors, nurses, and other medical workers were in acutely short supply and recruitment remained problematic.¹⁰² T. G. Narayan records the story of one government doctor in Midnapore who threatened to commit suicide if he was not transferred from the front lines.¹⁰³ In all of Bengal, as late as January 1944, there were a total of 13,000 hospital beds available for famine victims - while an average of at least 2,300 people were dying *each day* of preventable disease and starvation. The hospitals, moreover, were ill-equipped and undersupplied. Large stocks of quinine to treat malaria had been allocated, but had entered swiftly into the black market in Calcutta and were selling at ten times controlled rates.¹⁰⁴ Public health workers who ran vaccination programs for smallpox were paid less than unskilled dock laborers and were themselves incapacitated by hunger and disease.¹⁰⁵ Disinfectants, essential for the prevention of Cholera, were still being hoarded by the A.R.P. for decontamination in the event of a gas

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, p. 118

¹⁰¹ Ibid, p. 117

¹⁰² Ibid, p. 125

¹⁰³ Narayan, p. 173

¹⁰⁴ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of Lieutenant Col. E. Cotter, Public Health Commissioner, p. 387

¹⁰⁵ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of D. Fraser, Inspector of Medical Services, p. 498

attacks.¹⁰⁶ And starvation, though slowed, remained chronic as the vitality of the population further plummeted, allowing disease and madness to continue gaining ground.

Wavell, himself, knew that the only remedy was to import large quantities of food grains, stabilize prices, and feed the population. The Viceroy wrote a sharp telegram to London in the last week of December, warning them that the import of 1.5 million tons of foodgrains into India was imperative to ward off even greater catastrophe in the coming year. Increased demand by Defence Services was further straining an already difficult situation to the breaking point. The Secretary of State responded that His Majesty's Government was still of the opinion, relayed in the earlier War Cabinet decision, that imports on the scale that Wavell was asking for were "out of the question." It had been agreed, however, that shipping might be provided for the import of 50,000 tons of grain to India in January and February.¹⁰⁷ Amery realized that this was absurdly insufficient and promised to renew the case for 1.5 million tons, but requested a detailed brief from New Delhi outlining their demand.

Wavell responded to Amery's request for an elaborate brief testily, "it is of no use going on arguing from month to month on figures and details," he complained, "I think Cabinet must trust man on the spot. You can warn them from me that it is my considered judgment that unless we can be assured now of receiving one million (repeat one million) tons of food grains during 1944 we are heading for disaster."¹⁰⁸ The Viceroy did, however, put together a comprehensive brief, with whatever numbers were available to him, and sent it off to London with further cautionary reminders. Pressing the government's only operative "famine code," he warned that "the present state of affairs in Bengal is a serious threat to the security of an operational base and to the health of troops."¹⁰⁹ The Secretary of State relayed the Viceroy's warning to Lord Leathers, noting that imports were essential to "prevent the breakdown of the whole economic structure of the country and its ability to function as a base for military operations."¹¹⁰

The War Cabinet met on February 7, 1944 to consider the Viceroy's demand. Churchill questioned the statistical basis of the Government of India's request, and

¹⁰⁶ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of Lieutenant Col. E. Cotter, Public Health Commissioner, p. 386

¹⁰⁷ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Secretary of State to Government of India, Food Department, p. 585

¹⁰⁸ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 590

¹⁰⁹ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 625

¹¹⁰ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Amery to Leathers, p. 658

showed himself "gravely concerned...that shipping...should be used on a major scale to import food into India."¹¹¹ The Minister for War Transport, concurred, arguing "it would be out of the question to find shipping for the million tons asked for." Ships *would* be available, however, to *export* 10,000 tons of rice per month *from* India to Ceylon. The Cabinet emphasized that if there was any shortage at all in Bengal, it was statistically insignificant. It was also noted that in Bengal shortage was, in any case, "political in character," being caused by "Marwari supporters of Congress in an effort to embarrass the existing Muslim Government of Bengal, the Government of India and His Majesty's Government."¹¹² Under such circumstances agreeing to imports would amount to concessions to the "enemy." The Cabinet concluded that the "matter should be further examined."¹¹³ Towards this end, a separate committee on "Indian food grains requirements" was established. The Committee consisted of the Secretary of State, the Minister for War Transport, the Food Minister, and Churchill's closest advisor, now Paymaster-General, Lord Cherwell - who, the Secretary of State had noted in his diary, "like Winston, hates India."¹¹⁴

When Wavell received news that his request had been denied, he was incensed. The Bengal Famine, he reminded London, "was one of the greatest disasters that [had] befallen any people under British rule and damage to our reputation...is incalculable."¹¹⁵ The statistics reported, he admitted, had been defective, but had been based on the best estimates available. A "rigid statistical approach," he added, was, in any case, "futile."¹¹⁶ He had personally discussed the supply situation with all provincial governors and had visited, in person, seven of the eleven provinces. The reality of shortage and the threat of impending *nation-wide* economic failure, leading to an even more massive famine, was manifest. He ended his telegram bluntly: "I warn His Majesty's Government with all seriousness that if they refuse our demands they are risking a catastrophe far greater than Bengal famine that will have irretrievable effect on their position both at home and abroad. They must either trust the opinion of the man they have appointed to advise them

¹¹¹ T.O.P. Vol. IV, War Cabinet W.M. (44) 16th Conclusion, p. 701

¹¹² Ibid, p. 702

¹¹³ Ibid

¹¹⁴ *The Leo Amery Diaries*, p. 933

¹¹⁵ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 706

¹¹⁶ Ibid

on Indian affairs or replace him."¹¹⁷ Churchill seemed softened by the Viceroy's threat of resignation. He wrote to Wavell and assured him that he would give him all the help he could, but India should "not ask the impossible."¹¹⁸

The War Cabinet met again on the 14th of February to reconsider the Government of India's demands. The Prime Minister presented the Viceroy's urgent telegrams and expressed his own concerns - *about a lack of shipping to meet Wavell's request*. The Minister of War Transport, Lord Leathers, seconded Churchill's anxiety, reiterating his doubts about being able to even maintain current shipments of grain to India. He suggested that when and if India could *prove* itself to be in "acute shortage" he would make the necessary arrangements for the shipment of up to 25,000 tons a month of Iraqi barley to the sub-continent.¹¹⁹ The Cabinet agreed to send a telegram to the Viceroy informing him that they had very earnestly considered his request, but could not comply. The last sentence of the telegram, they suggested to the Secretary of State, "might be expressed...to make it clear that refusal of India's request was not due to our underrating India's needs, but because we could not take operational risks by cutting down the shipping required for vital operations."¹²⁰

The Viceroy, far from resigning, renewed his efforts, reminding London, "this [is] a matter of life and death for hundreds of thousands of Indians and one by which our good name in the world for justice and kindness may be irretrievably ruined."¹²¹ He tailored his original demand for 1.5 million tons down to 500,000 in the next six months, and requested that a deputation be sent to the United States immediately to ask for help with shipping. In the event that these efforts failed, he also requested permission for India to apply to the newly formed United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) for aid. In the meantime he recruited the assistance of the Commander-in-Chief for India, General Sir Claude Auchinleck, and the Supreme Commander, South-East Asia Command, Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten. Both Commanders sent telegrams to the Chiefs of Staff conveying their conviction that it was "an urgent *military*

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 707

¹¹⁸ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Churchill to Wavell, p. 718

¹¹⁹ T.O.P. Vol. IV, War Cabinet W.M. (44) 19th Conclusion, p. 728

¹²⁰ Ibid

¹²¹ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 734

necessity for food to be imported into [India.]"¹²² The coding of food imports in terms of war requirements was the only hopeful approach. That hundreds of thousands were continuing to die of starvation and concurrent disease was, apparently, a non-starter.

The War Cabinet met to consider the Viceroy's "counter-offensive" on the 21st of February.¹²³ They had before them his series of forceful telegrams, together with those of Mountbatten and Auchinleck, and also the Food Grain Committee's anemic report. After short deliberation it was agreed that little could be done for India. The Minister of War Transport suggested that the 50,000 tons of Iraqi barley promised would be replaced by 50,000 tons of wheat - at some future date. The shipment of another 50,000 tons already *en route* to India from Australia, however, would have to be cancelled and redirected to the Balkans. The net gain was, therefore, zero. Instead a net loss of 100,000 tons - represented by the lost Iraqi barley and Australian wheat - was incurred. A telegram to the Viceroy was sent conveying these conclusions and also noting that the Minister of War Transport was "fully satisfied that United States have no shipping," and, as such, an approach to the Americans would be pointless. An appeal to U.N.R.R.A. Leathers added, was, likewise, pointless, as they had no shipping of their own. Churchill, in a separate telegram to Wavell, expressed his regrets and wished the Viceroy "every good wish amid [his] anxieties."¹²⁴

Wavell cabled to London in dismay. "To expect me to hold the critical food situation here with empty hands," he wrote to the Secretary of State, "is stupid and shortsighted."¹²⁵ Once again, the hand of Churchill's confident and chief council, Lord Cherwell, was deplored. "I see from your letter," Wavell added, "that that old menace and fraud the Professor was called in to advise against me. The fact is that the P.M. has calculated his war plans without any consideration at all of India's needs."¹²⁶ The Viceroy sent telegrams to Auchinleck and Mountbatten with the request that they might arrange, on their own, for the replacement of military cargo with food grain imports for India. In the meantime, Wavell pressed on, admitting to Amery that he understood himself to be something of a "nuisance" to His Majesty's Government, but reiterating that

¹²² T.O.P. Vol. IV, Auchinleck to Chiefs of Staff, p. 737-8 (emphasis mine)

¹²³ T.O.P. Vol. IV, War Cabinet W. M. (44) 23rd Conclusion, Minute 6, p 749-751

¹²⁴ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Churchill to Wavell, p. 729

¹²⁵ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 758

¹²⁶ Ibid

he was "so certain that imports are vital to India that [he was] determined not to accept refusal."¹²⁷

In London, however, the contention that India had enough, if not more than enough, was well entrenched. In a rather cynical rejoinder to the Government of India's request for wheat imports, a proposal was floated by the War Cabinet suggesting that India might be supplied with 300,000 tons of Australian wheat *in exchange* for 300,000 tons of rice from Bengal for Ceylon. The scheme involved the forward shipment of rice from India, backed by the promise of *later* imports of wheat.¹²⁸ The Viceroy predictably bridled at the suggestion: "[this] proposal has no real bearing whatever on India's main food problem. It does not increase by one ton India's total food supply and in fact apparently proposes that India should lend Ceylon rice for period without return."¹²⁹ Actual procurement in Bengal, he noted, was less than 15% of that which had been targeted, and the resumption of exports under such conditions would only lead to further panic. Moreover, he reminded Amery, "it is quite impossible for us to export rice at all: we have in fact publicly pledged not to do so."¹³⁰ "It is clear," Wavell concluded, "that the War Cabinet have not begun to understand the nature of our problem, and apparently don't even care to try."¹³¹

The lobbying done by Auchinleck and Mountbatten, however, had gained some traction where the remonstrations of the Viceroy had failed. The Chiefs of Staff met to consider their views on March 18th. In conclusion they issued a report that advocated the import of at least 200,000 tons of wheat to India in the 2nd and 3rd quarters of 1944, the allocation of 10% of cargo space on military vessels for further imports, and an approach to America for help with additional shipping. They ended their recommendations predictably: "the shipping necessary to provide the cereals for the minimum maintenance requirements in India," they wrote, "should be tabulated in future as *military requirement*." The War Cabinet met the following day and acceded to the recommendation for the release of 25 ships for the import of 200,000 tons of grain to

¹²⁷ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 784

¹²⁸ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 801, footnote # 1

¹²⁹ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 801

¹³⁰ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 801

¹³¹ *Ibid*, p. 808

India in the coming six months.¹³² At the insistence of the Minister of War Transport, however, it was stipulated that there would be "no prospect" of additional imports in 1944. Lord Leathers also expressed his aversion to any approach to the U.S. for assistance, as well as the unfeasibility of allocating 10% of military shipping to food. It was also concluded that the Ceylon exchange scheme should be "strongly pressed" with the Viceroy in view of the "surplus" of rice in Bengal.

Wavell categorically rejected the exchange scheme, noting that the import of 200,000 tons was a mere one-sixth of India's needs.¹³³ Military requirements, alone, amounted to 724,000 tons per annum, and as such 524,000 tons were still being removed from civilian consumption even if the entire imported amount was allocated to Defense Services - which was, in fact, the plan. In a resort to more extreme methods, the Viceroy informed the War Cabinet that with this 200,000 tons he would be able to supply the military a total of 550,000 tons, leaving a 224,000 ton shortfall.¹³⁴ To the Secretary of State, Wavell drove the point home still further. "It is not a matter of sentiment," he wrote, "on the one hand, it is impossible to ignore the needs of starving people, and on the other hand, an acute shortage of food at once reduces the efficiency of the factories and the civilian services of all kinds, on which a Military Commander must rely."¹³⁵ Wavell's protestations had little effect. With 200,000 tons promised, the issue languished for several weeks.

In the third week of April, however, Wavell returned to the charge. Procurement in Bengal had continued to be moribund and crop damages were being reported from several other provinces which threatened to destabilize the nation-wide food supply still further. Given these contingencies, Wavell informed Amery: "the promised import of 200 [thousand tons] just balances civil position with nothing (repeat nothing) to meet defense requirements of 724 for 12 months from 1st May and whole amount must be imported if Army demands are to be met...I am informing Supreme Commander and Commander-in-Chief of inability to meet service requirement."¹³⁶ The Viceroy's telegram came as a

¹³² T.O.P. Vol. IV, War Cabinet W. M. (44) 36th Conclusion, Minute 4, p. 822-824

¹³³ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 836

¹³⁴ Ibid, p. 837

¹³⁵ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 844

¹³⁶ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 900

"great shock" to London.¹³⁷ At a recent meeting of the Indian Food Grains Committee, Lord Cherwell, "The Professor," had suggested that "a certain number of wealthy Indians should be hanged," and that this might solve the crisis.¹³⁸ But the Secretary of State was of the mind that the import of food grains might be a better measure. The War Cabinet convened, yet again, on April 24th and concluded, however, that nothing could be done - neither hanging nor imports. Churchill was "truculent" as ever, "and came very near saying that we could not let Indian starvation interfere with operations."¹³⁹ All he was willing to concede, according to the Secretary of State was to telegram the Americans and to "intimate to them that the general economic situation was likely to be serious."¹⁴⁰

A telegram, drafted with approval of the War Cabinet, was sent off to Washington on April 29, 1944. In it mention was made of Wavell's "gravest warnings," and also of the "grievous famine" of 1943. But mention was also made of the "good crop of rice" in Bengal, and no specific information of the extent of shortfall that the Viceroy anticipated was included. His Majesty's Government had done its honest best, Churchill assured his counterpart. "I have been able to arrange for 350,000 tons of wheat to be shipped to India from Australia during the first nine months of 1944. I cannot see how we could do more."¹⁴¹ When Wavell received a draft of the telegram he responded wryly to the Secretary of State, "I see that the Prime Minister speaks of having made 350,00 tons of wheat available which apparently means a promise to us of another 150,000 tons over what has already been promised."¹⁴² Amery assured the Viceroy that that was not the case; "Leathers put it that way in order to make it clear to the President that we had done our best."¹⁴³ President Roosevelt, apparently, felt that that was good enough. On June 3rd he cabled back to express his "utmost sympathy," but reported that he would be unable to provide any assistance, being "unable on military grounds to consent to the diversion of shipping."¹⁴⁴

¹³⁷ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Amery to Wavell, p. 904

¹³⁸ *The Leo Amery Diaries*, p. 976

¹³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 979

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*

¹⁴¹ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Amery to Wavell, p. 939

¹⁴² T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 941

¹⁴³ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Amery to Wavell, p. 964

¹⁴⁴ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Amery to Wavell, p. 999

Nearly six months had elapsed since Wavell had begun his campaign to contain famine in India by means of necessary imports, and nothing more than a promise of 200,000 tons against the Viceroy's estimate of 1.5 million necessary had been accomplished. Bengal, meanwhile, was entering into its lean months, which under even normal circumstances, meant acute hardship for the poor. Smallpox had reached its peak during the months of April and May,¹⁴⁵ and with one hospital bed for every 100,000 residents of the province, had taken a very severe toll. In Calcutta, alone, the mortality rate was three times what it had been in 1943.¹⁴⁶ But, as Governor Casey reported to the Prime Minister, "food [was still] the constant and most important problem."¹⁴⁷ Conditions in Bengal, moreover, were destabilizing the food supply of the country as a whole. Receiving the news of Roosevelt's refusal, Wavell was despondent. "There has been dangerous, and as I think, *deliberate* procrastination,"¹⁴⁸ he complained to Amery, "I have never believed that the tonnage required to enable me to deal properly with our food problem would make any real difference to [military] operations in the West or here."¹⁴⁹

Wavell sent a second telegram to Churchill directly. He assured the Prime Minister that in the event of imminent nation-wide famine, "His Majesty's Government's attitude if maintained, can, and will, be represented *with reason* as both short-sighted and callous."¹⁵⁰ No War Cabinet meeting was called. Instead, the Prime Minister, in direct consultation with his War Transport Minister, used the authority within his mandate and issued an executive order for arrangements to be made for the delivery of an additional 200,000 tons of food grains to India by September of 1944.¹⁵¹ On the 5th of July the Viceroy informed London that His Majesty's Government's decision had been "too little, too late."¹⁵² After six months of frustration and failure, he returned to his charge for imports in the months to come.

¹⁴⁵ Amartya Sen (1981), p. 203

¹⁴⁶ *The Statesman*, "Too Much Death," April 30, 1944

¹⁴⁷ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Casey to Churchill, p. 1030

¹⁴⁸ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 1021 (emphasis mine)

¹⁴⁹ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 1034

¹⁵⁰ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Churchill, p. 1044 (emphasis mine)

¹⁵¹ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 1046

¹⁵² T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 1069

Famine Enquiry

As detailed in the official *Medical History of the Bengal Famine*, on the morning of July 10, 1944, a 32 year-old, "male Hindu," identified only as "Netai," was picked up on the streets of Calcutta and removed in an Air Raid Precaution lorry to the Campbell Medical Hospital Calcutta.¹⁵³ Netai had been starving for at least six months and was weak and emaciated on admittance. He had a history of intermittent fever for 2 months, but tested negative for malaria. His fever may have been the result of kal-azar infection, or may have resulted from pulmonary infection or kidney failure. His left lung had impaired resonance, fine crepitus and his breathing was diminished. It is possible that he, like millions of others, had spent the winter without shelter or sufficient clothing, which, combined with starvation, had left him with chronic pneumonia in his left lung. The hospital had no reagents to run a sputum test to confirm or contradict a diagnosis of tuberculosis, which was also a distinct possibility. High levels of phosphate in Netai's urine suggested kidney dysfunction, which also could have explained his fever. He had acute edema in his feet and hands, which was a common finding with famine victims, and like all patients in his sample group, he had severe anemia. His blood sugar was also far below normal and he was suffering from diarrhea. The diarrhea may have been the result of dysentery contracted from eating rotten food, it may have been from an infectious disease such as para-sprue, or it may have been a "specific type of diarrhea found in starving individuals which is not infective in origin and may be called 'famine diarrhea.'"¹⁵⁴ The blood and mucus detected in his stool would be consistent with any of the above. He was spoon fed barley water, and was administered sub-coetaneous saline. On the 18th of July his condition was still deteriorating. His pulse was feeble and his respiration was hurried. Netai died on July 20, 1944 in bed 20A at Calcutta's Campbell hospital. His body was claimed by relatives the same day. No post mortem was done.

Less than two weeks later, on the 31st of July, 1944 the Royal Commission to Enquire into the Bengal Famine of 1943 convened in Delhi under the Chairmanship of I.C.S. Officer, Sir John Woodhead. Woodhead, a white British citizen, had been

¹⁵³ All information on Netai is taken from a case study included in: K.S. Fitch, *Medical History of the Bengal Famine 1943-44* (Govt. of India Press: Calcutta, 1947), p. 78-9

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 17

appointed by the India Office in London despite protests in India that an Indian should preside over the enquiry.¹⁵⁵ In keeping with current colonial policy, one Hindu representative, S.V. Ramamurthy, and one Muslim representative, Afzal Hussain; were included as examiners. The panel was rounded off by an expert on public health, Dr. W.R. Aykroyd, and a representative member of the Indian business community, Manilal Nanavati. The terms of reference were to be, as already mentioned, future-oriented. Care was to be taken so that "officials giving evidence [would be] assured of complete immunity of victimization."¹⁵⁶ As an additional safeguard, the entire proceedings were to be held *in camera*, as "it would be most embarrassing if officials were examined in public."¹⁵⁷ Witnesses were called to testify from the Government of India, the Government of Bengal, military and private relief organizations, and commercial interests involved in the rice trade in one form or another. No testimony was given by any representative of the India Office or His Majesty's Government in London.

The Famine Enquiry Commission was, in some definite sense, primarily an effort to punctuate the "Bengal Famine of 1943." It was also a fairly thorough examination of the economic, political and social context of famine in Bengal. As such, the transcripts of the proceedings provide an extensive record of the events, personalities, and forces that comprised the context of famine in 1943. The Commission's *Report on Bengal*, published in 1945, was, on the other hand, a relatively brief narrative summary of the information gathered, edited to conform with the "terms of reference" which had been outlined beforehand. The full transcript of the proceedings was never published, but remains in the public record at the India National Archives in New Delhi. The wealth of information that is contained in the unexpurgated transcript of the proceedings has been used extensively throughout this study. Here, certain items of testimony given at the Famine Enquiry Commission will be examined in an effort to foreground the context in which the proceedings actually took place. In short, as several witnesses testified, famine was still very much persisting even while the Commission sat down to compile its retrospective.

¹⁵⁵ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Amery to Wavell, p. 1175

¹⁵⁶ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 712

¹⁵⁷ Ibid

On August 14th, 1944, Mr. Justice Braund, Regional Food Commissioner, Eastern India, testified before the Woodhead Commission. As Food Commissioner since March of 1943, Braund had intimate knowledge of the food supply and distribution system in Bengal. He was also intricately involved with the *aman* procurement scheme of 1944. In his testimony Braund gave a frank and unflattering picture of the state of affairs in the province. Mill capacity was wholly inadequate, a lack of storage facilities was a very serious problem, transportation services were extremely deficient, and the staff of the Civil Supplies Department was still in a state of utter chaos.¹⁵⁸ The high price of rice had been caused by a systemic breakdown involving all of these factors - none of which had yet been remedied. The current price of rice, he added, was still more than four times higher than in early 1942. After hearing the grim picture that Braund sketched, Nanavati asked him whether or not rice was yet within the reach of the poor in Bengal. "No, it is not always," Braund replied. Lieutenant-Colonel K.S. Fitch, Deputy Surgeon General of Bengal, in charge of Medical Relief Operation, including those at Campbell Hospital in Calcutta at which Netai had recently died of starvation, confirmed Braund's surmise, admitting that, "generally...there is still a lot of underfeeding."¹⁵⁹

The Honorary Secretary of the British Indian Association drew the implicit conclusion that neither Braund nor Fitch had ventured: "the continuation of famine conditions," he testified, "may be said to be persisting."¹⁶⁰ Mr. Barman, of the Calcutta Corporation, also explained to the Commission excitedly on September 13, 1944, "there are yet famine deaths. I can cite a famine case examined by Dr. Roy, just at the junction of Howrah. He died only yesterday being famine-stricken." Nanavati rejoined perplexed, "Is it happening here?" Dr. Ahmed of the Corporation responded in Barman's stead, "Yes, there are quite a lot of people dying even now."¹⁶¹ Members of the Provincial Kisan Sabha, a peasant rights organization with the closest links of any to the rural poor in Bengal, described conditions as "a complete crack-up of rural life - rural economy, rural society and rural humanity - this is the reality of 1944. The village artisans; weavers, fishermen, boatmen, black-smiths - all have been ruined. Fishermen

¹⁵⁸ Nanavati Papers, testimony of Justice Braund, p. 999

¹⁵⁹ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of K.S. Fitch, p. 679

¹⁶⁰ Nanavati Papers, Memorandum of the British Indian Association, p. 224

¹⁶¹ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of Representatives of the Calcutta Corporation, p. 1244

have no fishing nets, boatmen have no boats, weavers get no yarn, black-smiths get no iron or steel."¹⁶² According to their estimates, ten million had been forced from their homes by hunger. Three and a half million had died. "The remaining six and a half million - homeless, landless, and denuded of all that is human, are moving about in the 90,000 villages of Bengal." But, the Kisan Sabha representatives warned, "let nobody think that famine has ended with this toll."¹⁶³ Famine was continuing.

The pervasive ruin of society, dislocation of economic life, and continuing hardships of scarcity, inflation, hunger and disease, that defined famine in Bengal, were endemic facts of life for the majority of the population of the province at the time. The mostly Hindu, "middle-class," though surviving better than the (mostly Muslim) rural poor, were not immune. In conclusion to his testimony before the Famine Enquiry Commission, the District Magistrate of Faridpur noted, "it is now people with fixed incomes, middle-classes, lower middle-classes, who are gradually getting impoverished, both financially and in health."¹⁶⁴ By April of 1944, the prices of a wide array of essential commodities in Bengal had risen by an average of more than 250% in just three year.¹⁶⁵ The price of lentils, a primary supplement to a rice diet for those who could afford them, had more than tripled. Vegetables had more than doubled in price, and eggs were three and a half times more dear. Fish, which was the most important source of protein to the middle-classes of Bengal, had more than tripled in price, due to consumption by the armed forces, and a stubborn scarcity of ice for preservation. Coal and Kerosene, were, likewise grossly inflated, and had to be acquired at control shops where long queues and short supply led to daily scenes of frustration and turmoil throughout the cities and towns of Bengal. Even with fuel for cooking, matches were at times unavailable, and cooking oil prices had risen nearly 400%. Government had commandeered a full 70% of the country's supply of paper at the beginning of the war, which created a paper shortage that crippled publishing, small business and educational enterprises central to the middle-class economy.¹⁶⁶ Lead pencils had increased in price by 1,500%, with the production of

¹⁶² Nanavati Papers, Memorandum of the Provincial Kisan Sabha, p. 167

¹⁶³ Ibid

¹⁶⁴ Nanavati Papers, Testimony of F.A. Karim, p. 1385

¹⁶⁵ *The Statesman*, "Rise of Prices in Everyday Goods Analyzed," April 20, 1944

¹⁶⁶ *The Statesman*, "Paper," April 24, 1944

bullets taking priority, and the acute scarcity of cloth was causing indignity for the poor and middle-class alike.¹⁶⁷

During famine claims of social difference based on class and religious community, long embedded in the socio-political structure of the province, were increasingly entangled in a bio-political struggle for sheer survival. The sufferings of the middle-class became easily equated with the claim of disproportionate suffering of "Hindus" in general, and government relief for the poor, as exemplified above, was considered inappropriate for middle-class Hindus, and as such, was resented as biased. Because, moreover, most of the impoverished cultivators, particularly in eastern Bengal, were themselves Muslims, the Muslim League Ministry's relief efforts aimed at the rural poor, and aided by the Government of India and the British military, were understood by Hindu political interests as "Muslim relief." The Hindu Mahasabha, meanwhile, while distributing unquestionably necessary relief to the middle-classes, was able, through its relief networks, to gain a foothold throughout Bengal that had evaded all previous efforts at consolidating a popular "Hindu" political front. If, as Sugata Bose has argued, class conflict in Bengal "did not, without external influence, flow easily into the communal mould,"¹⁶⁸ the devastations of famine provided a unique and exceptional circumstance for just such an eventuality.

The rigidity with which class and communal identities continued to harden has to be understood from a psychological perspective as well. Survival, in the midst of death by deprivation, was a double-edged sword: it could only be exacted at the price of the death of others. Callousness and self-interest thrived. The "care of one's own" took precedence over finer sentiments of suffering humanity more generally. Charity became extremely strained and society became mean and chary in the furnace of want. The Director-General of Food for the Government of India, identified these psychological factors as part and parcel of famine: "Public confidence," he testified, "was so undermined and people felt so insecure that everyone tried to keep what he had in his own hands."¹⁶⁹ Those able to make do, he continued, "were simply callous to the

¹⁶⁷ See Greenough's interview with a village school-master, in: *Prosperity and Misery*, p. 173-4

¹⁶⁸ *Agrarian Bengal*, p. 199

¹⁶⁹ Nanavati papers, Testimony of B.R. Sen, p. 447

suffering of fellow-villagers and the civic spirit was entirely absent."¹⁷⁰ Corruption thrived, and "honesty," representatives of the Provincial Kisan Sabha noted, had been "eliminated." The famine of food, they asserted, had engendered a "moral famine" of equally disturbing proportions. Religious, class and/or ethnic bigotry under such circumstances, it is no stretch to conclude, can be understood as yet another pernicious disease that thrived in the wake of famine - the increasingly virulent divide between "Muslim" and "Hindu" claims, most dangerously of all.

Pakistan

The release of Gandhi on health grounds in mid-1944 had, meanwhile, shifted the spotlight back to national politics. Although hopes in London were high that Gandhi would retire from politics after his detention, he re-engaged in the nationalist struggle immediately upon release. By the autumn of 1944, the Muslim League's call for a separate state of Pakistan had become increasingly vociferous, and now represented the most pressing "national" dilemma of all - not least because of famine itself. The question of Muslim freedom from Hindu economic dominance had long been a primary concern of the Muslim elite, who formed the backbone of the All-India Muslim League.¹⁷¹ Catastrophic economic failure, leading to acute scarcity, despair, and mass death from starvation, only accentuated the urgency of the issue, providing a stark backdrop upon which the idyll of Pakistan was sketched. Famine also offered a manifest platform to *popularize* the call. At the All-India Muslim League's Council meeting in November of 1943, Bengal's Chief Minister, Kwaja Nazimuddin argued that famine had clearly shown that Pakistan was a necessity for the poor Muslim masses. The famine had demonstrated, he declared, "that situations like the present cannot be tackled by a Central Government and in the future no Central or Federal scheme for India can ever hope to meet a situation like this."¹⁷² At the same meeting "a uniform food policy for all Muslim majority provinces" was outlined by Jinnah.¹⁷³ The idea was, in some sense, a test run of

¹⁷⁰ Ibid

¹⁷¹ See: Sumit Sarkar (1983), p. 409

¹⁷² *The Statesman*, "League and Food Crisis," November 17, 1943

¹⁷³ *The Statesman*, Dar-el-Islam," November 28, 1943

"Pakistan," an exercise organized to presage the benefits of Muslim political solidarity and economic independence.

Though, in 1942, Gandhi had been sharply opposed to the Muslim League's proposal for partitioning India into Hindu and Muslim states, after his release from detention he appeared to be in a somewhat more equivocal state of mind. By that time a new scheme for a "communal settlement" had been advanced by ex-Congress faithful, and close confidant to Gandhi, C.R. Rajagopalachari. The "Rajagopalachari Formula," as it came to be known, represented, what Secretary of State Amery termed a "conditional and partial concession of 'Pakistan.'"¹⁷⁴ The formula advanced a plan for the Muslim League and Congress to work together towards the independence of India, deferring the question of a separate Muslim state until after the war. At that time, district-by-district plebiscites in Muslim-majority provinces would be taken to decide the terms of a possible division of India into Hindu and Muslim states. Such plebiscites, it was understood, would guarantee the partition of the provinces of Bengal and the Punjab along communal lines. The plan also included an ambiguous caveat for "mutual agreements" between Muslim and Hindu states in relation to defence, commerce and other "essential purposes, in the event of partition."¹⁷⁵ The likely division of Bengal and the Punjab - two extremely important Muslim-majority provinces - and even the hint of a central administrative apparatus for any purposes at all, were deeply antithetical to the Muslim League's professed main-line, but the Rajagopalachari Formula did represent the first real concession to the Muslim League's demand for a separate state, and Gandhi's acceptance of the scheme lent it enticing relevance.¹⁷⁶ Jinnah responded equivocally, and negotiations with Gandhi were planned for September of 1944.

Many Congress followers supported the overture, but acceptance was far from universal. The Hindu Mahasabha, in particular, was vehemently opposed to any detente with the Muslim League, and was especially hostile to even the mention of "Pakistan" in national debate. To Hindu Nationalists Gandhi's support of the plan amounted to a reckless betrayal of Hindu interests. Within the Muslim League, particularly in Bengal, there were divisions as well. The League in Bengal was, at this time, becoming

¹⁷⁴ T.O.P. IV, War Cabinet Paper, p. 1101

¹⁷⁵ T.O.P. Vol. IV, Wavell to Amery, p. 1084

¹⁷⁶ Rajmohan Gandhi, p. 160

increasingly divided, with Chief Minister Nazimuddin seen to represent non-Bengali, elite Muslim interests, and Food Minister and Midnapore native, H.S. Suhrawardy, representing the Bengali rural and urban poor.¹⁷⁷ Nazimuddin was, moreover, considered to be the All-India Muslim League's "man in Bengal," while Suhrawardy, a seasoned veteran in the tortured and always-shifting terrain of provincial politics, had not attended an All-India Muslim League session since 1941.¹⁷⁸ Suhrawardy's reputation as an advocate for the poor had, furthermore, been greatly enhanced during the famine, and his challenge to Nazimuddin's authority had crystallized accordingly.

By the middle of 1944, disruptions and deadlock in the Bengal Assembly had all but halted the provincial administrative machinery. Governor Casey visited the chamber during a debate on the Secondary Education Bill¹⁷⁹ and found the proceedings "perfectly disgraceful."¹⁸⁰ The "Hindus in the Opposition" he wrote, gave a "splendid example of intolerance," shutting down all debate and holding the floor by main force. When the Governor argued for the immediate removal of the Speaker, whose duty it was to keep order, Nazimuddin warned him that he was unable to do so "for fear of riot in the house, which would be followed by communal disturbances in Bengal generally."¹⁸¹ Casey, found the state of affairs in the Assembly absurd, but himself was "saddled with boils under the arm and a poisoned toe," and so was unable to take a more active stance.¹⁸² Meanwhile, "the opposition," approached Suhrawardy to suggest a coup against Nazimuddin.¹⁸³ The detente between the Congress and the Muslim League at the center in relation to the Rajagopalachari Formula had facilitated the possibility of an otherwise highly unlikely alliance between S.P. Mookerjee and H.S. Suhrawardy. Suhrawardy approached the Governor in a quandary, wondering what to do. Casey warned the Food Minister against a plot "clearly designed to split and confuse the Muslim League forces still further."¹⁸⁴

¹⁷⁷ See: Shila Sen, p. 186

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 190

¹⁷⁹ designed to give Muslims parity with Hindus in higher education, etc.

¹⁸⁰ Casey's Diary, 279

¹⁸¹ Ibid, p. 308

¹⁸² Ibid, p. 287

¹⁸³ Ibid, 325

¹⁸⁴ Ibid

The "opposition" was having troubles of its own. Hindu Mahasabha President, S.P. Mookerjee, who had once declared that "the indivisibility of India was his God,"¹⁸⁵ was shouted down at a Mahasabha rally in Calcutta for his suggestion that the Sabha might support the "Rajagopalachari Formula" along with Congress.¹⁸⁶ In August he traveled to Delhi to discuss the particulars of the formula with Gandhi and it was reported to the Viceroy that he had left "much encouraged" by the plan. It is entirely likely that his Ministerial aspirations in Bengal were at least as influential as Gandhi's arguments at the Center. Although Mookerjee himself was not a member of Congress, his associations with Congress were extensive and essential to his own political career. When the Jinnah-Gandhi negotiations proved abortive and sentiments between the Muslim League and Congress hardened, however, politics in Bengal returned to the communal fold, and S.P. Mookerjee venture to broker no further compromise with the Muslim League, again retreating into bitter opposition.

Meanwhile, conditions on the ground in Bengal continued to be extremely grim. Malaria hit its peak in November 1944, with as many as 51.7% of blood samples examined at Calcutta hospitals testing positive for malaria parasites.¹⁸⁷ Cholera and smallpox were still decimating the countryside,¹⁸⁸ and the price of rice still remained beyond the reach of millions.¹⁸⁹ Rationing had been operating in Calcutta and Dacca, but the rest of the province was still without. Even in Calcutta, where famine was officially a thing of the past, the urban poor lived on the absolute margins of life and death. Governor Casey toured the slums of the city in December of 1944 and was shocked: "I have seen something of the way that hundreds of thousands of the citizens of Calcutta are obliged to live," he reported, "[and] I have been horrified by what I have seen."¹⁹⁰ The myth of Calcutta's relative prosperity had been belied. "Human beings cannot let other human being exist under these conditions," the Governor opined, but help was still a long time coming. The death count continued to mount steadily, and existence, if it could be maintained at all, grew only more bitter and desperate for the majority of the citizens of

¹⁸⁵ T.O.P. IV, Twynam to Wavell, p. 1182

¹⁸⁶ Casey's Diary, p. 346

¹⁸⁷ *Medical History of Bengal Famine*, p. 44

¹⁸⁸ *The Statesman*, "Cholera and Smallpox Threaten 97 Towns," December 14, 1943

¹⁸⁹ *Janayuddha*, "Chauler Dar," November 22, 1944

¹⁹⁰ *The Statesman*, "Governor Horrified by Living Conditions," December 5, 1944

Bengal. Field Marshall Wavell, however, remained upbeat. He had maintained his crusade for food imports and by the end of 1944 had managed to wrangle one million tons out of London. On New Year's Eve he sat at his desk and mused: "So ends 1944. On the whole not a bad year for India."¹⁹¹

The Lean Season

Richard Casey shared none of the Viceroy's optimism. On the 1st of March 1945, after 13 months on the job as Governor, he drafted a frank and gloomy report to the Viceroy. "The Empire has cause for shame," he wrote, "in fact... in Bengal, at least, after a century and a half of British rule, we can point to no achievement worth the name in any direction."¹⁹² He continued,

What stands out principally in my mind is the pitiful inadequacy of the administration of the province. Judged by any standards which I am acquainted with or which I can imagine, the administration is of a very low order. On these standards Bengal has, practically speaking, no irrigation or drainage, a medieval system of agriculture, no roads, no education, no cottage industries, completely inadequate hospitals, no effective health services, and no adequate machinery to cope with distress. There are not even plans to make good these deficiencies - and even if there were, it would be quite impossible to pay for them, as things are.¹⁹³

The Imperial Services in Bengal, he also noted, had "for generations...been mainly concerned with law-and-order and revenue," and had little skill or interest in more "modern" functions of governance. The I.C.S. ranks, in particular were of extremely low caliber and their numbers "grossly inadequate to the barest needs of a modern administration on the most elementary schedule."¹⁹⁴ Little help had been given him from the Government of India or His Majesty's Government in London and little light was on the horizon. "In short," he concluded, "I believe that unless I am given more active assistance, I will have to discuss with you whether or not it is worth while my remaining here."¹⁹⁵

¹⁹¹ *The Viceroy's Journal*, p. 107

¹⁹² T.O.P Vol. V, Casey to Wavell, p. 638

¹⁹³ Ibid

¹⁹⁴ Ibid

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 641

Wavell was able to convince Casey to remain, but only a few weeks later the Ministry in Bengal collapsed. The virulence of attacks by the opposition, together with the forces of division inside the Muslim League, had weakened Nazimuddin's regime to the breaking point. The end came on March 28, 1945, two years to the day after Fazlul Huq had been unceremoniously removed from power. Behind the scenes Nazimuddin had been attempting an alliance with Kiran Sankar Roy of the "orthodox" Congress. A partnership with Congress would have given Nazimuddin the leverage to remain in power despite routine defections by the Suhrawardy faction, who frequently crossed lines to vote with the opposition.¹⁹⁶ Negotiations between the parties broke down, however, and on the 28th of March a trap was laid for the Nazimuddin by the opposition in concert with Suhrawardy loyalists. An almost incidental Agricultural Grant Bill came to the floor and was defeated when 18 members of the ruling party crossed over to the opposition. Failure to pass the Agricultural Grant tied up the budget bill, and the failure to pass the budget amounted to a no-confidence vote in the Ministry. The Bengal Ministry was disbanded on the 29th and Section 93 was declared in Bengal, with Governor Casey, a disillusioned and interim executive, gaining extensive emergency powers to govern the province without democratic interference.

Meanwhile, allied forces in Europe and Asia were moving from victory to victory and the end of the war was now well within sight. Japanese and Indian National Army troops had been successfully fought back from the boundary regions of British India by the fall of 1944. They retreated to Mandalay in Burma, which in turn fell to Allied advance in March of 1945. On May 2nd, Rangoon was recaptured by Allied troops, and the Japanese threat to India had been all but extinguished. Less than a week later, on May 8th, Nazi Germany unconditionally surrendered to the Allies, and the streets of London and New York were mobbed by victory celebrations. On the very same day, the Famine Enquiry Commission's *Report on Bengal* was published. Although the report detailed the pervasive failure of the colonial administrative apparatus in India, as publication had coincided with V-E Day, the Viceroy assured London, "the impact [was] considerably lessened!"¹⁹⁷ The collateral damage of famine could hardly take headlines

¹⁹⁶ T.O.P. Vol. V, Casey to Colville, p. 715-716

¹⁹⁷ T.O.P. Vol. V, Colville to Amery, p. 999

on such a historic day. Governor Casey, however, remained reflective. “There does not seem to be much doubt,” he jotted in his diary that evening, “but that India represents an administrative and governmental failure on a scale that fortunately is not common in the world...It all makes one very ashamed.”¹⁹⁸

Wavell, himself, was also disillusioned with the merits of Empire, and had been pushing for a resumption of the “political process” since the beginning of his Viceregal tenure. Churchill had been foremost in opposition to resuming the process, and no moves had been made since the failed Cripps Mission. With the war in Europe now over and elections in Britain scheduled for July of 1945, however, the Prime Minister gave the Viceroy permission to revive negotiations. The Congress Working Committee was released from detention on June 15, and a conference was scheduled at Simla towards the end of the month. The proposal to be presented by the Viceroy differed little from that rejected by Congress at the time of the Cripps Mission, but Allied progress in the war now made the prospect of provisional “Indianization,” with the promise of more comprehensive independence after the war, much more enticing. The other major player at Simla would be the Muslim League. In the first few days of the conference there was considerable optimism, but negotiations broke down when Jinnah refused to allow any party but the Muslim League to appoint Muslim representatives to sit on the Viceroy’s Executive Council. The Muslim League, according to Jinnah’s contention, should be the sole representative body of Muslims in India, and Jinnah its “sole spokesman.” This idea proved wholly unacceptable to both Congress, whose President, Maulana Azad, was himself a Muslim. The Viceroy, who himself had facilitated Jinnah’s role as a chief negotiator, was dismayed by Jinnah’s “arrogance and intransigence.”¹⁹⁹

Meanwhile general elections had taken place in the United Kingdom, and much to the shock of the Conservatives, they and their heroic wartime leader, Winston Churchill, were swept from power by the Labour Party in a landslide victory. Clement Attlee replaced Churchill as Prime Minister, and Lord Pethwick-Lawrence replaced Leopold Amery as Secretary of State for India. The Labour party was assumed to advocate Indian independence, and despite the failure of the Simla Conference, anticipation that the new

¹⁹⁸ Casey’s Diary, p. 56

¹⁹⁹ *The Viceroy’s Journal*, p. 153

government in London would move in a “liberal” direction on India policy was widespread. Wavell traveled to London towards the end of August, and though he found the leadership in the newly formulated India Office "obviously bent on handing over India to their Congress friends as soon as possible,"²⁰⁰ he also noted that "the rank and file of the Labour party and the country at large take little interest in India."²⁰¹ He returned to the sub-continent with little more to report than that elections to the General Assembly and provincial legislatures would be held - for the first time since 1937 - in the coming winter months.

The end of summer in Bengal was breeding other anxieties however. Once again the province was approaching its lean season, when local reserves from the previous harvest were perennially running low, prices were rising, and anticipation of the coming *aman* crop was all that kept many of the province's poor from absolute despair - even in a normal year. The monsoon rains in 1945, however, had failed; drought conditions were prevailing in most districts, and by August fears were rising that Bengal was facing imminent starvation on a large scale once again. It was predicted that the *aman* harvest in the province was likely to be just 65% of average.²⁰² Wavell wrote to the new Secretary of State just a few days after he took office, to convey to him that the food situation was extremely worrying and a "serious scarcity of rice in Bengal" was anticipated.²⁰³ Predictions of the poor rice harvest, he informed London, suggested that the province would soon be facing a shortage of as much as 3.5 million tons. The Viceroy had received reports that there were considerable reserves in re-occupied Burma and Siam, which might be utilized if large scale famine was to be averted.

Due to administrative inefficiency, political intrigue and colonial indifference the situation in Bengal had been allowed to drift. Military medical and food relief had been withdrawn in late 1944, and little had been done by the provincial government to replace the loss. Casey had initiated an ambitious program to re-build country boats, in order to rehabilitate the dismantled transportation infrastructure, but the scheme was riddled with

²⁰⁰ *The Viceroy's Journal*, p. 169-170

²⁰¹ *Ibid*, p. 165

²⁰² Casey's Diary, p. 185

²⁰³ T.O.P. Vol. VI, Wavell to Pethwick-Lawrence, p. 295

corruption and was flagging badly.²⁰⁴ An increasingly acute coal shortage was crippling rail movements throughout the country, and the transport of food remained a low priority.²⁰⁵ As a result, and despite the lessons learned from 1943, the food distribution system in Bengal continued to be poor.²⁰⁶ Land rehabilitation schemes were entangled in political maneuvering and acrimony, and millions in Bengal remained homeless. Calcutta itself, after permutations already detailed, was now fully rationed, but the rest of Bengal, with the exception of Dacca and Narayangunge, were without any rationing scheme at all. As such, supplies, as well as prices, were still subject to the vicissitudes of the "free market."²⁰⁷ And perhaps most alarming of all, the feeding of industrial Calcutta, which was widely understood to have been deeply implicated in the calamity of 1943, had been removed from Government of India responsibility and the city would, once again, be dependent on rice from the country-side.

Victory over Japan, meanwhile, meant little in Bengal. Repressive wartime controls remained in effect,²⁰⁸ and Governor Casey hesitated to demobilize the Home or Civic Guards who had been instrumental in keeping "order" in Bengal for the last several years. Rice was now theoretically available through traditional import routes from Southeast Asia, but the geo-political landscape remained unforgiving to Bengal. A two million ton surplus of rice in Burma and Thailand had to go through the "tooth-comb of the Food Committee in Washington," Governor Casey worried, "and [the] U.S.A. [would] push for rice to China - their white-haired boy."²⁰⁹ Casey's apprehensions proved well founded. Despite the Governor's appeals, backed by Wavell's increasingly harsh warnings, the Secretary of State reported back to India that, as regards the possibility of getting imports from Southeast Asia, "the Americans have been making themselves very difficult in opposition to India's claims."²¹⁰ What might be made available to Bengal, Pethwick-Lawrence warned was "certain to be immensely short of total requirement."²¹¹

²⁰⁴ Casey's Diary, August 8, 1945

²⁰⁵ *The Viceroy's Journal*, p. 143

²⁰⁶ Casey's Diary, p. 219

²⁰⁷ Casey's Diary, p. 243

²⁰⁸ WBSA, Home Political, "Confidential Report on the Political Situation in Bengal, Second Half of September, 1945," File W-37/45

²⁰⁹ Casey's Diary, p. 212

²¹⁰ T.O.P. Vol. VI, Pethwick-Lawrence to Wavell, p. 363

²¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 364

Thus, scarcity, hunger, and martial law continued to be the order of the day - despite Allied victory.

Hunger continued to be the order of the day in provincial politics as well. In August of 1945 Fazlul Huq was on the stump at Calcutta University, thrashing the Muslim League and warning that their policies imperiled Bengal with the threat of an even greater famine than the "last." Casey called on Huq and scolded him for his "exploitation of the food situation for political ends."²¹² The speech, he chided the ex-Chief Minister, had been a "naughty one" that the Governor could not tolerate. Huq left Casey's office chastened, "with the promise of being good."²¹³ Shortly thereafter the Governor summoned the editors of all the major newspapers in the province and implored them, as well, "to desist from crying 'famine.'"²¹⁴ S.P. Mookerjee was, meanwhile, maintaining his attacks, warning of an impending "second famine" and reminding his audiences that an "Anglo-Muslim League conspiracy" had been responsible for the greatest catastrophe in living memory, which had provided "a bitter foretaste of Pakistan rule in Bengal kept in power by the British bayonets."²¹⁵ He also reminded his gatherings of the singular relief work that the Mahasabha had done and assured them that they would continue the fight to make "famine's recurrence impossible."²¹⁶ H.S. Suhrawardy was, at the same time, reinforcing his own public image, expanding the connections and influence that he had accrued as Food Minister under Nazimuddin, particularly with the increasingly active Muslim student community who had gained a certain political capital in voluntary service at government "gruel kitchens" during famine relief efforts.²¹⁷

For the poor of Bengal, however, the autumn of 1945 proved yet another act in the ongoing script of dislocation, hunger, disease and unmitigated despair. The continuing "cloth famine," in particular, was becoming increasingly acute. Governor Casey, while on a visit to New Delhi, approached the Government of India's Department of Civil Supplies about "the nakedness of Bengal due to shortage of cloth," but was

²¹² Casey's Diary, p. 168

²¹³ Ibid

²¹⁴ Ibid, p. 186

²¹⁵ *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, "S.P. Mookerjee's Speech," November 15, 1945

²¹⁶ Ibid

²¹⁷ Shila Sen, p. 190

unable to move "hardly a *dhoti*" out of the Central Government.²¹⁸ As the cold weather approached, the situation become only more dire. Relief agencies operating in the districts were compelled by law to accept shipments of cloth from warehouses in Calcutta, regardless of quality. The District Magistrate in Jessore complained bitterly that "some of the cloth sent [was] reported...to be so moth-eaten or so rotten that it cannot stand the slightest strain. This is grossly unfair on our local handling agents who have to pay the Calcutta agent irrespective of the quality delivered - an unheard of thing - and also on the public, especially the poor folk who have to pay hard-earned rupees for bad stuff."²¹⁹ The dead, as of autumn 1945, fared only a little better. Protests had been raised about the lack of cloth, even, to cover the deceased, and special provisions were made to ration whole cloth for corpses. Following standard procedures related to the dead in general, however, rations for mortuary cloth were allocated according to religious community, with yardage figured according to respective Hindu, Muslim or Christian needs.²²⁰

Meanwhile, grim prospects for the rice harvest were unsettling prices and the black market was again holding sway.²²¹ By September the Chief Secretary was reporting "appreciable demand for rice from Government stocks for the districts."²²² and arrangements were made to move rice from Calcutta to the *mofussil*. But the direction of "relief" was reversed within a few short months, and by November, "steps [were being] taken to reinforce Calcutta's stocks by moving stocks *from* the districts."²²³ At the same time, rations in factories were being reduced and the quality of rice being dolled out was still extremely poor.²²⁴ Massive retrenchment in war-related industries had also left hundreds of thousands unemployed, and the general mood in the city was growing increasingly restive. Strikes for "victory bonuses" were widespread, and at General

²¹⁸ *The Viceroy's Journal*, p. 141

²¹⁹ WBSA, Home Political, file W-37/45 "Confidential Report on the Political Situation in Bengal: First Half of November, 1945"

²²⁰ See publication of Calcutta Rationing Order in *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, November 18, 1945, p. 7

²²¹ WBSA, Home Political, file W-37/45 "Confidential Report on the Political Situation in Bengal: First Half of October, 1945"

²²² WBSA, Home Political, file W-37/45 "Confidential Report on the Political Situation in Bengal: Second Half of September, 1945"

²²³ WBSA, Home Political, file W-37/45 "Confidential Report on the Political Situation in Bengal: First Half of November, 1945" (italics added)

²²⁴ *Ibid*

Electric's Garden Reach factory "there was a riot...on account of bad rice supplied to the workers and the Manager was assaulted."²²⁵ In the countryside, as winter approached, conditions deteriorated further. In Bankura district there was "agitation over distress" and reports of death from starvation.²²⁶ In Midnapore "test relief works" were opened and drew large numbers of "destitutes" (the final measure of famine according to the Bengal Famine Code.)²²⁷ Test works were also opened in Khulna, Dacca and Bankura - all drawing tens of thousands of "volunteers." Seed potatoes were in short supply throughout the province due to consumption by starving cultivators, and in districts around Calcutta reports of an increase of "beggars" were, again, being received.²²⁸

Disturbances

On the 21st of November 1945 - amidst such bad news from every quarter - Calcutta erupted into violence, the scale of which had not been witnessed in decades. The trouble began when a large crowd of students gathered to protest the trials of Indian National Army (INA) soldiers captured by British authorities upon the defeat of Japan in Burma.²²⁹ After a rally at Wellington Square in downtown Calcutta, a procession began towards Government headquarters at Dalhousie. The meeting itself had been authorized, but when the crowd approached Dharmatala Street, they were met by a cordon of police constables and a tense stand-off ensued. The confrontation grew more heated in the early evening, and by morning there were reports that shots had been fired and at least three student demonstrators had been killed and by the afternoon of the 22nd rioting was widespread, with outbreaks becoming "steadily more violent in character."²³⁰ Student demonstrators by this time had been joined by a diverse contingent of urban residents including taxi drivers, "up country" laborers, Bengali factory workers, and, according to the governor, "the hooligan element [more] generally."²³¹ Running battles between rioting crowds and the police and military were fought throughout the city, and after four

²²⁵ Ibid

²²⁶ Ibid

²²⁷ WBSA, Home Political, file W-37/45 "Confidential Report on the Political Situation in Bengal: Second Half of November, 1945"

²²⁸ Ibid

²³⁰ T.O.P. Vol. VI, Casey to Wavell, p. 725

²³¹ Ibid

days of violence at least 33 people had been killed, with another 400 seriously injured, including 200 police, fire brigade workers and military personnel.

The exact cause of the disturbances, Governor Casey admitted to the Viceroy, had been difficult to establish. The activities of the students on the 21st, he informed Wavell, could not explain the amplification and diversification of violence that rocked the city subsequently. The disorder, in this sense, "was not the result of a widespread conspiracy to plunge Calcutta into anarchy."²³² Rather the violence emerged spontaneously, and as such could only be understood to represent a diverse range of animosities, grievances and anxieties. It also exemplified an unprecedented sense of desperation. "Both in North and South Calcutta," Casey reported, "a feature of the disturbances comparatively new to Bengal was that crowds when fired on largely stood their ground or at most receded a little, to return again to attack."²³³ The targets of the crowds included police installations, public transport facilities, symbols of governmental authority and military vehicles and personnel. In a telling and highly significant sign of the times, attacks were also made on Government ration shops, and private retail outlets were forced to shuttered their establishments by angry mobs.²³⁴ Department of Civil Supply lorries were also targeted, some being attacked and burnt, and as many as six going completely "missing" during the disorder.²³⁵ The Calcutta Rationing Department issued a press release on the 24th of November. "It is in the interest of the people themselves," the publication read, "to see that Food Rationing lorries are enabled to work so that people may be fed."²³⁶

That the citizens of Calcutta were acting contrary to their own interests was a viewpoint also held by all the major political parties, who hastened to disassociate themselves with the disturbances. On the 21st protestors had tied together Muslim League, Congress, and Communist Party flags in a rare gesture of political unity.²³⁷ The parties themselves, however, quickly denied involvement, making claims and counter-claims implicating rival organizations. Muslim League representatives rushed to the Governor's office on the 22nd to assure Casey that the League "deplored the present

²³² Ibid

²³³ Ibid

²³⁴ WBSA, Home Political, file W-37/45 "Confidential Report on the Political Situation in Bengal: Second Half of November, 1945"

²³⁵ Casey's Diary, p.

²³⁶ *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, "Calcutta Rationing," November 34, 1945

²³⁷ Sumit Sarkar (1983), p. 421

disturbances and disowned any responsibility for them."²³⁸ They, in turn, fingered Sarat Bose, leader of the Bengal Congress, as the primary instigator. Sarat Bose - brother of Subhas Bose, who, himself, had commanded the INA - also unequivocally denied involvement. Bose issued a "frantic appeal" to residents of Calcutta on the 22nd urging them to remain "disciplined" to Congress directives.²³⁹ He subsequently put blame for the disturbances on the communist party,²⁴⁰ with whom Congress was recently having very bitter differences.²⁴¹ The Communist Party, though involved in the initial protest through their students' wing, was, by the 23rd, touring the affected areas in "propaganda cars...dissuading students from further participation."²⁴² Lack of support from organized political parties and repressive Government measures thus precipitated a "sudden collapse of the trouble and the speedy return to normal conditions."²⁴³

"Normal conditions" in the fall of 1945, however, and as detailed above, were a grind of poverty, ill-health and acute anxiety. That this popular "disturbance" was short-circuited by lack of institutional support is a sad and telling commentary on the disconnect between party and popular interests in Bengal at the time. After several long years of colossal calamity, suffering and insecurity, and with the specter of acute food shortage again looming on the immediate horizon, the desperate measures that characterized the November disturbances in Calcutta can, and should, be understood as a revolution denied. "The most significant feature of the disturbances," writes historian Pranab Kumar Chatterjee, "was absence of communal strife. The Hindus and Muslims stood as comrades in arms and no trace of mutual rancor between the communities was evident all through the November episode."²⁴⁴ That communal rancor was, on the other hand, becoming increasingly enmeshed in party politics, particularly with elections scheduled for the coming months, is significant. The emergence of unified rebellion in November of 1945 is testimony to a sense of solidarity with which the population of Calcutta understood their highly uncertain collective fate. The denunciation of this same eruption of fraternal "disorder," has to be seen as a rejection of this same solidarity by the

²³⁸ Casey's Diary, p. 254

²³⁹ *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, "Carry Out Congress Directions," November 23, 1945

²⁴⁰ T.O.P. Vol. VI Wavell to Pethwick-Lawrence, p. 602

²⁴¹ See: Sumit Sarkar (1983), p. 420

²⁴² T.O.P. Vol. VI, Casey to Wavell, p. 725

²⁴³ Ibid

²⁴⁴ P.K. Chatterjee, p. 163

political elite, who continued to channel the anxieties and frustrations of the masses into an entirely more sectarian mold.

In February of 1946, however, disturbances again broke out in Calcutta that mirrored the November model. The flashpoint was again the trial of INA soldiers, but, again, the "disorder" that ensued belied the deep and pervasive anxieties of a population under siege. Demonstrators fought pitched battles with police and military forces across the city, burned Government transport, looted shops and, again, stood their ground against police and military firings. The violence took on a distinctly anti-colonial character, with numerous attacks on European people and property, and spread to the far outskirts of the city.²⁴⁵ "As in November," historian Sumit Sarkar notes, "there quickly developed a remarkable unity in the streets between students and workers, Muslims and Hindus."²⁴⁶ Governor Casey, whose bags were already packed for Australia, met with Muslim League stalwart Huseyn Suhrawardy concluding that the day's activities "show[ed] quite clearly that [he had] no recognized authority over his followers."²⁴⁷ Sarat Bose again disassociated Congress from the disturbances and called for strict adherence to party "discipline."²⁴⁸ After two days of clashes, 84 people were dead and more than 300 injured.²⁴⁹ The incoming Governor, Sir Fredrick Burrows, was scheduled to arrive in Calcutta on February 13th to assume Emergency Rule in Bengal, but Casey, himself eager to get away, telephoned the Viceroy to advise delay. Transporting Burrows from the airport would "take a great many police (who [were] being sorely tried) away from much more important tasks."²⁵⁰ "The Almost Revolution"²⁵¹ of February 1946 was the last of its kind in colonial Calcutta. The conflagrations that Burrows would have to deal with in the coming months were of a much different, and darker, nature.

²⁴⁵ P.K. Chatterjee, p. 166

²⁴⁶ Sumit Sarkar (1983), p. 422

²⁴⁷ Casey's Diary, p. 338

²⁴⁸ P.K. Chatterjee, p. 167

²⁴⁹ Sumit Sarkar (1983), p. 422

²⁵⁰ Casey's Diary, p. 339

²⁵¹ Suranjan Das uses this term to describe the February disturbance in "The 1992 Calcutta Riot in Historical Continuum: A Relapse into 'Communal Fury?'"

Second Famine

The Viceroy informed London on the first of January 1946 that the food situation in India was deteriorating still further. If Congress called for a mass movement, Wavell warned, food shortage would surely intensify the response.²⁵² "To have another disastrous famine within the space of three years," he cautioned further, "would afflict the conscience of the world."²⁵³ He lobbied for immediate and substantial imports, but, yet again, received less than satisfactory replies. "India's need is unquestionable," the Labour Party's Secretary of State responded, "but...it would be foolish to raise false expectations of greatly increased imports."²⁵⁴ Perhaps, the Secretary of State added, a cut in rations could save the situation.²⁵⁵ Wavell found the suggestion that rations in India should be reduced to 12 oz. per day deplorable. He pointed out that a 12 oz. ration amounted to only 1200 calories, "which any health expert [would] admit is a hopelessly inadequate diet."²⁵⁶ He puzzled at the audacity of the India Office in London. "I cannot believe," he bristled, "that anyone will contemplate keeping such a large population on the edge of starvation for the whole of this critical year."²⁵⁷

With few other options, however, Wavell contemplated this exact course. He met with his Executive Council, and found them amenable to the idea of a ration cut. A few weeks later, he met with Congress President, Maulana Azad, and even more surprisingly, found Azad agreeable to a reduction of rations as well. In a press statement Azad explained that Congress was "essentially a political organization based on the will and aspirations of the people...fully alive to the urgency of the new spirit and to the impatience of the younger generation. But we are equally conscious of our heavy responsibility at this critical time."²⁵⁸ Part and parcel of that responsibility was to urge the public to co-operate with India's current colonial caretakers. Co-operation, as far as the food crisis went, meant accepting Government expediencies. In this context, he reasoned, the cut in rations was "a far-sighted measure for saving millions of lives."²⁵⁹

²⁵² T.O.P. Vol. VI, Wavell to Pethwick-Lawrence, p. 720

²⁵³ T.O.P. Vol. VI, Wavell to Pethwick-Lawrence, p. 868

²⁵⁴ T.O.P. Vol. VI, Pethwick-Lawrence to Wavell, p. 920

²⁵⁵ Ibid

²⁵⁶ T.O.P. Vol. VI, Wavell to Pethwick-Lawrence, p. 1006

²⁵⁷ Ibid

²⁵⁸ From the *Hindustan Times*, March 3, 1946, reprinted in T.O.P. Vol. VI, p. 1116

²⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 1117

The leadership of the Muslim League similarly complied with the necessity of reducing rations and pushing the masses of India further towards "the edge of starvation."²⁶⁰ In this sense, the disconnect between the masses and the political elite, evident in the earlier disturbances, was reiterated in relation to food.

By this time the Congress and the Muslim League had been established as the overwhelmingly dominant players on the national scene. In the winter elections, Congress had commandeered a majority in the Central Assembly, winning 57 out of a total of 102 seats, earning 91.3% of the non-Muslim vote.²⁶¹ The Muslim League scored a parallel victory, winning all 30 Assembly seats reserved for Muslims, after garnering 86.6% of the Muslim vote. The fact that franchise was extremely limited, less than 1% for the Central Assembly elections,²⁶² did little to curtail the enthusiasm with which each party now claimed broad and sweeping representation. The election results also served to reify the rivalry between the League and Congress, centralizing the over-determining issue of contention between them, namely: Pakistan. A high level Cabinet Mission was organized by Wavell in conjunction with the India Office in London to bring the parties to the table in order to hammer out a final resolution that would determine the terms of a transfer of power. The "Cabinet Mission" commenced its work in March of 1946, and by May 16th had come up with a plan that one tentative agreement from both parties.

The May 16th Plan involved a three-tiered federation with a weak central authority that would remain in control of defence, foreign affairs and communications. Provinces would be "grouped" according to majority religious communities, with Group A comprised of Hindu majority provinces in south and central India, and Groups B and C consisting of Muslim majority provinces in the west (Punjab and the North Western Frontier Province) and in the east (Bengal and Assam.) Each grouping would be given wide-ranging governmental autonomy, and the minority community in any of the three groupings would be guaranteed a measure of equity by the balance of power in the groupings where they maintained majority status. This plan, it was thought, would give Jinnah and the Muslim League a very close approximation of the "Pakistan" that was central to their demands - particularly in establishing the entire provinces of Bengal and

²⁶⁰Sumit Sarkar (1983), p. 423

²⁶¹ Ibid, p. 426

²⁶² Ibid, p. 427

Punjab under Muslim control - as well as placating Congress with the promise of a, however compromised, central authority. Though they had given provisional approval of the scheme in May, however, the Congress leadership began to back-pedal, most conspicuously on whether groupings were to be understood as compulsory or whether they would be based on plebiscites. Further acrimony mounted in June as the Congress leadership became ever-more equivocal, with leading industrialists lobbying for a stronger central government that would guarantee their primacy.²⁶³ The issue of a much stronger center finally became the issue around which Congress support for the negotiations collapsed.

Further dispute surrounded the composition of an Interim Government, which would oversee the constitutional and administrative processes in the lead-up to independence. The Muslim League demanded parity with Congress in any provisional government, and furthermore stipulated that only they should be allowed to appoint Muslim representatives to the Council. A Cabinet Mission statement was issued on June 16th granting both demands. Congress, however, rejected the plan, most vehemently in relation to the monopoly on Muslim representation proposed by the Muslim League. The Muslim League argued that if Congress was unwilling to participate in the Interim Government proposed by the Cabinet Mission on June 16th, it was incumbent upon the Viceroy to move ahead with the formation of a provisional government without them. Members of the Cabinet Mission, however, fearing a mass movement if Congress was excluded, rejected Jinnah's insistence. On June 26th the Viceroy announced that while constitutional negotiations would continue, the formation of an Interim Government would not be presently possible. On June 29th the Cabinet Mission left India.

The Viceroy, for his part, felt that, "however absorbed [Government] may [have been] in the constitutional problems, the food situation [was] even more urgent."²⁶⁴ Promises of imports from the U.S. had proved hollow, and London had little more to suggest than that India might be able to work a deal for 60 large *tractors* which were for sale at the American Air Depot at Agra.²⁶⁵ Meanwhile, Wavell complained, the Muslim League and Congress were content to "pay lip service to the idea that the food crisis

²⁶³ Metcalf and Metcalf, p. 213

²⁶⁴ T.O.P. Vol. VII, Wavell to Henderson, April 24, 1946

²⁶⁵ T.O.P. Vol. VII, Henderson to Wavell, April 4, 1946

should not be a matter of party politics, but in the end they will not forgo party advantage even in the face of famine."²⁶⁶ Animosity was nowhere higher than in Bengal. The Muslim League, campaigning on the "single issue of Pakistan."²⁶⁷ won a substantial victory in provincial elections, registering 93% of the Muslim vote, and in April consummate Bengali political strongman, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, formed "an almost purely Muslim Ministry...with an almost purely Hindu opposition"²⁶⁸ Franchise had been no more than 10% of the population in provincial elections,²⁶⁹ however, and it is entirely unclear to what extent the majority of the population remained interested in the ongoing Ministerial morass. The insufficient *aman* crop was now in and the province was careening towards the lean months with few solutions to an impending disaster. Reports from most districts in Bengal, meanwhile, indicated that acute distress was imminent.²⁷⁰

London sent Herbert Morrison, leader of the House of Commons, to Washington to argue the case for imports to India, but the U.S. Government offered little help. Wavell discussed the possibility of cutting rations still further with his Executive Council, but it was concluded that any further cut might "create very serious labor trouble and by affecting confidence would probably doom the prospects of procurement so as to leave us even worse off than before."²⁷¹ Towards the end of June there were demonstrations in Calcutta, orchestrated by provincial Kisan Sabhas, demanding immediate arrangements for the movement of at least 200,000 tons of rice to distressed districts and the immediate constitution of a Food Advisory Council.²⁷² Government gave in to the latter demand, organizing an all-parties Council to advise Government on procurement, storage and distribution on food grains, but no measures were taken for the movement of food relief to deficit areas.²⁷³ While reports of starvation were filling the newspapers and famine was again becoming headline news, the Viceroy called on

²⁶⁶ T.O.P. Vol. VI, Wavell to King George, p. 1236

²⁶⁷ Suranjan Das (1991), p. 164

²⁶⁸ Bose (1986), p. 223

²⁶⁹ Sumit Sarkar (1983), p. 427

²⁷⁰ Casey's Diary, p. 236-238

²⁷¹ T.O.P. Vol. VII, Wavell to Henderson, p. 645

²⁷² *The Statesman*, "Demonstration in Calcutta," July 1, 1946

²⁷³ *The Statesman*, "Food Advisory Committee," July 1, 1946

Maulana Azad to dissuade the Bengal press from fomenting "alarm about the food situation."²⁷⁴

At the same time a "U.S. Famine Mission" arrived in Calcutta to tour Bengal, in order to gauge levels of distress and make recommendations to the U.S. Government.²⁷⁵ The Mission visited deficit districts and studied distribution and rationing arrangements, but when asked to comment on their conclusions, admitted that Bengal's problems were "too big and too complex" to make any statement presently.²⁷⁶ On July 10 the *Statesman* reported that mortality rates in Calcutta had risen more than 15% over the previous week,²⁷⁷ and on the 16th of July the Government of India's Food Adviser warned that the rationing system in Bengal was highly "inefficient," and the province "might face famine," if markets were further destabilized by black-market forces and political intrigue.²⁷⁸ On July 25 Congress representatives tabled an adjournment in the Bengal Council that focused on the "acute distress prevailing in different parts of the province because of the government's failure to reduce prices and to maintain an adequate supply of rice."²⁷⁹ The Congress representatives expressed their dismay that no lesson had been learned from the cataclysm of 1943 and warned, "reports reaching Congress offices showed that starvation on a wide scale has already begun."²⁸⁰ The dreaded "second famine" had finally arrived, and Congress laid the blame squarely at the Muslim League's door. Muslim League representatives retorted that the Ministry was "being attacked for an offence that was not committed by them. It was the Section 93 Administration which should have been the subject matter for discussion as the food policy pursued by that regime was responsible for the present situation."²⁸¹ The problem, moreover, might have been met but for the "malicious propaganda obviously carried on in the Press in the interests of Hindu merchants and *aratdars*."²⁸² A motion to censor the Ministry for allowing a "second famine" to arise was defeated along party lines.

²⁷⁴ T.O.P. Vol. VIII, Wavell to Maulana Azad, 1946, p.

²⁷⁵ *The Statesman*, "U.S. Famine Mission Arrives in Calcutta," July 2, 1946

²⁷⁶ *The Statesman*, "U.S. Food Mission Ends Bengal Tour," July 4, 1946

²⁷⁷ *The Statesman*, "Rise in Calcutta Mortality," July 10, 1946

²⁷⁸ *The Statesman*, "India's Food Import Needs," July 18, 1946

²⁷⁹ *The Statesman*, "No Starvation in Bengal," July 26, 1946

²⁸⁰ *Ibid*

²⁸¹ *Ibid*

²⁸² *Ibid* (*aratdars* are small traders who also store rice.)

On August 2nd a banner headline in *The Statesman*, the same paper that had broke the "first" famine read: "**Millions to Die of Starvation.**" The United States Department of Agriculture, the article read, "feared a serious famine was developing in Bengal." Meanwhile, however, the Cabinet Mission had completely broken down and the impasse between the Muslim League and Congress at the center had become intractable. On July 10th Nehru gave a speech unequivocally rejecting the May 16th plan, asserting that the Indian National Congress would not agree to mandatory groupings. The Muslim League, bitterly disillusioned with both Congress and Britain, convened a three day meeting at the end of July. At this meeting, the Council of the All-India Muslim passed two resolutions; one rejecting the Cabinet delegations plan for Indian independence, and a second calling for "direct action" for the achievement of Pakistan. August 16th was designated "Direct Action Day," and Muslims across India were called on to observe a *hartal* (general strike), and to conduct public meetings and rallies throughout the country in support of Pakistan. On August 4th it was added that Direct Action would also include a no-tax campaign, "particularly in respect of taxes levied by the Central Government."²⁸³ The primary objective of the announced program seems to have been to show the collective strength of the "Muslim Nation," and to demonstrate that they, like Congress, could organize a program of mass disobedience to express their political will. Furthermore, and rather importantly, the intended target of "direct action" appears to have been at least as much the British as it was Congress - or for that matter "Hindus," in general.²⁸⁴

In the mix of what was to come, famine in Bengal was forgotten.

²⁸³ *The Statesman*, "League Direct Action Programme Includes No-Tax Campaign," August 6, 1946

²⁸⁴ Sir Arthur Waugh interviewed the Muslim League Secretary, Liaquat Ali Khan on the 7th of August and reported that Khan said that "shedding of British and Muslim blood would be deplorable, but that it was better than slow strangulation." (T.O.P. Vol. VII, Waugh to Abell, August 7, 1946. p. 199) That Liaquat Ali Khan foresaw possible Muslim/*British* violence is significant.

Chapter Seven: Riots

The colonist keeps the colonized in a state of rage, which he prevents from boiling over. The colonized are caught in the tightly knit web of colonialism. But we have seen how on the inside the colonist achieves only a pseudo-petrification. The muscular tension of the colonized periodically erupts into bloody fighting - between tribes, clans, and individuals.¹

Franz Fanon - *The Wretched of the Earth*

Direct Action

On the 7th of August, Bengal Chief Minister, H. S. Suhrawardy, released a statement to the press calling on Muslims to ensure that Direct Action Day in Bengal would be observed peacefully. "This is the first step we are taking in pursuance of our new policy," he reminded followers, "and we must be absolutely disciplined. Let us show to the world that we can perform our task with complete discipline and that we have sufficient self-control and control over our people."² Suhrawardy's Ministry declared the 16th a public holiday, arguing that this was in the interest of public order and would "minimize chances of conflict."³ Minimizing conflict in the always contentious Bengal Legislative Assembly, however, would not be easy. Deploring the exercise of "Government in using their authority to give [official] effect to a communal party's decision,"⁴ Congress representatives tabled a motion to overturn the public holiday ruling. This same motion was, in turn, promptly thrown out by the (Muslim League) Deputy Speaker. After angry protests, heckling, and rancorous dispute, Congress Party representatives stormed off the floor and took the debate into the streets. In south Calcutta, the Provincial Congress Committee held a public meeting, at which the Muslim League was accused of "utilizing their [governmental] powers for advancing party

¹ Fanon, p. 17

² *The Statesman*, "Suhrawardy's Message for Direct Action Day," August 7, 1946

³ *The Statesman*, "Discussion on Holiday," August 16, 1942

⁴ *The Statesman*, "Congress Party Walk-Out," August 13, 1946

interest," and the League's plan of Direct Action was denounced.⁵ The leader of the Bengal Congress, Surendra Mohan Ghosh, urged "the public to perform their normal duties on August 16th," and a movement to thwart the League's *hartal* took hold.

The central platform of "Direct Action" in Calcutta, aside from a city-wide *hartal*, was a mass rally on the Maidan planned for three-o'clock in the afternoon. And so, starting early in the morning, Muslims from every corner of Calcutta and its industrial suburbs began to travel, mostly on foot, to the center of the city to join the demonstration. Reports of trouble began filtering into police headquarters by 7:30 AM. Armed Muslim processionists on their way to the Maidan were attempting to force Hindu shops to close, and bricks and other projectiles were being thrown from Hindu rooftops onto passing Muslim processionists below.⁶ Looting and violent confrontations between large mobs were reported a short time later, and by 9:30 serious disturbances had erupted in north Calcutta.⁷ Also around 9:30, casualties began to pour into Medical College Hospitals.⁸ By noon, thirty-seven arson fires had been reported from neighborhoods including; Maniktola, Machipara, Beliaghata, Jorasanka and Amherst street, and violent clashes had broken out all over central Calcutta.⁹ The police were fighting running battles with rioters in the streets and resorting to tear-gas and *lathi*-charges to deter looting mobs - who at times were attacking them directly.¹⁰ At 2:30, the Police Commissioner telephoned the Governor to inform him that the situation was rapidly deteriorating and that he and the Chief Minister were both of the opinion that the military should be called in immediately to quell the violence.¹¹

Despite the ongoing situation, however, the rally on the Maidan began at 4 P.M., and was attended by at least 100,000 Muslims from all over the city and its industrial suburbs.¹² At the gathering, rumors were rife that Muslims had been attacked and killed in many quarters of the city on their way to the Maidan. The crowd was already highly

⁵ *The Statesman*, "Protest Resolution Adopted," August 15, 1946

⁶ *Calcutta Disturbances Commission of Enquiry* (Hereafter CDCE), Vol. V, Test. of H.N. Sirkar, p. 58

⁷ *Ibid*

⁸ WBSA, Home Confidential, file W-351/46 (Part B IX) "Medical Arrangements During the Civil Disturbances.)

⁹ WBSA, Home Confidential, file W-351/46 (Part B IV) "The Work of the Fire Brigade."

¹⁰ CDCE, Vol. V, Testimony of H.N. Sirkar, p. 59

¹¹ CDCE Vol. II, Testimony of D.R. Hardwick, Commissioner of Police, Calcutta, p. 69

¹² Estimate of the Commissioner of Police, D.R. Hardwick in CDCE, Vol. II, p. 82

excitable, and these rumors served to increase the collective anxiety precipitously. The keynote speakers were the former and current Chief Ministers of Bengal, Kwaja Nazimuddin and H. S. Suhrawardy. Nazimuddin, according to the Governor's report, "in a woolly speech, on the whole preached peacefulness and restraint, but rather spoilt the effect by asserting that till 11:00 that morning all the injured persons [in clashes] were Muslims."¹³ Suhrawardy, also gave a half-hearted and unremarkable speech, but is reported to have assured the crowd that the police in Calcutta had been "restrained" and, as such, would not suppress Muslim violence - though no transcript of his speech exists.¹⁴ Meanwhile, even while the speeches were going on, violence had spread throughout central and north Calcutta. Clashes had also erupted in Tollygunge and Bhawanipur in south Calcutta, as well as in the industrial "docklands" of Kidderpore, Mommenpur and Garden Reach. When the demonstration at the Maidan ended, there was massive looting along the central business corridor, and as the congregants fanned back out into the city, violence across Calcutta escalated further. A curfew was imposed at six-o'clock, and military troops were dispatched from Sealdah sometime around midnight. But the violence, by this point, had already spiraled out of control, and neither the police nor the military could do much to stem it.

After five days of unrestrained murder, loot, arson, mutilation, torture and dislocation, much of the city lay in ruins. A British journalist present on the scene reported:

A sense of desolation hung over the native bazaars. In street after street rows of shops had been stripped to the walls. Tenements and business buildings were burnt out, and their unconsumed innards strewn over the pavements. Smashed furniture cluttered the roads, along with concrete blocks, brick, glass, iron rods, machine tools - anything that the mob had been able to tear loose but did not want to carry off. Fountains gushed from broken water remains. Burnt-out automobiles stood across traffic lanes. A pall of smoke hung over many blocks, and buzzards sailed in great, leisurely circles. Most overwhelming, however, were the neglected human casualties: fresh bodies, bodies grotesquely bloated in the tropical heat, slashed bodies, bodies bludgeoned to death, bodies piled on push carts, bodies caught in drains, bodies stacked high in vacant lots, bodies, bodies.¹⁵

¹³ T.O.P. Vol. VIII, Burrows to Wavell, p. 297

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Sengupta, p. 293

Nothing approaching the carnage that had taken place in Calcutta between the 16th and 20th of August had ever before taken place in the history of modern India. Estimates of between 5,000 and 10,000 killed have been advanced, but the true number of dead is impossible to ascertain. An unknown number of bodies were burnt to death in fires, stuffed into the sewers, dumped into rivers, or otherwise disposed of without account. Close to 200,000 people were in need of immediate relief, with at least 100,000 homeless. The violence also left deep psychological scars, both individually and collectively. The animosity between Hindu and Muslim religious communities suffered an irreparable shock that would concretize the push towards the partition of India - which took place exactly one year later. The violence in Calcutta precipitated communal outburst in Noakhali in east Bengal in October, and the violence in Noakhali (and Calcutta) reverberated in Bihar a month later. These several riots, in turn, set the tempo and tone for the catastrophic violence across India that accompanied partition in 1947. In this sense, it can be said, Calcutta provided the spark that ignited the conflagration of violence which would leave at least one million people dead, and more than ten million people dispossessed and dislocated.

The Calcutta Riots in History

That the Calcutta riots of 1946 were a catalyst and point of departure for the catastrophic violence that accompanied the partition of India, is a fact that is widely acknowledged by many historians - and yet about the riots themselves very little has been written. Not a single full length monograph has been published, and minimal scholarship exists. Very little of anything that has been written on the topic, moreover, gives any plausible explanation of the extent and ferocity of the cataclysmic violence that devastated the city in August, 1946. Participation was extremely widespread and seems to defy the logic of "instigation." What were the larger socio-political factors at work? What variables influenced the course of events? And - why was the violence so pervasive? Towards an answer to these questions historian Ayesha Jalal notes that the Calcutta riots were "just one symptom of a more generalized and diverse unrest... the endemic rivalry of scarce resources."¹⁶ The received wisdoms on the riots, she contends,

¹⁶ Jalal, p. 223

has proven insufficient: "everyone who describes these killings, runs for the shelter of communalism to explain the inexplicable, or more accurately the unacceptable, face of violence. But the killings still await their historian."¹⁷

The most commonly cited cause of the Calcutta riots is the acrimony caused by Britain's failed Cabinet Mission. According to this line of thought, the Muslim League's call for "direct action" is cited, de facto, as sufficient explanation for the violence that laid ruin to Calcutta.¹⁸ As can be discerned from even the perfunctory summary of events given above, however, the call to "direct action" was, in itself, merely an indefinite political posture taken by the central command of the All-India Muslim League, which included no explicit call for violence, and was, moreover, intended as a movement against the British, at least as much as against Congress supporters, no less Hindus more generally. More puzzling still is that Direct Action Day was, in fact, observed peacefully all across India - while only in Calcutta was there catastrophe. That Muslims - mostly poor and immigrant - comprised only 25% of the population of Calcutta at the time, would also tend to make explanations of one-sided Muslim instigation implausible. It is, furthermore, generally accepted - though no reliable statistics were ever compiled - that more Muslims were killed in the violence than Hindus,¹⁹ which again would tend to undermine explanations that place disproportionate blame for the riots on Muslims.

In other histories, particularly those with a Hindu or Nationalist bent, the role of Chief Minister, H.S. Suhrawardy, in particular, is given primary importance. According to this line, Suhrawardy is accused of having instigated the violence, almost single-handedly, through his connections with Calcutta's Muslim underworld and the Calcutta police. That Suhrawardy himself was in favor of calling in the military - even on the first day - to quell the disturbances, however, seems to indicate quite clearly that whatever machinations he may be guilty of, the violence that extremely rapidly engulfed Calcutta was far beyond the purvey of his governmental or popular authority. In fact, once violence had engulfed the city as a whole, and the extent of brutality was evident; Suhrawardy and Kwaja Nazimuddin of the Muslim League, together with Congress

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 216

¹⁸ See, for instance: Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India*, or Bose and Jalal, *Modern South Asia*

¹⁹ On August 19th, Wavell wrote to Pethwick-Lawrence, "the present estimate is that appreciably more Muslims than Hindus were killed." (T.O.P. Vol. VIII, p. 274.) Vallabhbhai Patel, in a letter to Stanford Cripps in October also suggested that "in Calcutta the Hindus had the best of it. (T.O.P. Vol. VIII, p. 750.)

leaders, Sarat Chandra Bose and Kiran Shankar Ray, issued a joint appeal for peace in the city.²⁰ But the situation, very quickly, was well beyond control of political leadership as well.

In the most often cited, and most thorough work to date on the topic, Kolkata University historian, Suranjan Das expands on the logic of political instigation in an effort to outline a more complex understanding of the 1946 riots. In his 1991 book, *Communal Riots in Bengal: 1905-1947*, Das engages in a meticulous and extremely well-researched survey of Hindu/Muslim conflict in Bengal during the 20th century, concluding with a chapter that is devoted primarily to the "Great Calcutta Killings."²¹ Previous riots in Calcutta - most notably those in 1918 and 1926 - Das concludes, provided "a channel for an expression of the socio-economic grievances of the lower social order,"²² and as such, "the riotous crowd had their own perceptions [and] their participation in the violence was dictated as much by their own consciousness as by a response to mobilization attempts by communal leaders."²³ The 1946 riots, however, Das argues, "were organized and overtly communal; religious and political, and not class or economic consideration, primarily determined the crowds' choice of targets."²⁴ The murderous mobs in 1946, Das adds, "Hindu as well as Muslim - came to be motivated by a kind of *political* legitimization."²⁵ Das goes even further to suggest that in 1946 "the rioting crowd appears to have been broadly aware of the objective of the violence in which it was participating. It was inspired by the same sense of 'moral duty' as had motivated the French revolutionary crowd to perform tasks which the magistrates had shown themselves unwilling to do."²⁶ As such, according to Das, it was not merely the extremity of these riots that set them apart from previous disturbances, but, more importantly, their communal, "sophisticated and organized" nature.

In fact, the violence during the 1946 riots was *highly variegated* and the list of motivations, objectives, grievances and expressions, is hardly exhausted by an examination of the connections between organized and popular politics - however

²⁰ *The Statesman*, "Communal Riots in Calcutta," August 18, 1946

²¹ ... as the Calcutta riots are also known

²² *Ibid.* p. 74

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 59

²⁴ Das (1991), p. 6

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 310 (emphasis added)

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 170

important these may have been. Most importantly, the socio-economic context in which the riots took place can not be so easily dismissed, and - as in the case of previous riots in Calcutta - must be understood as fundamental. The context of the 1946 riots, it should be understood, was defined above all else by famine and war. In *Communal Riots in Bengal*, Suranjan Das does recognize the impact of famine on the population of Bengal, noting:

The 'man-made famine' of 1943 was [a] devastating experience for the Calcuttans, as thousands of hungry people from all parts of the province moved to Calcutta, begging even for gruel when they lost hope of being given rice. Great numbers starved to death of open streets, precipitating some of Calcutta's worst ever epidemics of cholera, malaria and smallpox... in popular perception these developments reduced the value of human lives. There was a brutalization of consciousness on a mass scale, as if the people were being prepared for the inhuman episode of August 1946.²⁷

But Das's emphasis on the political aspects of the violence obscures the more pervasive structural relationship between famine and riots in Bengal. The Bengal Famine was not merely a psychological prelude to the riots, it was also a principal catalyst, and in concrete ways set the stage for the Calcutta Killings.

As I have argued in all that has come before, famine had, throughout the period, insinuated itself into every aspect of life - political, psychological, economic, socio-political, communal, and otherwise. By 1946 this was a society in which any idea of "moral duty," particularly in the political sphere, had been so attenuated by the ravages of famine and the uncertainties of war, that for many millions it can be said to have ceased to exist. Famine had not merely "brutalized the consciousness" of the population, it had distorted and deformed certain fundamental structures that define daily existence. Meanings of concepts like "health," "territory," "hunger," "home," "community," and "priority" (to cite just a few) had gone through many complicated and rapid layers of transformation in the tumult of war, starvation, and death. Famine and war had also transformed the geo-political importance of Calcutta. Millions had died - and continued to die - of deprivation and disease, so that Calcutta, the colonial war effort, and Capital could thrive. With the countryside increasingly understood as merely a buffer zone to the city, both in terms of defence and supply, establishing a legitimate foothold in

²⁷ Ibid, p. 162

Calcutta had increasingly meant the difference between life and death. "Belonging" to Calcutta meant "priority," which, in turn, meant survival. Meanwhile, bodies themselves became tokens of social value, with certain bodies - the bodies of the poor and disempowered - sacrificed for those deemed "essential." In this way, the bio-politics of famine also congealed identities, hardening distinctions in the furnace of necessity and survival, transforming, but at the same time cementing, affiliations of community, class, and caste.

In the examination of the Calcutta riots to follow, I will continue my analysis from these perspectives. A central, if implicit, argument that I am making is that an investigation of the "causes" of the Calcutta riots is a somewhat impracticable exercise that can only proceed from a generalization of the event that does not withstand scrutiny. What is called the "Calcutta riots," I want to suggest, can be more productively understood as a complex conglomeration of enactments which, taken as a whole, can not, and should not, be grouped under any single category, such as "communal," "political," "economic," or otherwise. In the pervasive breakdown of order that characterized Calcutta between the 16th and 22nd of August, 1946, the violence was highly diverse, motivations were, likewise, varied, and even perceptions of the violence remained relative and contingent.

The five sections that follow each illustrate specific issues at stake in the violence, starting with claims on territory at a time when gaining a secure toehold in the city seemed key to survival. But first, I include a short anecdote that serves as an apt introduction.

In 2004 I spoke with a Muslim man, in his 70s, who had miraculously survived the 1940s in Calcutta. He had immigrated from Bihar in 1938 at the age of eight or nine, after his father had died of disease and his family could not support him any longer. In Calcutta he at first lived on the streets, and later, after securing work as a casual laborer, moved into a *bustee* in central Calcutta. I asked him about the early forties in Calcutta - the war and famine - and he responded anxiously, "*bahut takliif - bahut!*"²⁸ When I then asked about the "Calcutta Riots," he seemed confused. He knew nothing of August 16th

²⁸ "Too much trouble - too much!"

and only repeated, "it was a time of trouble, too much trouble, no food and always trouble." I asked him again specifically about the riots, the fighting that had taken place in the streets, the killing. "Yes," he said, "people were fighting, many stabbings, all the time people were killing, it was terrifying, *for so many years*." I began to realize that he had little concept of the event-structured chronology that I was following in my interviews. He understood the whole period as simply the time of trouble (*bahut takliif!*), without drawing much distinction between famine, war and riot. He spoke nothing of the political situation at the time, as had almost all of the other (mostly middle-class) survivors that I had spoken with, and as such it was difficult to locate him in my own understanding of "events." He had not talked about this period of time with anyone before and was highly agitated to recount his experience. Finally I asked him *why* people were fighting all the time and *why* they were killing, and he exclaimed emotionally, "*Khanna ke liye! Jagah ke liye!* (For food! For space!)"²⁹ I think of him often as I write.

Territory

The demographic pressures on Calcutta, throughout the 1940s, were intense and unremitting. According to the 1931 census the city of Calcutta had a population of approximately 1.2 million people.³⁰ By 1941, due to economic flight from the impoverished countryside during the depression, and migration related to war-time industrial production after 1939, the population of Calcutta had increased to nearly 2.1 million.³¹ By 1945, with the subsequent ramping-up of war-related industrial production, increased deprivation in the countryside, and other dislocations associated with war and famine, the population of the city had doubled again to more than four million.³² This doesn't include "outsiders," who lived in the city without having confirmed regular residence according to A.R.P. enumeration practices - on the basis of which rationing privileges were also determined - nor does it include the large number of military troops stationed in Calcutta at the time. Housing in the city, meanwhile, had long been

²⁹ Interview with Sattar Abdul Khan

³⁰ Ghosh, Dutta and Ray, p. 78

³¹ Ibid (actual enumerated population in 1941: 2,070,619)

³² Exact numbers of the actual population are lacking, but according to A.C. Hartley, Controller of Rationing, 4 million *official* residents of Calcutta were being fed by the end of 1944. In: Nanavati Papers, Testimony of A.C. Hartley, p. 894

insufficient, with more than 16 residents per household recorded in 1931³³ By 1941 that number had increased to 27.5 people per household, and was steadily rising throughout the decade. Immigration and scarcity of land conspired to squeeze the population of the city into a tighter and tighter mold. The conditions in the slums of Calcutta were especially deplorable, with over-crowding to the point of suffocation in many of the *bustees* of the city.

Meanwhile, under the Defence of India Rules, close to a thousand homes had been requisitioned for military purposes until 1945, which caused great indignation among Indian residents of Calcutta, and exacerbated existing antagonisms between military personnel and civilians.³⁴ In a material sense, the requisitioning of civilian property in Calcutta during the war also gave official sanction to the idea that civilian property ownership was entirely contingent on the expediency of martial priority.³⁵ Those understood to be less than "priority" could and would be removed by force. Few additional houses had meanwhile been built, which also led to increased rents and further intensification of overcrowding in existing quarters.³⁶ When put to question on the floor of the Bengal Assembly, just three days before the riots broke out, the Secretary to the Chief Minister admitted that there was an "acute shortage of residential accommodation in Calcutta," and blushed at the fact that only 200 of the 985 civilian residencies occupied by the American and British militaries had been de-requisitioned since the end of the war.³⁷ With an average occupancy of 27.5 (by the conservative 1941 number), this would have meant that of the nearly 30,000 people dislocated by the military, more than 20,000 were still homeless even after the war. To the south of Calcutta entire villages had been "evacuated" by the military as well, dislocating an additional 30,000 people

³³ Ghosh, Dutta and Ray, p. 78

³⁴ Stephens, p. 151

³⁵ Minto Dutto's large family compound in south Calcutta, for one, was requisitioned in the winter of 1941. Without any prior notice, the requisitioning officers showed up at the house and told them that they had 24 hours to vacate the premises. The next morning, even before 24 hours had passed, 30-40 military personnel arrived with mules packed down with provisions for a long stay. The family, given no other choice, hid their valuables in a cache beneath the stairwell and relocated to Dacca for the duration of the occupation of their home. When they returned in 1945, the house was a shambles, strewn with cigarette butts, empty whiskey bottles and food wrappers. The roof was pock-marked with divots made were anti-aircraft guns had been fastened, and the garden outside had withered from a lack of care. No compensation was paid. (From an interview with Minto Dutto)

³⁶ *The Statesman*, "Bill to Control House Rents," August 1, 1946

³⁷ *The Statesman*, "Congress Party Walkout," August 13, 1946

who filtered into Calcutta in search of provisional accommodation and subsistence. These demographic realities need to be kept in mind in relation to the riots.

During the height of famine the city came under increasing, and at times, extremely volatile, demographic pressure. Starting in the early months of 1943, waves of "destitute" villagers began pouring into the city in various stages of starvation, and occupied the city's public spaces and back alleys, begging for rice-water, and dying on the open streets in large numbers. With the city fast becoming "filthy" with starving destitutes by summer relief operations were undertaken. One of the first measures of "famine relief," however, was to collect the tens of thousands of famine victims from the streets of Calcutta and forcibly remove them to "rehabilitation camps" outside the city (though these same famine victims were, in fact, Bengalis, who themselves had labored in various ways to keep the city prosperous.) The treatment of famine refugees also demonstrated that - if necessary - force was a legitimate means of clearing the city of those who did not "belong." The ration system, when implemented, followed the same logic, with "outsiders" excluded from the guarantee of subsidized access to food - even while the country-side remained un-rationed and starving. Meanwhile, the food situation was again rapidly deteriorating in the summer of 1946, with the streets of the city, again, filling up with starving destitutes, who were, again, being removed, by force in large numbers.³⁸ As might be expected, then, those who could claim authorized residency in Calcutta clung to their territorial claim jealously and tenaciously.

But Calcutta had long been a city of immigrants, with few, if any, having an ancestral claim to the city. As such, all claims of legitimacy were historically contingent and socio-politically constructed. For this reason the administrative rubric of "belonging" gained special relevance. The white-collar class was mostly comprised of Hindu Bengali *bhadralok* who had immigrated to the city in increasing numbers in the 20th century from the impoverished countryside. The industrial workforce was mostly comprised of immigrant laborers, both Hindu and Muslim, from Bihar, Orissa and the United Provinces, whose poverty and lack of opportunity back home had also driven them to the city. The dock area attracted Muslim boatmen, *khalasis*, from the eastern reaches of Bengal, and from the Punjab, many thousands of Sikhs had migrated to work in the urban

³⁸ Das (1991), p. 162

transportation infrastructures. Marwaris, though relatively small in numbers, held an inordinately prominent position in trade and industry. They were known for speculation in commodity markets, as well as for their involvement in the textile industry. The most prominent Marwari family in Calcutta was the Birla family, whose connections to the Nationalist leadership have already been discussed. The city, as such, was a patchwork of ethno-linguistic and religious diversity, with concurrent tensions and contestations of belonging and place, which tended to increase in uncertain economic times.

Each of the many immigrant communities, due to filial or regional association, had settled into distinct *paras*, or tightly knit neighborhoods, that were often, but not always, relatively homogeneous in composition. Attached to each *para* there was generally a local market, or *bazaar*, which was also recognized as a distinct commercial unit. By 1946 Calcutta was essentially a vast urban patchwork of diverse *paras* that were popularly recognized as discrete and cohesive demographic entities. In Calcutta one's *para* (even until today) is the most commonly cited reference of locality. The *para*, in this sense, was as important a social reference point as was one's religion or place of origin, and could commonly be understood to signify both. Because Calcutta was an almost entirely unplanned city - many areas being comprised of nothing but endlessly winding narrow lanes and alleyways that comprise a highly intricate and complicated maze of urban habitation - *paras* too were established haphazardly and without any necessary systematic logic. A larger territorial unit, such as Beliaghata in northern Calcutta, might be comprised of a number of adjacent Hindu *paras* with few Muslim residents, or a single Hindu *para*, such as Ananda Pali, north of Park Circus, might exist amidst a large area of mostly Muslim *paras*. In north-central Calcutta, Hindu and Muslim *paras* were more equally scattered, sometimes bounded only by a single narrow lane. Individual *paras*, however, remained only relatively homogenous - in a "Hindu" *para* such as in Bhawanipur, there would likely be some Muslim families residing, as in a "Muslim" *para*, such as in Mominpore, there would be a handful of Hindu families. In central Calcutta *paras* were especially mixed, with some neighborhoods being evenly or almost evenly divided.

The earliest violence reported on August 16, 1946 seems to have erupted, above all else, in relation to the territorial specificity of the *para*. From early in the morning,

Muslims from all parts of the city traveled in processions to the Maidan for the scheduled rally, and along the way had to move through many Hindu-majority neighborhoods of the city. Early in the morning, as Muslims, waving flags and chanting slogans, passed through Hindu *paras* in north Calcutta, trouble arose. In some Hindu neighborhoods, bricks and other projectiles were hurled from rooftops down onto the Muslim processionists below, and in other neighborhoods, Muslim processionists attempted to force Hindu shops and bazaars to close for the day, and were met with stiff resistance. That Muslims had to pass through Hindu neighborhoods on their way to the Maidan, and that they tried to enforce their political will in such localities, led to violence. On the other hand, bricks and other heavy objects were hauled up to the rooftops of individual Hindu homes in preparation for the "invasion" of *their territory* by Muslim processionists. The attacks on Muslim processionists below, can, likewise, be understood to have stemmed from a territorial vigilance. Several of these skirmishes quickly developed into large scale clashes, which had to be broken up by tear-gas and *lathi* charges. In this sense, the earliest conflicts during the Calcutta riots could be said to have erupted over territorial tension. The extent to which famine and war had aggravated the significance of territorial rights in Calcutta, in this regard, should not be underestimated - territory in Calcutta, for several years running, had meant survival, and nothing less.

Moreover, famine and war had also rendered the public spaces of Calcutta a matter of contention and contingency. Claimed by neither Hindus nor Muslims, public spaces might be imagined to have represented something like neutral ground. However, during wartime, access to public space in Calcutta was increasingly policed, most clearly during air-raid drills and "black-outs," at which times Calcuttans were ordered to remove themselves from streets and sidewalks immediately and efficiently, and remove themselves from public space. During famine the right to occupy public space in the city at any given time of the day or night became only increasingly qualified, with those understood as "sick destitutes" being removed, by force when necessary, from public view. The jewel of all public space in Calcutta, was the Maidan - Calcutta's Central Park; a vast expanse of open fields, sometimes referred to as "the lungs of Calcutta." The Maidan was also home to Fort William, the Victoria Memorial, the Royal Calcutta Turf Club, as well as the Ochterlony Monument, and was featured prominently in imperial

publications to demonstrate the grandeur of the British Raj in India. The territory of the Maidan, was thus, of great symbolic importance, and was well understood as such. During the war, although a landing by Japanese airplanes was highly unlikely, buses were periodically parked all across the Maidan to prevent "invasion" - an exercise aimed much more at "morale" than defense.

The occupation of Calcutta's most conspicuous public space by many tens of thousand of Muslims on August 16th was a similarly symbolic spectacle. Reports of attendance at the rally varied from 30,000 to as many as 500,000. The Governor of Bengal, in his report to the Viceroy, noted that the former number had been the estimate of Central Intelligence officer "a Hindu," while the latter was that provided by the Special Branch Inspector "a Muslim."³⁹ This discrepancy is a telling indication of the highly charged nature of the event. For the minority Muslims of Calcutta, many coming from the overcrowded and squalid slums of the city's industrial wards, to physically occupy the city's most sacred civic space, en masse, was a much bolder expression of corporate power than any of the rhetoric advanced by their leaders who spoke at the rally. Golam Kibria, a Muslim coal seller from Park Circus, had made the journey to the Maidan with the local Muslims of his neighborhood as well. He remembers thousands and thousands of people, waving flags and shouting slogans, and also remembers rumors swirling of Hindu attacks on Muslim processionists in Kalighat and Bhawanipur, but remembers nothing of the speeches. "There were so many people," he explained, "and the sound was not good."⁴⁰ Whether or not the Chief Minister had, in fact, assured the gathering that the police had been "restrained," it is clear that the agitation of the crowd stemmed at least as much from rumors of attacks against Muslims in different parts of the city, and also from the symbolic significance of the mass occupation of the Maidan by many tens of thousand of Muslims, as it did from political instigation.

When the rally broke up, there was widespread looting along the business corridor adjacent to the Maidan, and increasingly violent clashes between Hindus and Muslims as the processionists passed back through the city returning to their own neighborhoods. By seven o'clock in the evening the violence had sharply escalated, with arson, looting, and

³⁹ T.O.P. Vol. VIII, Burrows to Wavell, p. 297

⁴⁰ Interview with Golam Kibria

murder being reported in many areas of Calcutta. Much of the violence continued to have a certain undeniable territorial logic about it that can be related back to socio-economic and psychological circumstances that were years in the making.

The Sen family, who I interviewed in 2003, lived in a two story house in a narrow, self-contained alley of Ananda Pali, a small Hindu neighborhood, sandwiched in the heart of Muslim Calcutta; with Park Circus to the south, Motijil to the north, and Taltala to the west.⁴¹ To the east there is a local railway line that runs goods from the 24 Parganas south of Calcutta, to Sealdah Station, a mile or so north of Ananda Pali. In the early afternoon of the 16th, from the rooftop of the family house, Soumesh Sen recalls seeing a gang of armed Muslim men, two to three hundred strong, making their way north from Park Circus along the elevated railway tracks. Shouts of "Allahu Akbar!" and "Larke lenge Pakistan!"⁴² could be heard as the crowd approached the Sens' *para*. Soumesh was fourteen at the time, and it was the sound of the excited mob, above all else, that frightened him. Sensing trouble he recalls, a contingent of Hindu men was quickly organized from the neighboring houses, and they went out to confront the gang before they crossed into the *para*. An argument ensued by the tracks and one of the Muslim interlopers was struck across the wrist by a large knife and the mob retreated, fleeing back down the tracks towards Park Circus.

That night, his recollection continues, a second crowd attacked the *para* from the north, crossing the small bridge that spans a transport canal separating Ananda Pali from Motijil. Again chants of "Allahu Akbar!" rent the air - this time answered by a thin but defiant call of "Bande Matram!"⁴³. From the window of their house, the Sens could see that all the Hindu houses along the main road of Ananda Pali had been set on fire and were burning unchecked. A resident of one of the houses under attack, one Mr. Roy, approached the arsonists and demanded to know what the purpose was behind this attack on Hindu property. He was killed on the spot - and the mob retreated. The next morning, again, the Muslims of Motijil crossed the bridge and entered Ananda Pali. There was more arson, and some looting, but no fatalities. In the night, a group of men from the

⁴¹ The reconstruction of events in Ananda Pali is comprised from interviews with Soumesh and Souresh Sen.

⁴² "We will fight for Pakistan!"

⁴³ Bow to the Mother Goddess!

para had organized for battle, assembling phosphorous bombs and gathering knives and lathis to ward off attack. Together they were able to drive the Muslims back across the bridge by midday on the 17th. Several more attacks were launched on that day, but each was repelled by Hindus of the *para*. That night, again, the neighborhood was encircled and chants of "Allahu Akbar" could be heard from all four directions, but no attack was launched. From the 18th, efforts to defend the neighborhood were further organized, guns were fashioned out of pipes, and other weapons were amassed from local resources. Stray attacks and counter-attacks continued for two weeks, during which time, the Sens were prisoners in their house, subsisting on figs from a tree in the courtyard.

It had been a terrifying ordeal, but "during the fighting," Soumesh Sen noted, "very few people were killed." This last fact is somewhat unique perhaps, but in other aspects, this recollected story of Ananda Pali is typical of many incidents that took place during the Calcutta riots. Attacks on minority enclaves within "opposing" community majority wards were an extremely common target. In the case of Ananda Pali, the primary focus of attack was the actual physical dwelling space of the Hindus of the *para*. The objective was to drive them out of "Muslim Calcutta." The battle was fought, in many respects, like an ordinary turf war. Both the railroad tracks and the bridge served as putative boundary lines, and the conflict unfolded based on an identifiable logic of territorial incursion and defence. Though there is an obvious "communal" aspect to these battles, the prevailing demographic and socio-economic pressures that had reached a critical point in Calcutta by this time, are relevant. For a long time, territory in Calcutta meant security. In this context, the effort to purge majority neighborhoods of minority communities - "outsiders" so to speak - has to be understood also from within the purview of the overcrowding, scarcity, and "prioritization" that war and famine had visited on the city. In the first instances attacks were motivated by a jurisdictional jealousy, in these instances something more akin to ethnic cleansing is taking place. Both, however, can be understood to stem from territorial anxieties.

While it is true that many of the Muslim combatants rallied to the cry, "Larke Lenge Pakistan," the call for a Muslim "homeland" can not be understood as sufficient cause for the eruption of violence. Hindus formed a significant majority of the population of Calcutta and few Muslims could have imagined that open warfare in the streets would

alter the city's composition in any way profound enough to transform the demographic equation. Furthermore, if the leadership of the Muslim League, themselves, were uncertain about the geographic specificity of an eventual Pakistan, how much more so the poor and disenfranchised Muslim masses of Calcutta who participated and suffered in the riots? The promise of "Pakistan" was, indeed, used to instigate attacks on Hindu neighborhoods, but in many instances it seems to have been denuded of any practical political content. Souresh Sen notes that "leaders of the Muslims... told them that this area will be yours - so go on rioting. Because this is a small area, if they take this area into their Pakistan then they will be very happy." The idea that any small parcel of land, in Hindu majority Calcutta, that might be forcefully occupied by Muslim rioters would become "Pakistan," would seem to be only a rather pedestrian ploy used by interested parties to advance their own much less grandiose material and territorial aspirations. Even if believed, this would not, in any case, limit the motivations of those who actually participated in the attack. In this example, "Pakistan" was only a somewhat provisional *casus belli* emerging from the highly contentious socio-economic context *specific* to Calcutta at the time. Above all else, this context was dependent on differential access to scarce resources based on claims of rootedness to the city. The riots, in this light, are understood not as a nationalist battle for the promised land of Pakistan, which would be home to India's 100 million Muslims, but as a much more specific, localized battle for the control of city blocks, alleyways and neighborhoods in Calcutta, the city of survival.

The prevailing territorial dynamic of *local* dominance was, in fact, so deeply entrenched in the unfolding of the riots that it could not be obscured. In an effort to ease communal tensions, many newspapers quickly stopped printing the religious affiliation of victims in their reports, fearing that the news of the killings of members of one community would lead to reprisal attacks on the other. Little specification of victims was, however, necessary. As Soumesh Sen notes, "in Hindu areas Muslims were being attacked, and in Muslim areas Hindus were being attacked...if you knew so many people were killed in Entally, you must know that they were Hindus, if you knew so many people were killed in Beliaghata, you knew that they must be Muslims."⁴⁴ In this sense, much of the violence amounted to purges of "enemy" communities from specific

⁴⁴ Interview with Soumesh Sen

localities, not wholesale and gratuitous killings of Muslims by Hindus, and visa-versa. *Paras* were quickly militarized to protect against incursions from neighboring communities, as in Ananda Pali, where pickets of civilians were posted to "keep guard." Road barriers were also constructed to inhibit infiltration in many places, such as in Park Circus, where the main roads of entry were barricaded with barbed wire.⁴⁵ The most fierce and protracted battles that took place, in this regard, were predictably in central Calcutta, where Hindus and Muslims lived in closer proximity and neighborhoods themselves were highly mixed.⁴⁶

The infiltration of neighborhoods by rival communities was persistent and complex. In the many interviews that I have conducted, it is at least as much the *sound* of the riots that has remained lodged in survivors' memories as it is any visual traces. As in the case of Ananda Pali, actual infiltration of neighborhoods by riotous crowds was routinely preceded by *acoustic* penetration. Enervating choruses of "Allahu Akbar!"⁴⁷ by Muslim combatants, and "Bande Matram!"⁴⁸ by Hindus, are remembered as a terrifying intrusions of domestic space that represented imminent peril to persons and property. Though, in and of themselves, neither invocation carries an explicit threat, both served as ominous and alarming indication of being *surrounded* by a hostile enemy. In this way neighborhoods could be besieged and their residents' sense of territorial security undermined even without physical incursion. Soumesh Sen remarks that even after the Hindu *para* of Ananda Pali had been secured by local armed guard, and Muslims no longer "dared" to attack, "every night there was still the *sound*: 'Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar!' - and with those sounds only, we were getting frightened." That sound is able to cross boundaries that have been secured from physical attack, seems to have been a constant reminder of the fragility of any sense of territorial sovereignty - and was used as such extensively during the riots. It is also, and again, a distinctive echo of famine, during which it was the *sound* of "sick destitutes" that so many Calcuttans remember.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ CDCE, Testimony of Deputy Commissioner, Calcutta Police, H.N. Sircar, Vol. V, p. 63

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 88-90

⁴⁷ "God is great!"

⁴⁸ "I bow to the goddess!"

⁴⁹ As mentioned in Chapter Four, it was the recurrent and plaintive moan, "Ma, phan dao" (Mother give us your rice starch) that so many Calcuttans remembered above all else.

The physical destruction of homes of the "opposite" community represents a far less abstract territorial intervention. Arson was extremely widespread during the disturbances, and cannot be understood as merely further evidence of political or cultural animosity, but can and should also be understood as a systemic effort to "de-house"⁵⁰ an "enemy" sector of the population. Given the arcane, and in many places, ad-hoc nature of property laws in Calcutta, the destruction of homes by means of arson amounted to a revocation of the territorial claim of many residents of the city - which depended more on perpetual habitation than official sanction. Though no reliable tally of the destruction of homes can be ventured,⁵¹ the toll on residential properties was immense. "Calcutta," it was noted in the *Statesman* on August 20th, "is like a town that has just known a heavy air-raid."⁵² In the first three days of rioting, the Calcutta Fire Brigade reported more than 1200 calls, with each call representing an average of four fires burning in that locality.⁵³ Given the average occupancy of houses utilized above, this number (alone) represents the dispossession and dislocation of at least 130,000 residents of Calcutta - and this only derived from calls to fires that could be (and were) reported. The number of Calcutta's poor who lost their homes in overcrowded *bustees*, which were also the target of arson,⁵⁴ is even less well documented.

In as far as there was a concerted effort to deracinate members of the rival community from areas of the city, claimed by either Muslims or Hindus, it was an effort that was quickly showing results. The Commissioner of Civil Supplies reported that "by Sunday, the 18th of August, large streams of refugees from affected areas were collecting at various centers, mostly operated under the auspices of non-official relief organization or ad-hoc non-official bodies set up for the occasion. Large exchanges of population took place within 48 hours as a result of persons of one community leaving their homes where

⁵⁰ Winston Churchill's friend and advisor, Lord Cherwell, pioneered the idea of "de-housing," which amounted to heavy bombing of German civilian area in order to "de-house", and thus de-moralize the population.

⁵¹ *The Statesman* noted in an staff editorial on the 20th of August, "no one will risk saying how many dwellings and business premises [were] burnt...many thousands." The lack of reliable statistics can be attributed to at east two factors; first, that there were more fires than could even be reported, or certainly fought, and second, that fire brigade workers were prevented from entering some areas by riotous mobs.

⁵² *The Statesman*, "The Calcutta Scene," August 20, 1946

⁵³ *The Statesman*, "Death Roll Now Between 2,000 and 3,000," August 19, 1946

⁵⁴ See CDCE, Testimony of H.N. Sircar, Donald Hardwick, and others.

there was a preponderance of the other community."⁵⁵ (It is worth noting that this may be the first use of "exchange of population" used in the Indian context. It is a term, however, that became highly operative in the coming months in relation to the partition of India and the massive violence that accompanied the same.) On the same day the Governor, with assistance of the military and police, initiated "Operation St. Bernard" to move minority communities from areas where they were under threat to rescue camps set up on the Maidan and elsewhere.⁵⁶ By the next day as many as 10,000 people had been removed from their homes under police and military escort, and Operation St Bernard continued, under the directorship of "denial" mastermind L.G. Pinnell, for the next ten days. Such an operation, it might be suggested, while undoubtedly beneficial for families under armed attack, ironically (or not) gave official sanction to the inclination of the rioting mobs.

The work done by the rioters, however, was on a far greater scale. By the 28th of August, the Relief Department reported that there were 189,015 riot refugees being cared for in 307 quazi-official camps supplied by the Civil Supplies Department.⁵⁷ This number, approaching 5% of the city's population, does not include those who had fled one area of the city and were sheltering with friends or family members in another part of the city, nor does it include those who had fled the city altogether. As to the former rank, some approximation of their numbers can be had in relation to the fact that by the 23rd of August, 110,000 people were reported to have fled the city by train since the 16th.⁵⁸ This number does not take into account those who fled on foot, or by other means of transportation. If account is taken of these refugees as well, it is easy to draw the conclusion that as much as ten percent of the city's population was dislocated by the riots - which would represent the largest displacement of an urban population in the history of colonial India until that time.

In the weeks following the most extreme violence, the purges continued. Outside of Ananda Pali, a killing grounds was set up in a vacant lot, and stray Muslims found in the area were removed to this spot where, "particular persons were there who were very

⁵⁵ WBSA, Home Confidential, file W-351/46 (Part B, VIII) "Activities of the Civil Supplies Department."

⁵⁶ WBSA, Home Confidential, file W-391/46 "Report on Salvage Services." See also, *The Statesman*, "Calcutta's Ordeal," August 19, 1946

⁵⁷ WBSA, Home Confidential, file W-351/46 (Part B, V), "Action Taken by the Relief Department"

⁵⁸ *The Statesman*, "Troops Work in Clearing City," August 24, 1946

much expert at killing."⁵⁹ Muslims found in this small Hindu area were executed in deliberate and methodical fashion, more in the mode of calculated ethnic cleansing than communal frenzy. Meanwhile, the few Muslim families living in the locality were permanently driven from their homes, which were subsequently occupied by Hindu residents. In other neighborhoods, house exchanges occurred, where Hindu families in Muslim neighborhoods "traded" homes with Muslim families living in Hindu neighborhoods.⁶⁰

While "de-housing" on this scale could not have possibly been foreseen, and would have been impossible to plan, it is, nevertheless, a fact that the riots *resulted* in a massive dislocation of people, the reduction of Calcutta's population by many tens - if not hundreds - of thousands, and the "purification" of entire wards of the city by brute force. That such an outcome was not a matter of premeditation or overt planning, only lends weight to the argument that the underlying tensions related to territory, belonging, and residency in Calcutta had at least as considerable an impact on the course of the riots as did political manipulation, or, for that matter, "communalism," in a more abstract sense.

Loot

In a similar sense, the extent to which rampant looting characterized the Calcutta riots cannot be simply viewed through the narrow lens of political instigation or communal animosity. By the summer of 1946, the steady rise in prices, coupled with cuts in rations, had already precipitated considerable labor unrest, with as many as 242 strikes occurring in Bengal in the first six months of the year.⁶¹ Many of these strikes were at smaller industrial concerns where preferential access to food grains was less secure than at the larger factories.⁶² The postal workers union had resorted to a strike over dearness allowances and job security on July 11th, effectively cutting off Calcutta from the rest of India in the weeks preceding the riot. Rice, however, was not the only commodity which was, again, in increasingly short supply; the "position" of mustard oil,

⁵⁹ Interview with Soumesh Sen

⁶⁰ An account of this practice was relayed to me by Golam Kutubuddin (a Muslim) whose family lived in the Gol Park area (a Hindu locale) and after the riots traded houses with a Hindu family living on Park Circus.

⁶¹ P.K. Chatterjee, p. 170

⁶² Ibid

kerosene, and seed potatoes had also become "chronic" by the beginning of 1946.⁶³ In the winter months the shortage of cloth, in particular, had reached a critical stage and was breeding deep anxieties and resentment. Even wealthier residents of Calcutta were having difficulty finding sufficient yardage to maintain their sense of dignity and station.⁶⁴ For the poor things were considerably more desperate. Hand loom weavers throughout the province complained of an acute shortage of yarn, and a thriving black market in piece goods was keeping prices artificially high and supplies short.⁶⁵ Moreover, the fact that the war had ended, and residents of Bengal were still suffering the same shortages that they had suffered *during* war, was extremely galling. That prices were again rising in 1946, and that there were, again, front page headlines announcing famine in Bengal,⁶⁶ did not bode well. Levels of theft in Calcutta and Bengal as a whole, had soared since the beginnings of famine,⁶⁷ and with reports of difficult times ahead, crime statistics were again on the rise in late 1945.⁶⁸

In this context, it is not entirely surprising that looting - from the earliest reports of trouble on the 16th - was a widespread and endemic feature of the riots. No estimate of the total value of commodities looted from private residences, businesses, and government warehouses has been ventured in any quarter, but the scale of looting was immense. Tellingly, when asked which community, Hindu or Muslim, most of the looted articles recovered by the police belonged, the Deputy Commissioner of Police responded to the Enquiry Commission, "It is very difficult. The quantities are very huge. Practically the whole of the Indian museum was used for display of the articles recovered."⁶⁹ Some historians have argued that looting during the riots too can be neatly folded into a "communal" explanation - that looting was motivated by a will to inflict economic damage, rather than committed for economic gain⁷⁰ - but this argument is based more on supposition than example. In the highly fluid and explosive situation on

⁶³ WBSA, Home Political, "Fortnightly Report first half of December 1945"

⁶⁴ Interview with Dolly Mukherjee

⁶⁵ WBSA, Home Political, "Fortnightly Report second half of December, 1945"

⁶⁶ See Chapter 6

⁶⁷ See Chapter Two

⁶⁸ WBSA, Home Political, "Fortnightly Report first half of December 1945"

⁶⁹ CDCE, Vol. V., Testimony of H.N. Sircar, p. 83

⁷⁰ Das (1991), p. 172 "the only discriminatory element in lootings lay in Muslims exclusively pillaging Hindu shops and vice-versa."

the streets of Calcutta, specific enactments of "loot" were complex, participation was variously motivated, and, very often, an instrumental opportunism governed the transgression of loot more than any other single factor.

In the early afternoon of the 16th, Muslims from Howrah, the industrial suburb just across the river from central Calcutta, were crossing the Hooghly Bridge on their way to the scheduled meeting at the Maidan. Like Muslim processionists from other areas of greater Calcutta, they carried flags and shouted slogans, stopped traffic and broke into scuffles with shopkeepers who had not closed to business for the day. The situation, however, remained relatively under control. Sometime in the early afternoon, however, according to the Police Inspector's report, "a large number of processionists *who had already crossed the bridge* were suddenly found rushing back to Howrah, shouting "Luto Howrah!"⁷¹ From that point on, the situation in Howrah deteriorated, with 28 incidents reported by nightfall. Of these 28 incidents, 19 involved looting, with the most common articles looted being; cash, cloth, and gold jewelry. Many of the reports listed the community of the owner of the shop looted, but not that of the looters. Thus a typical entry reads, "24.) A cloth shop belonging to a Muslim at 62 Grand Trunk Road was looted," or, "27.) Cash and gold were looted from a Hindu shop at 5/B Maidan Road."⁷²

This police blotter of August 16th in Howrah raises some interesting questions as to the motivations of the crowds and the nature of the looting that transpired. That Muslim processionists from Howrah, on their way to the meeting at the Maidan, turned *back* from their intended destination in order to loot Howrah is telling. To skip the main event at the Maidan - an assembly organized to demonstrate for Pakistan - in order to ransack the commercial district of Howrah, would suggest a rather tepid dedication to the cause of the day. Moreover, it was not to loot *Hindus* that the crowd turned back, but, demonstrably, to loot *Howrah*. What seems to have gripped the crowd was not a politically motivated will to reek "communal" havoc in the streets, but rather a more mundane and spontaneous inspiration to take part in a free-for-all for personal economic gain. That, in a majority of cases reported on the 16th, the religious affiliation of the looted party is given, but not that of the looters, throws communal explanations into

⁷¹ ("Loot Howrah!") From WBSA, Home Confidential, file # 393/46 "Howrah and 24 Parganas, I.G.P. Report"

⁷² Ibid

further doubt. The report that a "country liquor shop at 542 Grand Trunk Road belonging to a Hindu,"⁷³ for instance, was looted, remains inconclusive in regards to the affiliation of the looters, except that they were likely drinkers. By the 17th, the police blotter was a bit more suppositional, the typical report reading, "a stationary shop of a Muslim at 70 Circular Road was looted by some unknown men - probably Hindu."⁷⁴ Given the endemic poverty and prevailing hardships of life in Bengal at the time, however, any statement about perpetrators of such property crimes, without further evidence, doesn't amount to much.

If we take, even, the most famous case of loot during the Calcutta riots, where the perpetrators were identifiably Muslim and the shop was undoubtedly owned by Hindus, we find that there may yet have been discriminatory factors apart from the communal affiliation of the parties involved. At approximately 4:30 in the afternoon on the 16th, while the meeting on the Maidan across the street was underway, a gun shop on the corner of Chowringhee and Dharamtolla, Messrs. Biswas and Co., was broken into and looted by a Muslim mob. To understand this one event, which is the most often referenced incident of loot during the riots, as primarily a "Muslim" attack on (specifically) "Hindu" commercial property, would be rather simplistic. To think that this gun shop was looted not because it had guns, but because the owner of the gun shop happened to be a Hindu, would be extremely naive. Calcutta, at this time, already, was exploding, and it is much more likely that it was the *content* of the shop that attracted looters, rather than the community of its owner. People looted specific items, not always specific shops related to an enemy community.

About less renowned incidents of loot it can also be said that there were discriminatory aspects at work other than communalist calculation. Scarcity of cloth had been a factor in several prior riots in Bengal,⁷⁵ and in 1946, with cloth scarcer than ever, tailor shops, cloth warehouses and textile piece goods stores were, again, singled out for attack. Golam Kutubuddin's family had been in the cloth business for several generations by 1946. They had four clothing retail shops in Howrah, and a cloth wholesale warehouse in Burabazar. Their house in a Hindu neighborhood in south Calcutta, was

⁷³ Ibid

⁷⁴ Ibid

⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 67

besieged by Hindus during the riots, and so the family took shelter in the American military barracks by the lake. The family survived, but were economically ruined. All four shops in Howrah, and the warehouse in Burabazar were looted and burned to the ground, and to put it in Mr. Kutubuddin's own words, "at that time we became beggars, you might say." It was not discovered who had looted their businesses, and no arrests were made. Golam Kutubuddin's father, after surviving the killings, died a short time later of a heart attack brought on by economic ruin.⁷⁶ Whether or not the perpetrators of each attack were Hindu, there were surely other factors involved. That all five shops, in different locations, were all severally looted and destroyed, examples a particular focus of the looting crowds that was seen in many areas of the city.

The Deputy Commissioner of Police, H.N. Sircar, on patrol, came across several scenes of cloth looting in the first two days of the riot as well. On Chitpur Road in central Calcutta, he witnessed a "big crowd" breaking into a cloth shop. The officers with him lathi-charged the crowd and they quickly dispersed. No mention is made of the religious affiliation of the looters or the owner of the shop, which doesn't seem to have been of any significance to the Commissioner. In the dock area, at Kidderpore, a few hours later, he again came across a large crowd looting a cloth shop. Eight rounds were fired by the police and three men were wounded. The men were arrested and "a handcart which had been loaded up with looted cloth was deposited at the police station." Again no specifics were given about the communal affiliation of the victims or perpetrators. Shortly thereafter, also in Kidderpore, Sircar again came across a lorry full of cloth moving down the road. About this incident there is a better indication of the participants. The lorry was stopped and it was found that the occupants were police constables. They told the Deputy Commissioner that they were on official business, but when Sircar began to ask for names and badge numbers, they fled away.⁷⁷

Calcutta was an anarchic and permissive city, and there were tremendous anxieties and socio-economic uncertainties just below the surface. Police constables were also poorly paid, struggling to get by, and morale in the force was extremely low.⁷⁸ In the College Street area several more lorries of cloth were looted from the Dalia Tailoring

⁷⁶ Interview with Golam Kutubuddin

⁷⁷ CDCE, Testimony of H.N. Sircar, Vol. V, p. 63

⁷⁸ CDCE, Testimony of Norton-Jones, Vol. IV, p. 257

Shop, a large retailer dealing in fine Benarasi silks. The shop was completely emptied out and gutted, and, again, police constables were implicated.⁷⁹ The Commissioner of Police, Donald Hardwick was not, himself, aware of the case, but testified that he had investigated several other very similar cases involving constables.⁸⁰ The Sen Law and Co. liquor store in north Calcutta was also looted, this time by a "large number" of Anglo-Indians and police sergeants.⁸¹ Also in north Calcutta, two police Inspectors and a Sergeant showed up at a "European" locksmith shop with a large iron safe. They explained to the proprietor that the safe belonged to one officer's wife. It was later discovered, however, that the safe had been looted from a civilian's house earlier in the day.⁸² Three other constables on patrol in central Calcutta were arrested for participating in the loot of another gun shop in Dharamtolla, and one of them was found to be the orderly of the Deputy Commissioner of Police, Philip Norton-Jones.⁸³

Even children, as it would seem, were taking part in the free-for-all on the streets of Calcutta. While passing the Kamalaya stores in central Calcutta on the 16th, Deputy Inspector, H. N. Sircar found "some *chokras* were bringing out articles through the glass panes which had been smashed."⁸⁴ *Chokras*, the Deputy Inspector explained to the Enquiry Commission, are servant boys, usually between the age of 10 and 14. Their designation as *chokras*, moreover, seems to have been more relevant to the report of the incident than the religious affiliation of the boys. What Sircar would appear to be attempting to convey is that all order had been lost, and *even chokras* were looting upscale shops in broad daylight. Minto Dutta was, at the time, only nine years old, but hardly a *chokra*. He came from a wealthy, landed family in a southern suburb of Calcutta. On the morning of the 16th he went to the market in Kasba early to go to the ration shop. When he arrived he found that the whole market was in a state of anarchy, with all shops being looted indiscriminately. Many year later he told me, with a mischievous smile on his face, that he had felt that he just couldn't leave there empty handed, and so he snatched three or four hurricane lamp chimneys from a glass shop that

⁷⁹ CDCE, Testimony of D.R. Hardwick, Vol. II, p. 94

⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 95

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 94

⁸² CDCE, Testimony of H.N. Sircar, Vol. V, p. 83

⁸³ Ibid

⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 60

was being looted and began to run. In the tumult he stumbled and the chimneys broke, cutting him in several places. When he returned home, he was scolded for getting blood on his t-shirt and half pants.⁸⁵

The choice of targets, too, did not always follow strictly communal logic. When the meeting on the Maidan let out and looting quickly spread down the upscale Chowringhee commercial district, several European shops and business were looted, including the Enfield motorcycle showroom on Park Street.⁸⁶ The Statesman House (the large complex of buildings where the newspaper's offices are housed) was also surrounded by rioters who attempted to enter, breaking windows and setting fire to the doors, before being chased off by the police.⁸⁷ The Grand Hotel also came under attack on the 16th, before being taken under police protection.⁸⁸ Across the river at Howrah, on the 17th, a large mob attempted to loot the Bengal Central Bank, but were, likewise, repelled by swift police intervention. The police similarly broke up a mob looting the Bata Shoe shop (a Czechoslovakian concern) in Dharamtolla on the same day. That each of these locations was protected by prompt police action - even while in the alleys and bazaars of Calcutta looting was going on relatively unabated and on a fantastic scale - is extremely telling, and is something that I will discuss more later.

The Civil Supplies Department, which handled the movement of foodstuffs to ration shops and industrial clients, well understood that it too needed protection - particularly in the context of famine, past and present. The depots of Civil Supplies were kept locked and heavily guarded due to the very real likelihood "of depots being subject to mob attack."⁸⁹ No Civil Supplies lorries moved until the 19th, and began then only on a limited scale and under close military escort. The Relief Department similarly moved rice around the city only under armed police guard.⁹⁰ Official reports released by the Civil Supply Department confirmed, however, that 15 government shops and 17 approved shops had been attacked and looted.⁹¹ This number may not indicate the real

⁸⁵ Interview with Minto Dutta

⁸⁶ Interview with Golam Kibria, who himself was present when the showroom was looted.

⁸⁷ *The Statesman*, "Communal Riots in Calcutta," August 18, 1946

⁸⁸ Interview with Gyani Singh, who witnessed the attack on the Grand Hotel. It is also written about in CDCE (need reference - Norton-Jones?)

⁸⁹ WBSA, Home Confidential, file W-351/46 (Part B, VIII), "Activities of the Civil Supplies Department."

⁹⁰ WBSA, Home Confidential, file W-351/46 (Part B, V), "Action Taken by the Relief Department"

⁹¹ WBSA, Home Confidential, file W-351/46 (Part B, VIII), "Activities of the Civil Supplies Department."

extent of damage to the system however, and may, instead, represent an effort on the part of the Civil Supplies department to minimize the panic over the city's (already extremely tenuous⁹²) food supply. When rationing was resumed on the 20th of August only 430 out of 1288 shops opened for business.⁹³ In addition to the food shops looted, the Civil Supplies Department reported "a number of cloth, kerosene, and mustard oil rationing shops were also looted, but details are not yet to hand."⁹⁴ The Burabazar rationing offices were also attacked and looted, and a warehouse in Kidderpore was looted and burned to the ground.⁹⁵

Also confirming the socio-economic nature of looting during the riots was that much of the loot recovered by the police in the days following the riots, was found in the *bustees* of the city.⁹⁶ In the *bustees* lived Calcutta poorest and most marginal residents, and the *bustees* were places of squalor and misery.⁹⁷ Most *bustee* dwellers were immigrants from outside Bengal. They worked either as contract employees or as casual laborers, eking out livings as porters, carters (*coolies*), doormen (*durwans*), sweepers, rickshaw pullers, cow-tenders (*goalas*), butchers (*kasais*), blacksmiths, masons, and dock workers (*khalasis*.) They had suffered the brunt of famine and disease in Calcutta without the benefits given to "priority" workers. They also composed the bulk of the victims during the riots. Many *bustees* were the scenes of large massacres, and many were burned to the ground.⁹⁸ *Bustee* dwellers were also highly active as participants in both murder and looting.⁹⁹ To write off the participation of Calcutta's working poor, particularly in regards to looting, as a cultural or political phenomenon, without reference to the specifics of their socio-economic situation, would be a mistake.

⁹² See Chapter 6

⁹³ WBSA, Home Confidential, file W-351/46 (Part B, VIII), "Activities of the Civil Supplies Department.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*

⁹⁵ *Ibid*

⁹⁶ CDCE, Testimony of H.N. Sircar, Vol. V, p. 82

⁹⁷ See Chapter 5 for a comprehensive description of conditions in *bustees*

⁹⁸ See the Testimonies of H.N. Sircar and P. Norton-Jones in CDCE, both recount many stories of massacres in various *bustees* throughout the city.

⁹⁹ Das (1991), p. 182

Labor

The Muslim *khalasis* of eastern Bengal, as has been noted earlier,¹⁰⁰ were itinerate and expert seafarers, renowned for their knowledge of the complex and dangerous inland waterways of Bengal. From the early days of the colonial enterprise, *khalasis* had been drafted in large number into British mercantile firms as "lascars," or ship hands. The terms of their employment were highly exploitative and degrading. They were often contracted into service as children, forced to work long hours, poorly compensated, insufficiently housed and fed, and had no job security to mention. As Ravi Ahuja has found, *khalasi* "employment relations were structurally more akin to those of plantation laborers whose 'indenture' contracts subordinated them under their employer as persons for the whole duration of their contract."¹⁰¹ Unemployment among *khalasis* was often high, and, if idle, they remained under contract without pay. In 1930 there were at least 130,000 *khalasis* "belonging" to shipping and industrial firms of Calcutta, but not necessarily earning anything at any given time.¹⁰² Provisions made for compensation in the case of disability were tenuous, and during World War I their "special" legal status as contract laborers made it difficult for families to draw from the War Risks Compensation scheme in the case of injury or death.¹⁰³

Even still, the 1940s were a difficult decade for *khalasis*. Their official designation as an "unruly" caste,¹⁰⁴ accorded them little sympathy, and the "denial" scheme had deprived them of their main, non-corporate, bread and butter - driving them further into the hands of the trading firms and shipping concerns of European and Indian capitalists alike. Though owners of country boats received full compensation for the loss of their vessels after "denial," the workers of those boats (i.e. *khalasis*) received only three months' wages. This arrangement left them especially vulnerable to the predations of famine and disease. A bill - the Bengal Steamer Khalasis Bill of 1943 - to establish *khalasis* as recognized employees of industrial firms, would have given them preferential access to subsidized food stuffs, and other benefits granted to "essential" laborers during the war. The bill was defeated, however, by the big-business lobby - amongst whom the

¹⁰⁰ See Chapter 5

¹⁰¹ Ahuja, p. 16

¹⁰² Ibid, p. 21

¹⁰³ Ibid, p. 15

¹⁰⁴ See Das (1991), p. 86, note 208

leading lights were, Jeremy Benthall; War Transport Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council and Managing Director of Bird and Co., and G.D. Birla; Marwari industrial magnate -with direct ties to Gandhi - whose textile and jute interests in Calcutta were unrivalled in India. Having failed to establish any legal normalization of their labor status, it is entirely likely that *khalasis* also comprised a fair number of the "outsiders" - whose corpses were left to rot in the sun for several days, unclaimed - killed in the Japanese bombing of the Kidderpore docks in December of 1943. Given the various circumstances compounding their already long standing economic hardships, *khalasis* often found themselves in the crosshairs of the structural and direct violence of war-time Bengal. The Calcutta riots proved no different.

On the morning of the 17th of August, while Calcutta was still reeling from its first long night of arson, looting and murder, approximately 500 *khalasis* left their quarters in a "coolie" *bustee* of Benthall's Bird and Company in Howrah, commandeered a number of the company's boats and steamers, and headed down river, towards the docks. They landed at Bichali Ghat in Metiabruz, which serves the surrounding factories - most notably G.D. Birla's Kesoram Cotton Mills and Kesoram Tent Factory - and proceeded to loot and set fire to the warehouses along the river. They then turned on several goods' boats anchored near the ghat and set them on fire as well. Fifteen boats, each manned by four boatmen, were destroyed. "The attack was sudden," the official report noted, "and it was apprehended that most of the boatmen lost their lives being unable to escape." A "vigorous search" was made for the men who were on the boats, but no bodies were retrieved from the scorched hulks. Some bodies were later found floating in the shallow water near the bank. The bodies - "Hindu" bodies - were collected and "disposed of" by the Hindu Satkar Samiti.¹⁰⁵

What stands out in this case is certainly not the fact that the boatmen killed on the water were Hindu - although, that they *were not khalasis* may have been more material. That the *khalasis* first attacked the warehouses is also of significance. Although it is not certain from the record, it can be fairly well assumed that the warehouses and the boats were related, and not just random targets. What seems just as likely, is that the *khalasis*

¹⁰⁵ Entire Incident taken from WBSA, Home Confidential, file W-393/46 "I.G.P.'s Report, Howrah and 24 Parganas"

who embarked on this raid, had some plan beforehand, as it would not be easy to coordinate an attack by 500 men on a single location without such, and, moreover, they traveled some distance to strike at this specific location. These facts make it likely that the *khalasis* chose their target in relation to a specific grievance, and this grievance was most likely against the owners of the warehouse and boats (which is not given in the existent record.) That the *khalasis* first looted the warehouse, and then burned the boats, would indicate that their primary motive was the loot and destruction of the targeted party's *property*. The boatmen were apparently not the primary target of attack, but, instead, represented, in some sense, the "collateral damage" of the *khalasis'* attack. It also seems likely that the destruction of the boats had something to do with the fact that no *khalasis*, who formed the bulk of dock and boat labor pool in Calcutta, were on the boats. In this incident, in other words, there are very clear undertones of an attack on a specific industrial/trade interest on the docks that likely involved discriminatory labor practices or other economic grievances harbored by the *khalasis* against a known "enemy."

I began this section on labor with the *khalasis* because their involvement in the riots has been noted in several accounts,¹⁰⁶ but little background information or analysis has been forthcoming. The *khalasis*, themselves, came under attack by both "up-country Hindus" and Sikhs in the B.N.R. railways yard. Attacks and counter-attacks proliferated on the 18th and 19th, resulting in many deaths and much bitterness.¹⁰⁷ How many *khalasis* were killed during the riots, as during the bombings, is not clear. What is clearer is that the *khalasis'* experience of violence (both as perpetrators and victims) had consequences far beyond what might be imagined from their social status. Having fled Calcutta in mass after the riots, many *khalasis* returned to Noakhali with stories of atrocities and outrages from the city and, as such, the *khalasis* of Calcutta have been implicated in the Noakhali riots as well, where the Hindu minority were the primary target of attack.¹⁰⁸ These riots, in October of 1946, were the first reverberation of the Calcutta riots, and the next step on the road to the even greater communal violence that wracked India for the next year in the lead-up to partition.

¹⁰⁶ See Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal*, Batabyal, *Communalism in Bengal*,

¹⁰⁷ WBSA, Home Confidential, file W-398/46 "Report of the District Magistrate, Howrah.

¹⁰⁸ See Batabyal, p. 240, note 12

What is missing in the river incident, in terms of the target of the *khalasis'* attack, is open to speculation. Given that there was a high concentration of Marwari capital in the area, particularly with the Birla mills close by, it is not unreasonable to surmise that the warehouses and boats that were destroyed, were related to such interests. The Marwaris of Calcutta had made fortunes in the jute, textile and coal industries, and by the mid-twentieth century were the scions of Indian capitalism. But relations between the Marwari community and Muslim laborers in Calcutta were historically tense, and had erupted into violence several times over the years. Many families of the rich Marwari trading community had built their palatial homes, in fact, on land from which poor Muslim tenants had been "cleared."¹⁰⁹ Tensions between Marwaris and Muslims in the early 20th century had also resulted in Marwaris refusing to rent houses to Muslim tenants, and discriminatory labor practice that disadvantaged Muslim laborers.¹¹⁰ In addition, Marwaris had long been popularly understood to engage in unfair trade practices such as commodity speculation and hoarding, which caused inflation and ultimately scarcity.¹¹¹ In the mid-twentieth century price manipulations in the raw jute market - of which Marwari traders comprised 75-80% of dealers¹¹² - had disastrous consequence for the Muslims of eastern Bengal, in particular, who then suffered disproportionately of famine in the 1940s.¹¹³ Marwari speculation in and hoarding of rice during the war was also widely suspected to have been a direct contributing factor in bringing about famine.¹¹⁴ Marwari monopolistic control of the cloth industry, coupled with a reputation for hoarding and price manipulation, moreover, was deeply resented and was a phenomenon that had been indexed in popular culture by rhyme: "*Eh Marwari, khola kewari, tohre ghar mein lugga sari*"¹¹⁵ In 1946, as in preceding riots in Calcutta, Marwaris were again singled out by Muslims for attack.¹¹⁶

¹⁰⁹Das (1991), p. 62

¹¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹¹ Ibid, p. 61

¹¹² Goswami (1985), p. 244

¹¹³ Bose (1986), p.

¹¹⁴ Hargrove, Introduction to *Community and Public Culture*,

¹¹⁵ "Oh Marwari, open up, there are dhotis and saris stacked in your house" cited in, Shahid Amin, "Post-Colonial Towns Called Deoria" *Sarai Reader*, "Claiming the City," p. 50

¹¹⁶ Ibid, p. 62

But more importantly for the analysis to follow, perhaps, were Marwari industrial labor practices in war-time Bengal. Calcutta was supplying the war effort and there was huge money to be made. The mills and factories of Calcutta were, in fact, turning record profits throughout the war, and needed to guarantee "priority" for their regular workers. While millions across the region were starving, essential employees at Calcutta's bigger mills and factories were granted preferential access to subsidized food grains, that very easily could mean the difference between life and death - particularly for the otherwise rural and poor immigrant laborers who comprised the labor ranks. Meanwhile, many industrial laborers, remained "outsiders," and were left to fend for themselves. That mills and factories hired so many laborers -particularly Muslims - on a contract basis, without "priority" benefits, caused tremendous bitterness, and it is in this context that one of the most notorious massacres that took place during the Calcutta riots has to be viewed.

Due to the eclectic mix of poor immigrant workers coming from many parts of India to work in the textile mills, shipping firms, collieries and railways in and around the Calcutta docks, the "docklands" were understood to be a volatile area. Most of the *bustees*, however, were under the jurisdiction of the ill-equipped police force of the 24 Parganas, while the mills themselves fell under the jurisdiction of the better organized Calcutta Police.¹¹⁷ For this reason, violence in the "docklands" was also less easily suppressed. Looting began in Kidderpore on the morning of the 17th and spread to Metiabruz on the eastern flank of the docks quickly. Metiabruz, a heavily Muslim-majority area, was also home to the Kesoram Cotton Mills and the Kesoram Tent Factories. Close around the factories were the workers *bustees*, inhabited by many Muslims who worked mostly as coolies and contract laborers, as well as the core of Birla's workforce who were comprised of Hindus from one particular locality of Orissa, from where they were recruited specifically to work at the Kesoram mills.

At 10:30 in the morning on the 17th Muslim laborers of the locality began a brutal and relentless attack on the Oriya laborers living in Lichi Bagan, which adjoins the Kesoram Mill. In the first assault, 50 Oriyas were killed, 250 injured and as least 60

¹¹⁷ WBSA, Home Confidential, file W-392/46 "Report of the District Magistrate of 24 Parganas." (All information on this incident, unless otherwise noted is from this same file.)

women living in the *bustee* were raped and brutalized.¹¹⁸ In the adjoining *bustee* at least 50 more Oriya laborers were slaughtered at around the same time. Houses were looted and set on fire, and several local temples were desecrated. Almost simultaneously there was an attack by "Muslim hooligans" on the Kesoram Tent factory, which was set on fire, and 15 of its workers killed. Also on the 17th, at 12:30, the factory barracks themselves were attacked by Muslims and another "50 Oriyas were done to death and about 100 more were injured, of whom several died subsequently." Even in the midst of the onslaught, Kesoram Cotton Mill authorities began rescue missions in Lichi Bagan and the surrounding *bustees*, ferrying their workers into the factory buildings. Nevertheless, at 11:00 the next morning, there was yet another attack on the Oriya workers near the mill and about 40 laborers were killed.

By nightfall on the 18th several thousand Hindu workers were sheltering in the Kesoram Cotton Mills. They were protected by armed police guard and "special arrangements" with Civil Supplies were made to feed them. There were as many as a thousand who were injured, some mutilated to the extent that "the mill doctor at Kesoram fainted when the injured were brought in." The violence, however, had not yet come to a close. On the afternoon of the 19th an armed mob of Muslims broke into the mill itself, and were turned back by police firing.¹¹⁹ In all, 129 arrests were made in connection with the incident, and the mill remained shut for many days to come. Shortly after the massacres, the Chief Minister of Orissa visited the mills personally to inquire into the condition of the Oriyan laborers, lending national scope to this particular incident. The Hindu nationalist media, meanwhile, made hay of the event, running highly exaggerated stories of the already spectacularly ghastly event to demonstrate Muslim barbarity.¹²⁰ From the Muslim perspective, things obviously looked different. On the 22nd, relief authorities held a meeting to assess the situation. At the gathering, according to the District Magistrate, "most inflammatory speeches were made," and representatives of the

¹¹⁸ Ibid (All information on this incident, unless otherwise noted is from this same file.)

¹¹⁹ WBSA, Home Confidential, file W-393/46 "I.G.P.'s Report, Howrah and 24 Parganas"

¹²⁰ The *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, for instance, ran reports that more than 600 "Hindus" had been killed, when, in fact, the number was demonstrably less.

Muslim community, "appeared to blame Marwari cotton mill authorities for causing the riots by not employing a sufficient number of Muslims."¹²¹

Undoubtedly there are many factors beneath the surface that go unexplained by the existing record of this incident, but it can somewhat safely be ventured that this incident cannot be explained by "direct action." The tenacity and single mindedness with which the Oriya factory workers were attacked speaks of a more material motivation than political rhetoric can account for. In this context, the representation of Muslim labor grievance as a causal factor, particularly given the long history of Marwari-Muslim relations, cannot be easily dismissed. It is significant, in this regard, that facilities of the mills were themselves entered, and in the case of the Kesoram Tent factory, attacked. It is also significant that the Muslim mobs did not go on a killing spree of "Hindus" in general, but that their choice of targets was entirely specific, and was inexorably linked to the Birla mills. In some definite sense, I would argue, this attack of Oriya (Hindu) workers at a Marwari (Hindu) industrial plant, by Muslim laborers would be wrongly categorize under the broad (and all-too-simplistic) heading of "Hindu-Muslim violence." The particularity in this case - as well as in many others - is far too important to be dismissed in favor of a resort to an argument of "communal hatred."

The extent to which famine paradigms can be traced through the entire course of events that comprise the Metiabruz incident is also very interesting. That the territory of the mill itself, in several instances, became a battleground, is significant. Competition to be *in* the mill had become especially fierce during famine, and during the riots the mill was, again, a protected space from the misfortunes reigning "outside." The mill, even in the heat of this unprecedented breakdown of order, was still granted "priority" status; protected by armed police guard and able to make "special arrangements" with Civil Supplies for food - even while many in Calcutta lived on whatever bare stocks they had at home for several weeks to come. Those sheltered in the mill during the riots were effectively protected from the *ongoing* mayhem and horror in the streets of Calcutta - they were granted a secure space. But, in truth, the fate of workers - even those given "priority" status - was always secondary at best. Writing to Stanford Cripps after the riots, G.D. Birla spoke nothing of the massacre of his workers, instead he noted that the

¹²¹ WBSA, Home Confidential, file W-392/46 "Report of the District Magistrate of 24 Parganas."

riots had been a "mixed evil," in that, even if many thousands had been killed, the Muslim League had been chastened by the fury that they (in Birla's estimation) had released.¹²²

For laborers in Calcutta who were outside such structures of protection during the Killings, realities were especially fierce. As has been mentioned, the bulk of the victims of the Calcutta riots were poor - they were also Muslim. Both of the cases that I have looked at above involve Muslims attacking Hindus, but the number of Muslim *bustees* across the city in which massacres took place is far larger. In Shampukur, northern Calcutta, there was an "extensive massacre" of Muslims on the night of August 16th.¹²³ No report of the incident was received, however, until the Governor himself, on tour of Calcutta on the 17th, came across a "number of corpses on the road," outside the *bustee*. The Karamtalli *bustee* near Chitpur Road was also the scene of a massacre, as was the Shahib Bagan *bustee* in Kalighat.¹²⁴ In the Nakasipara, on the eastern side of Upper Circular Road, "most of the Muslims in that *bustee* were absolutely wiped out."¹²⁵ And in Bhowanipur, "Muslims were murdered and killed in hundreds."¹²⁶ Perhaps because of the very same structural mechanisms that led to the exclusion of the victims of these massacres from any security at the time, very few specifics are to be found in the existent record of any of these incidents - whereas the two incidents that I have detailed more thoroughly above involved *commercial* interests and, as such, some record was maintained. Given the lack of information on these other incidents, it would not be wise to speculate on the causes, motivations or variables, that defined violence in the *bustees*, but undoubtedly there were complexities to these attacks, as well, that betray simplistic explanation. It is enough to say, without further information, however, that these victims in Muslim *bustees* were poor laborers who, as in the case of famine and war, were, again, rendered most vulnerable to violence in the permissiveness and abject breakdown of order that defined the Calcutta riots.

¹²² T.O.P. Vol. VIII, Birla to Cripps, p. 278

¹²³ CDCE, Testimony of P. Norton-Jones, p. 300

¹²⁴ Ibid, p. 303

¹²⁵ Ibid, p. 301

¹²⁶ Ibid, p. 301

Anti-Colonialism and Administrative Collapse

In both November of 1945 and February of 1946, as detailed in Chapter 6, there were massive and spontaneous anti-colonial uprisings in Calcutta which were put down with swift and comprehensive martial force. The extent of the repression which was necessary to quell the 1945 disturbances greatly troubled then Governor of Bengal, Richard Casey. Speaking with General Auchinlek after the rebellion, he expressed his conscience on the matter, noting that he "had [General] Dyer and Amritsar constantly on [his] mind in the last few days."¹²⁷ In his own diary he worried, "I do not want to kill these poor misguided creatures - I only want to frighten them and stop them doing the stupidities that the rabble-rousing politicians have driven them to."¹²⁸ Although Governor Casey's sentiments might be imagined admirable, there is also something disingenuous about his logic. As the Governor well knew, both the Congress and the Muslim League had expressed themselves unequivocally *against* this popular, and remarkably non-partisan, expression of anti-colonial anger.¹²⁹ Tellingly, although in Calcutta there was a wide-spread feeling that unnecessary and excessive force had been used on demonstrators, even Gandhi, when he met with Casey shortly after the outbreak, told the Governor that "no good purpose could be served in having a public enquiry into the recent disturbances."¹³⁰ The disturbances of February 1946 followed an extremely similar pattern, both in terms of the outbreak of popular unrest, and the responses that it elicited.

Thus, the popular and decidedly anti-communal frustrations which were directed against the power structure, where met, on the one hand by the prohibitive violence of the colonial state, and on the other, by disapproval and disavowal by the national Indian leadership, both Hindu and Muslim alike. In both cases, no call to action had been given by either major political party, and the audacity of the demonstrators - even in the face of armed assault by the police and military - had shocked the government. The magnitude of these spontaneous eruptions served as a barometer of the pent up frustrations and anxieties of a society that had been pushed to the wall by war, famine and administrative

¹²⁷ Casey's Diary, November 25, 1945. At Jallianwala Bagh, in Amritsar on April 13, 1919, Brigadier-General, Reginald Dyer, had given orders to his troops to fire on demonstrators protesting against the Rowlatt Act, resulting in the massacre of 379 men, women and children, earning him the nickname "the butcher of Amritsar."

¹²⁸ Casey's Diary, November 24, 1945.

¹²⁹ See Chapter 6

¹³⁰ Casey's Diary, December 4, 1945.

failure. Heeding this troubling indicator of popular discontent, Government established its "Emergency Action Scheme" to deal with future disturbances against the state. The Emergency Action Scheme revolved around protecting government and corporate interests from attack in the event of further disturbances in Calcutta. Leaders of the national political factions, meanwhile, engaged in self-aggrandizing political showmanship aimed at diverting attention away from the colonial state and towards the domestic, political enemy, in order to "discipline" their unruly constituencies. What these measures, together, managed to achieve, was to flatten the violence of the masses, which had been recently expressed upwards, onto a horizontal plane. That is: the anger, frustration and violence of the people, which had just recently come to a head in united violence against the state, twice repressed and twice disavowed, exploded laterally - in civil war.

From his earliest report to the Viceroy on the 16th, Governor Burrows warned that events in Calcutta were serious, but reassured Delhi that the "disturbances have so far been markedly communal and not - repeat not - in any way anti-British or Anti-Government."¹³¹ In his final report of the 22nd, he again celebrated the fact that "*though 'Direct Action Day' was intended to be a gesture against the British,*" he wrote, the violence had remained entirely "communal."¹³² This same contention has been echoed in all subsequent scholarship on the Calcutta riots in rather uncomplicated fashion. It is, however, a contention that does not live up to historical scrutiny. As has already been mentioned, Calcutta during the riots was an extremely permissive space and enactments of violence were highly diverse, multifaceted, and complex. As has also already been noted, there *were* attacks on European, governmental and quazi-governmental targets such as ration shops, Civil Supplies warehouses, the Bengal Central Bank, the Statesman House, the Grand Hotel and the property of large industrial firms - who since the beginning of the war had been granted *de facto* "governmental" status.

Attacks on the police - particularly on the first day - were also widespread. At 11:00 AM on the 16th the Deputy Inspector of Police, H.N. Sircar, received word that the Burtolla police station near Hatibagan in north Calcutta was under attack. The Second

¹³¹ T.O.P. Vol. VII, Burrows to Wavell, August 16, 1946, p. 240

¹³² T.O.P. Vol. VIII, Burrows to Wavell, August 22, 1946, p. 302 (italics mine)

Officer in charge of the station explained that he was unable to hold the situation without armed reinforcement. A Riot Squad was quickly dispatched and the offending mob was dispersed.¹³³ At 11:30, on Chitpur Road the police were having similar difficulties - the crowd there "was truculent...and attacked the police with brickbats." A call was made and "reinforcements from Lal Bazar soon arrived."¹³⁴ In central Calcutta, on Chittaranjan Avenue, police were fighting a hit and run battle with an angry mob that fell back when tear-gassed, but advanced again when the gas had dissipated. "The crowd was then dispersed by force."¹³⁵ Shortly thereafter the headquarters of the North District Police was itself attacked by a mob, and the Deputy Commissioner of Police, North District, was called in from field operations to address the situation.¹³⁶

By 3 PM on the 16th, in fact, attacks on the police were so widespread that the Commissioner of Police had made the decision to ask for military assistance immediately. "We could not hold out indefinitely," he testified later, "we were being attacked."¹³⁷ But there was disagreement about whether to call in the troops. Brigadier E.K.G. Sixsmith, for one, feared that the "premature use of military might have turned these crowds...we knew the situation on the 16th might have developed into anti-Government riots."¹³⁸ The Brigadier's delicacy here is extremely significant. Whenever a European or governmental target was attacked, there was a swift dispatch of auxiliary force from Police Central Command that was able to defuse the situation before any serious damage had been done. Civil Supplies depots and vehicles, as well as important factories and commercial interests, were also under armed guard. The damage to high profile targets was thus being contained - the "Emergency Action Scheme" was working as planned. That the native bazaars, *bustees* and by-lanes were seething with arson, loot and murder did not alter that success. The military was not deployed until after midnight on the 16th - but by that time things had spun far out of control.

The most significant aspect of the colonial state in relation to the riots, however, was its abject dysfunction. The famine, more than anything else, had already revealed

¹³³ CDCE, Vol. V, Testimony of H.N. Sircar, p. 58

¹³⁴ CDCE, Vol. V, Testimony of S.N. Mukherji, p. 167

¹³⁵ Ibid, p. 126

¹³⁶ Ibid

¹³⁷ CDCE, Vol. II, Testimony of D.R. Hardwick, p. 83

¹³⁸ CDCE, Vol. IV, Testimony of E.K.G. Sixsmith, p. 155

the depth of administrative, ethical and political bankruptcy that prevailed in Bengal. The Famine Enquiry Commission, though conservative in many of its findings, was unequivocal in its condemnation of civil society in the province, noting:

Enormous profits were made out of the calamity, and in the circumstances, profits for some meant death for others. A large part of the community lived in plenty while others starved, and there was much indifference in the face of suffering. Corruption was widespread throughout the province and in many classes of society... indeed there was a moral and social breakdown as well as an administrative breakdown¹³⁹

The Rowlands Committee Report, commissioned by Governor Casey to further investigate the "hopeless corruption and inefficiency of the Bengal administration," clarified to the highest circles of colonial governance that Bengal was in a state of complete administrative collapse. But the colonial state was already in its death throws by the time the Rowlands Report was published in May of 1945, and no initiatives would be taken. By the time of the riots things had only further deteriorated.

During the riots Chief Minister, H. S. Suhrawardy, was, throughout, in the police "Control Room," frantically scribbling notes to the Commissioner of Police, advising him on how and where to allocate police "pickets." Since that time, and for this reason, he has been imagined by many historians to have been directing the riots from this remove by clever deployment of available forces to strategic locations that would protect the Muslim community.¹⁴⁰ But, in fact, it was the sheer ineffectiveness of the entire administrative and political apparatus to demonstrate *any* control over the situation that is most pronounced throughout the riots. Suhrawardy was no exception. The kind of "order" that is conferred on the Calcutta riots by explanations of instigation or political mischief was simply in very scarce supply during the riots. There may have been disproportionate agencies that influenced specific and limited events, but it is very difficult to argue that there were significant mechanisms of "control." Police pickets did not materially effect the course of violence.

In fact, even in the Control Room itself, chaos reigned. By early afternoon on the 16th, the "Incident Board," which had been developed in relation to Emergency Action

¹³⁹ *Report on Bengal*, p. 107

¹⁴⁰ See: Sumit Sarkar (1983), p. 432

Scheme, had broken down completely and had to be abandoned.¹⁴¹ Calls were pouring in from every corner of Calcutta and no response could be mounted.¹⁴² Police resources could not meet the circumstances which confronted them already in the open streets. Undermanned and under attack, their presence quickly became increasingly futile. A thriving black-market, endemic poverty, high crime, and the duty of "removing" starving destitutes, had strained police morale to the breaking point, and corruption in the ranks was "rife."¹⁴³ Even while Suhrawardy was in the Control Room advising the Commissioner, ordinary policemen were out on the streets of Calcutta looting lorries full of cloth and handcarts full liquor. In the volatile neighborhood Kidderpore police had insufficient ammunition to mount any kind of effective intervention,¹⁴⁴ and in the Jorabagan police station there was panic and fear.¹⁴⁵ The Police headquarters at Lal Bazar was itself choked with thousands of refugees, which only added to the prevailing confusion. A substantial massacre of several hundred *bustee* dwellers took place only 200 yards from the gates of Lal Bazar, and the officers inside were none the wiser.¹⁴⁶ Fire Brigade workers also came under attack, and were prevented from answering many calls.¹⁴⁷ The city's water supply also broke down, which threatened a cholera outbreak in relief compounds and further hampered fire-fighting efforts.¹⁴⁸ Telephone exchanges went out of order,¹⁴⁹ and hospitals could not cope with admissions and so began to shut their doors.¹⁵⁰ "By Sunday," a British nurse working with one ambulance crew reported, "every city hospital was hanging signs of refusal outside its gates."¹⁵¹ The Calcutta Corporation's sanitation services also ceased to function, and garbage and corpses, both human and animal, rotted on the streets.¹⁵² And maybe most troubling for survivors - the city's rationing system collapsed, even with a "second famine" looming.

¹⁴¹ CDCE, Vol. IV, Testimony of P. Norton-Jones, p 242

¹⁴² Ibid

¹⁴³ Casey's Diary, May 6, 1944

¹⁴⁴ CDCE, Vol. V, Testimony of H.N. Sircar, p. 62

¹⁴⁵ CDCE, Vol. II, Testimony of D.R. Hardwick, p. 64

¹⁴⁶ CDCE, Vol. IV, Testimony of P. Norton-Jones, p 265

¹⁴⁷ *The Statesman*, "Communal Riots in Calcutta," August 18, 1946

¹⁴⁸ WBSA, Home Confidential, file W-351/46 (Part B, IX), "Activities of the Public Health Directorate"

¹⁴⁹ WBSA, Home Confidential, file W-352/46 (Part B, V), "Action take by the Relief Department."

¹⁵⁰ WBSA, Home Confidential, file W-351/46 (Part B, IX), "Medical Arrangements"

¹⁵¹ *The Statesman*, War Was Never Like This," August 23, 1946

¹⁵² WBSA, Home Confidential, file W-351/46 (Part B, IX), "Activities of the Public Health Directorate"

Without the necessary wherewithal to deal with the deteriorating situation in Calcutta, the city's administration fell back, again, on its tired implements developed in relation to war and famine. Refugees were removed from Lal Bazar and other police compounds where they had collected, and carried in police lorries to famine relief camps operated by the Relief Department.¹⁵³ These relief camps, however, soon filled up with panicked and desperate refugees, and additional provisions needed to be made. The horse stables at the Calcutta Turf Club were selected as a suitable place to warehouse those who had been driven from their homes by mob violence and could not be accommodated in existing famine camps. The stables were fitted out with supplies gathered from A.R.P. air-raid shelters, and opened to additional refugees. The Civil Supplies Department, also established during famine, meanwhile cut off all its deliveries except to "priority" sites, namely: hospitals, relief camps, and facilities for "essential" personnel such as the Kesoram mills.¹⁵⁴ "Regular rationing to the public," it was decided at a closed-door meeting at Civil Supplies headquarters on August 18th, "would be a sheer impossibility until confidence was restored."¹⁵⁵ In the meantime, as in the case of famine, private relief organizations did the bulk of the heavy lifting, sheltering and feeding the vast majority of the nearly 200,000 people dislocated.¹⁵⁶

The Publicity Department, established in the earliest days of the war, was also pressed into service. "But," as the Director of Publicity - one P.S. Mathur - complained in his report, "the Publicity Department was never asked to keep itself ready for communal disturbances."¹⁵⁷ All the Department had at its disposal were a sheaf of "health leaflets" to be distributed in times of "emergency," and eight "propaganda vans" which made the rounds during A.R.P. drills, and also during famine, to educate the public in civic responsibility. The vehicles were in dilapidated condition, "very worn out...and far from being 'trouble free.'" Of the loudspeakers with which they had been fitted-out, "one was condemned outright, four were in working condition but could not bear much strain, and three others needed major repairs and were in the workshop."¹⁵⁸ Nevertheless, the

¹⁵³ WBSA, Home Confidential, file W-352/46 (Part B, V), "Action take by the Relief Department."

¹⁵⁴ WBSA, Home Confidential, file W-351/46 (Part B, VII), "Activities of the Civil Supplies Department"

¹⁵⁵ Ibid

¹⁵⁶ Ibid

¹⁵⁷ WBSA, Home Confidential, file W-351/46 (Part B, X) "Action Taken by the Publicity Department"

¹⁵⁸ Ibid

Director of Publicity was requested by the Deputy Commissioner of police to get his vehicles up and running and out into the fray. "But propaganda vans," the Director noted petulantly in his report, "though quite suitable for fighting panic and guiding law abiding citizens, are of no avail when mobs and organized groups of hooligans are concerned." Yet, dutiful to a fault, the Director of Publicity went off to work in the governmental office complex on the 16th, only to find "there was no other officer in the Writer's Buildings as far as he could see." He went home that same afternoon after a few lonely hours in the office, only to find that "a pitched battle was going on just in front of his own house...and it was only with great difficulty that he could enter." After another futile day at the office on the 17th, the Director of Publicity was summoned to Lal Bazar on the 18th and told in no uncertain terms to get his propaganda vans in working order and out on the roads. After much inconvenience and jerry-rigging he was able to get three of the eight vans running and fitted out with loud speakers, found some drivers, and headed out on the roads at 9 PM. But with the Publicity Director's thoughts on this matter, it is easy to agree: "when there is fighting on every street and every road, when the trouble is so wide-spread, when clashes take place between armed groups of hooligans and angry mobs, publicity vans can be of little avail."¹⁵⁹

Bodies

Throughout the chapters on war and famine, I have argued that how a society and government deal with their dead is of great importance in understanding the value that is accorded to the living of that society as well. During famine, from early 1943 until the riots broke out, Bengal was confronted with many millions of excess corpses in every corner of the province. These corpses represented an overwhelming material predicament. Throughout the period, cremation facilities and burial grounds worked overtime, but corpses only continued to pile up. Finally, whatever systems that had existed previously for the last rites of the dead were largely abandoned. Faced with the sheer enormity of the weight of these bodies, indifference to the fate of the dead began to reign. The majority of those killed by famine across Bengal's countryside were left to rot out in the open sun on roadsides or in fallow fields. Tens of thousands more were tossed

¹⁵⁹ Ibid

thoughtlessly into rivers and canals. Bodies in all states of decay and putrefaction - and even in the last stages of life - were torn apart by vultures where they had fallen or dragged through the lanes of abandoned villages by hungry jackals. The province had become a vast charnel house, and the land, itself, did most of the work of digesting the millions of discarded bodies.

The cumulative effect of this violence, I would argue, constitutes a very profound material "argument" that revolves in a pernicious dynamic which reinforces the logic of its own repetition. When the most marginal of society, in their millions, are deprived of bare existence by economic violence, and when, moreover, society is witness to the ultimate debasement of their human worth, there results a "brutalization of conscious" that is deep and abiding. The corpse becomes an *acceptable* social fact. This desensitization towards death and normalization of the dead, entails a kind of collective permission that allows for further violence that guarantees the generation of still more corpses. The violent materialization of more corpses, again, is only that much less shocking, which, in turn, allows for more corpse-producing violence to ensue. In this way, violence begets violence.

In Calcutta the scenario was different than in the countryside. The stacks of corpse that accumulated on its streets and by-lanes by the summer of 1943 represented an acute embarrassment to empire, and had to be more proactively dealt with. The dead who had breathed their last on the streets of Britain's "Second City," were thus put under the "protective custody" of the state. Though many corpses did remain in the open air for days at a time, they were eventually loaded, in mass, onto military and police lorries, enumerated, labeled and disposed of in relatively orderly fashion. To achieve this end, two private organizations, the Hindu Satkar Samiti and the Anjuman Mofidul Islam were utilized to dispose of the corpses according to "community." That bodies, deprived of any sense of decency or human value, were yet assigned this one last measure of classification, can be understood as the height of essentialism. That it was the state, moreover, that sanctioned this final distinction on corpses is both striking and disconcerting. Because any and all social value of these individuals had been effectively revoked, the labeling of corpses, "Hindu" or "Muslim," amounts to *biological* distinction that was imagined to have adhered in the fallen bodies themselves. When one final and

single label is attached to these otherwise "meaningless" bodies, moreover, that single label takes on enormous significance. In the total absence of any other social value, that label still *matters*. The violence in the streets of Calcutta in August of 1946 was, in some definite sense, a reiteration of this officially constructed truism: bodies themselves are understood as either "Hindu" or "Muslim," and, as such, the mass annihilation of *bodies* becomes a "communal" phenomenon.

During the Calcutta riots, corpses, yet again, became a prevailing and ubiquitous social fact. The streets and alleys of the city were, in fact, littered with corpses in all sorts of "grotesque attitudes."¹⁶⁰ Mutilated bodies, bodies defiled, hacked to pieces, half-burned, bludgeoned, stabbed, crushed, disfigured, discarded and decaying, defied all previous imagination. Bodies floated in the river and choked the city's sewers. Bodies lay about in unmanned hand-carts and were heaped with other mountains of trash in the ruined streets. Bodies lay beneath the rubble of burnt out buildings and hung from ceilings by their hair in looted houses.¹⁶¹ A *Statesman* reporter, on the 21st of August, reported that in an open plot in Shampukur he had come across a pile of about 50 bodies "that had been thrown haphazardly in two heaps and were being devoured by vultures."¹⁶² In Park Circus "beside the burnt and looted remains of a two storied house lay the bodies of two men and a dog. Vultures had attacked the former, leaving the dog alone."¹⁶³ In Howrah, "a Muslim was found sitting on the dead body of a Hindu who had been stabbed to death." As police approached, there he remained, until he was arrested.¹⁶⁴ Kim Christen, working for Friends' Ambulance Service, came across a wheelbarrow full of bodies on Chittaranjan Avenue. Among the corpses she found a boy with a pulse. Before she could revive him, however, he expired, and was left in the barrow, as it was not her mission to administer to the dead.

Government, on the other hand, had no choice but to administer. It was a mammoth task for an administration in collapse. The cast of characters involved was, accordingly, immense. At least seven I.C.S. officers oversaw a process that involved, also, several ranking members of the Department of Public Health as well as the

¹⁶⁰ *The Statesman*, "Only Stray Cases of Assault," August 21, 1946

¹⁶¹ See CDCE, Vol. V, Testimony of S.N. Mukherji, p. 152

¹⁶² *The Statesman*, "Only Stray Cases of Assault," August 21, 1946

¹⁶³ *Ibid*

¹⁶⁴ WBSA, Home Confidential, file W-393/46 "Howrah and 24 Parganas, I.G.P. Report"

Geographical Institute. The fire brigade lent assistance, as did the Deputy Secretary of the Development Board, the Assistant Secretary to the Governor, three judges from the Calcutta High Court, an official of the Bengal-Assam Railroad, and, of course, the Hindu Satkar Samiti and the Anjuman Mofidul Islam.¹⁶⁵ But these actors only represented the organizational apparatus. The dirty work, the actual lifting, shifting and handling of bodies was done by several hundred *doms* and Anglo-Indians - *doms* because this was understood to be within their caste distinction, and Anglo-Indians, because, as Christians, they were thought to be outside the parameters of the "communal" fray. The military also lent its services, providing lorries and light engineering troops, or "pioneers," who dug trenches to receive the dead. Burial operations, however did not go as smoothly as the extensive and varied personnel expended on the job might imply.

On the afternoon of the 18th, authorities contacted the Secretary of the Mohammedan Burial Board to ask for his assistance with burial space. He informed the Public Health Department that they had room at the Bagmari Burial Ground in Manicktola for the internment of several hundred corpses. A few military "pioneers" and a bull-dozer were sent to the grounds to dig open pits to receive bodies, and the military lent lorries with armed escort for the work of collecting corpses from the streets. All was ready, except for the *doms*, who were proving exceedingly reluctant to be, again, pressed into government's grisly business of ridding the streets of Calcutta of its rotting and mangled corpses. Two days had elapsed since the riots had begun, and the work was "unimaginably foul." At length, the Deputy Commissioner of Police was enlisted, and he managed to wrangle up a contingent of 16 *doms*. Four corpse removal parties, under I.C.S. leadership, with four *doms* each, went out onto the streets in military lorries to collect the dead at 9 PM on the 18th. When the 3-ton lorries, loaded down with bodies, began to arrive at Bagmari, however, it was found that they could not fit through the cemetery gates. *Doms* were thus engaged, with handcarts, to off-load the corpses from the lorries and wheel them a quarter-mile through the mud and up to the pits where the bodies were haphazardly dumped. After several hours of such work, the *doms* refused to labor any longer, and operations were called off for the day. In the meantime, the gates of the

¹⁶⁵ WBSA, Home Confidential, file W-351/46 (Part B, IX) "Action Taken by the Department of Health and Labor." (all information and quotes on burial are taken from this file unless otherwise noted.)

cemetery had been removed and lorries of dead - which had been arriving all the while - were parked up "hard by the graves" for the night - yet to be unloaded.

Again, the next morning, *doms* could not be found, as those who had worked all night on the 18th failed to show up for service. By the time a new party of *doms* had been arranged, the scene at Bagmari was chaotic. More than ten lorries filled with hundreds of corpses removed by the military early in the morning, had joined those of the Public Health Department and were in queue to deposit their payloads into the open pits. The bull-dozer, which was still in use digging more pits, however, was bogged down in mud, and the "pioneers" had dug trenches which made the grounds impassible to the lorries. "Despite continued showers and a marked reluctance on the part of the *doms* to get to work," five of the lorries were somehow unloaded. The military pioneers, however, for unspecified reasons, refused to "earth the graves," departing in mass and leaving behind only a few hand spades. This created further difficulties, as "Doms are not grave diggers, and were not familiar with the spades, and the attempt to employ a section of them to shovel earth over the graves was abandoned when (only) half a trench had been filled." By that time it was after 9 PM and the *doms* again struck work, "being tired wet, thirsty and apprehensive of the curfew." The remaining lorries, stacked with corpses, were left behind and operations were suspended for the day. In the night, 22 other *doms* were rounded up "following the clues furnished by an Executive Engineer of the (Calcutta) Corporation."

On the following day, again, an additional nine lorries had been brought in by the military by the time government workers arrived. The lorries left over night, however, had blocked access to the graves, and as such, the military lorries could not approach. The *doms* were pressed into hard service to clear the queue quickly, but by 8 AM refused to work any further. The military, who had brought their own *doms*, thus dumped the bodies that they had brought at the gates of the cemetery and headed back out into the streets to collect more. A small contingent of *doms* were left behind. They unloaded two more trucks "and left the bodies lying on the grass." In the meantime, 15 additional *doms* were squeezed out of the Calcutta Corporation, and the corpses that had been left lying immediately outside the graves were interned. These *doms*, however, having had no food, demanded breakfast, but then were not willing to be fed the "famine gruel" supplied

by the Relief Department. They also demanded a steady supply of "pagalpani" (literally "crazy water") - "the only stimulant that will make doms work" - but, in the midst of the riots, none could be found. Only "with difficulty," therefore, "were they induced to inter the bodies near the graves." Those that had been dumped at the gates by the military, were loaded back onto lorries by the remaining *doms* and dumped again nearer the graves. At this time, however, these *doms*, too, refused to work any further and walked off the job. The Bagmari Burial Ground was thus left with bodies scattered everywhere, open graves full of bodies un-earthed, and little space left for more bodies to be brought in. A deal was struck with the Secretary of the Mohammedan Burial Board that "on supply of transport and escort," the remaining bodies would be buried and the pits filled in by Burial Board workers. This work was reported to have been completed only a week later, on August 26th.

Having thus closed operation at Bagmari, it was decided to "open" the A.R.P. burial pits at Gobra, which had been dug in anticipation of air-raid casualties during the war. Open pits were available to receive approximately 1,000 bodies, but other pits were filled up with water, which had to be pumped out by the Fire Brigade to clear them for more. A whole "colony" of *doms* was "fortunately" located near Hazra Road and a "steady supply" of lorries began bringing corpses to the A.R.P. pits at Gobra. But the Hazra *doms* too proved unreliable and obstinate, and continued to strike work. Frustrated, the organizers of the burials contacted the Anglo-Indian Civic Union, who agreed to send a battalion of Anglo-Indian workers to handle the corpses, on payment. "These proved, from the 22nd onwards, a valuable supplement."

The work at Gobra went slow and haltingly at first, and so the Head Officer of the Corporation "agreed to instruct all burning ghats to dispose of all bodies brought to them, irrespective of community," and arrangements were made to keep the crematoriums "open day and night continuously." In the meantime bodies kept arriving at Gobra and after a few days the work there proceeded at an increasingly chaotic pace. "Bodies were frequently unloaded at Gobra hurriedly, by night, and the tendency was to tip them, without arrangement, round about the pits." This created extra work during the day, at which time corpses needed to be assembled in a more orderly fashion inside the pits. "This work was nauseating and picked men were necessary to take charge of it." How

men were "picked" is not mentioned. The work at Gobra continued for the next six days, at which time the Anjuman Mofidul Islam, together with the Mohammedan Burial Board, were employed to "tidy up and fill the pits." The operation had been extremely trying for all those involved. It had only been held together, in fact, by the begrudging co-operation of the always difficult *doms* and sheer dumb perseverance. It had also been "dependent on military transport and escort," as well as on "gunny (for carrying bodies hammock-wise), *pagalpani* (for doms), beer (for Anglo-Indians), stench-masks, *kodalis* [something like a garden hoe], and quicklime." By official count, and in such a fashion, 3,468 corpses were disposed of in the mass graves at Bagmari and Gobra.

What stands out most starkly in this account, however, is not just the reckless, ad-hoc and debasing manner in which these bodies were managed - though it does provide an illuminating insight into the workings of the colonial state at this time - it is perhaps more interesting that, even after taking such care during famine and war to categorize bodies by religious affiliation, in the context of the riots this practice was totally abandoned and the neat system of demarcation and disposal broke down. Unclassified bodies were dumped into mass graves without distinction and bulldozed over in monsoon mud. The Calcutta Corporation gave orders to burning ghats to burn all corpses irrespective of community, and the Anjuman Mofidul Islam, likewise, labored under directions to "keep no separate count." In short: the riots had done the work of final identification, no further assignment was needed. The administrative task of distinguishing Muslim bodies from Hindus bodies, had been accomplished, instead, by a violence that, beforehand, had marked these bodies as "communal." The Calcutta riots had, in this sense, concretized a bureaucratic distinction that now could be left unreported.

In addition to those bodies collected and disposed of by the state, there were countless other bodies that went completely unrecorded. The exact toll of the Calcutta riots, therefore cannot be known. It is likely, however, many times the official figure. How many bodies were burnt in the thousands of fires that gutted the city, how many were dispatched into rivers and canals, and how many were disposed of by family members in private ceremonies at burning ghats and burial grounds, is completely unknown. Even the official numbers are extremely unlikely to represent the total number

of bodies disposed of through state auspices alone. Given the chaos of the official operations at Bagmari and Gobra, it is difficult to imagine that any accurate accounting could have been made. In addition, it is unclear what other corpse disposal operations were undertaken by the military and/or government.

Ashoke Mukherjee was, at the time, 18 years of age. He had spent the worst of the riots sheltered in a friend's house in north Calcutta, the scene of the most extreme violence. On the fifth day, when the riots had subsided to some extent, "clean-up" operation were undertaken. Ashoke and three of his friends ventured out into the street for the first time since the 16th. A group of armed military personnel approached them and demanded, in no uncertain terms, that they required the assistance. Ashoke and his friends were commandeered by the cuff, told to take hold of some pushcarts, and pointed to a stack of dead bodies. "Here, this is the mess that you have created," the soldiers barked, "and it is you who have to clear this mess." They were told to load the carts with corpses, and "were made to drop the bodies of the slaughtered Muslims into the Ganges." The boys made three trips, moving about 25 bodies each time, before being released from their impromptu civic duty.¹⁶⁶

A great number of bodies were also stuffed into the city's manholes and sewers. In Ballygunge, Mintu Dutto witnessed corpses arriving by train from many other parts of the city. The bodies were unloaded from the train by Sikhs, who had sided with Hindus during the riots, and heaped indiscriminately onto pushcarts, by which means they were transported to the main sewer opening and crammed inside. This procedure went on most of the day, disappearing an untold number of bodies into the sewage system.¹⁶⁷ On the night of the 20th a report was received by the Public Health Department that "3 or 4 bodies" were stuck in the sewers at Ballygunge and it was feared that they might float over the grating at the pumping station and jam the pumps.¹⁶⁸ A party of *doms* was assembled and an operation was undertaken to clear the lines. The *doms* were paid the special rate of 12 Rupees per body to dangle by ropes into the open sewer and fish out bodies from a depth of 14 to 20 feet. In this fashion, 110 bodies were retrieved from the

¹⁶⁶ Interview with Ashoke Mukherjee

¹⁶⁷ Interview with Mintu Dutto

¹⁶⁸ WBSA, Home Confidential, file W-351/46 (Part B, IX) "Action Taken by the Department of Health and Labor."

sewers of Ballygunge, though it is unclear how many more were simply flushed through the system and out into the river. Miraculously a Muslim boy who had been "killed" in Park Circus on the 16th was rescued alive during this operation on the 25th - nine days later.¹⁶⁹ That he had been beaten and left for dead in Park Circus, more than a mile away, would confirm that bodies were transported to different parts of the city for secret - if production-line - disposal. A similar retrieval operation was undertaken at the Mommenpur pumping station, which was also choked with corpses. By official account, 20 bodies were retrieved. But this number, too, is perhaps arbitrary. Narendra Krishna Mukherjee attended the operations at the Mommenpur pumping station in hopes of identifying his brother-in-law who had been killed on the 17th, but whose body had not been found. No identification was possible, however, as the sewer was congested not with bodies, but with body parts. The corpses had been hacked to pieces in order to fit into the tight opening of the sewer. N. K. Mukherjee found a hand that he believed to be his brother-in-law's, but was never sure.¹⁷⁰

In north Calcutta there were also widespread reports of bodies having been stuffed into manholes and sewer openings. No retrieval operations were undertaken, but a *Statesman* reporter toured many parts of north Calcutta, and while there were no bodies left in the open streets, he "was greeted with an overpowering stench in many localities (that) seemed to confirm (his) information that numberless bodies (had) been pushed into the city's sewers through manholes."¹⁷¹ In fact, there had been a noticeable and nagging drop in the water pressure in many parts of the city, which frustrated Corporation officials and hampered firefighting efforts. At first it was thought that open hydrants had caused the drop, but it was later discovered that at the pumping stations pressure was maximal. This indicated to Corporation engineers that there were blockages in the main lines and a "choking" of pipes in the entire system. The water mains were accordingly "regularly and systematically flushed" for the next several days, and the problem was resolved.¹⁷² Calcutta had digested its dead.

¹⁶⁹ *The Statesman*, "Ghastly Experience of August 16th Victim," August 26, 1946

¹⁷⁰ Interview with N.K. Mukherjee

¹⁷¹ *The Statesman*, "Only Stray Cases of Assault," August 21, 1946

¹⁷² WBSA, Home Confidential, file W-351/46 (Part B, IX) "Action Taken by the Department of Health and Labor."

These are not the signs of a society driven to madness by political rhetoric - these are the signs of a society de-humanized by abounding violence, death and impunity. These are the signs of an *already* tortured society.

Conclusion (Communalism)

What may appear absent to some readers from the foregoing analysis is the omission of any sustained analysis of the communal nature of the riots. My intention has not been to deny the prevalence of this particular aspect of the Calcutta riots, but to demonstrate, by concrete example, that the riots were not merely communal. By 1946, Bengal had long been a society under siege. Fear, uncertainty, oppression, and ultimately death on a monumental scale, had frayed the psychological, administrative and moral fiber of society; until, in August of 1946, Calcutta became completely unraveled. The riots were, in many respects, a free-for-all in which any number of grievances, anxieties and animosities could find uninhibited expression. All of these expressions - the sum total of the highly variegated violence that took place - are what comprise the event called the Calcutta riots. Underlying much of the violence, and many of the trends that characterized the riots, were anxieties that were many years in the making. There was also a tremendous amount of communal enmity that was unleashed - which, itself had been cultured in the petri-dish of war and famine.

In most cases the looting, arson, and murder that took place was, indeed, directed violence, with Hindus targeting Muslims, and Muslims targeting Hindus. As I have argued, however, in many cases, there were often variables and particulars that confound the conclusion that communalism alone can explain the violence. In other cases, a very base and uncomplicated hatred of the "enemy" community does appear to have been primary. Many victims of both communities were randomly stabbed to death in the streets with no other motivation than the murder of the "other." Temples and mosques were desecrated and the property of the rival community destroyed without any logic other than to cause economic damage to a hated adversary. In north Calcutta a group of Hindu women were raped, slaughtered and hung from the ceiling by their hair.¹⁷³ In Beliaghata, the severed heads of Muslims impaled on spikes were paraded through the

¹⁷³ CDCE, Vol. V, Testimony of S.N. Mukherji, p. 152

streets.¹⁷⁴ In Sovabazar, a group of terrified Muslim men, women and children ran to a five-story roof top to escape a Hindu mob. The assailants, rather than chasing their prey, set fire to the building and the heat from below caused the roof to collapse. All sixty-odd of the victims fell to their death and their bodies were consumed in the fire.¹⁷⁵ In Mommenpur, a Hindu family was attacked by a local mob of Muslims and all the male members of the household were executed, one by one, while the women and the children were made to watch.¹⁷⁶

The list could go on, but there is no need. About naked hatred and senseless murder there is very little that is interesting. What is more interesting is that this descent into carnage and communal blood-lust did not occur in a vacuum. It emerged in the context of a collective madness that had seized Calcutta, erupting on the day of a political demonstration. This demonstration, and the politics behind it, have already been detailed in some depth. Neither the demonstration itself, nor the politics behind it, can account for the carnage that ensued. The over-determining factor, even in politics, and more specifically in communalists politics, leading up to this event was famine. Politics had become deeply enmeshed in society's grief, and its attempt to come to grips with the avoidable death of at least three million of its citizens. It is one thing when an opposing party is accused of kick-backs or catering to its own constituency; it is another when they are accused of being responsible for the death of millions. Famine hardened the political discourse to a dangerous extent. It also hardened society at large. Scarcity, uncertainty, and fear of destitution, were for many years the prevailing social realities for a large sector of the population. That it was this same sector of the population that were the primary aggressors, as well as victims, during the Calcutta riots is not coincidence. Issues of belonging, of claiming space, of commandeering resources, of eliminating economic competition, and of defending entitlements, were at least as important to the course of the riots, as were issues of politics or religion. The historical record very much confirms this argument.

In some sense, the Calcutta riots became a far more nakedly "communal" conflict only *after* they had been declared "over." By August 22nd, there were 45,000 troops in

¹⁷⁴ Interview with Soumesh Sen

¹⁷⁵ Interview with Ashoke Mukherjee

¹⁷⁶ Interview with Gopal Banerjee

the streets of Calcutta, which, like during famine, meant that the riots were officially "over." But killings, evictions, and generalized uncertainty still prevailed. Many of the people I have interviewed have said that the riots continued for many weeks or months to come, and do not adhere to the official "five day" line. Once the din of unbridled violence had receded, however, the shallow rhetoric could start again. The enormous complexity of the riots could be elided in favor of political explanations that privileged, again, the powerful as representatives of the weak. This, in some sense, was only a further dehumanization of the (mostly poor) victims. The tensions, anxieties, and apprehensions that underpinned the violence would not be addressed, and the idea that the riots *also* represented an expression of material grievance, could simply be ignored. Moreover, any admission of the participants acting in relation to their own consciousness could be denied. They had merely been automatons of "communalism."

The only official investigation into the riots, the Calcutta Disturbances Enquiry Commission, followed this same logic. The proceedings took the form of a court trial, rather than a hearing. The majority of witnesses called were police officers and military personnel. They were confronted by a Hindu advocate who often questioned them in hostile and leading terms, and by a Muslim advocate, who tried to demonstrate that the atrocities of Hindus were that much more fierce. The proceedings began in November of 1946, and muddled along in this blame game for the next several months. Finally, in July of 1947, with independence - and partition - pending, and without ever reaching conclusion, the commission was convened. A presiding member explained:

Your Lordships might remember that during the last session we had communicated with our Lordships that it would serve no useful purpose by continuing this Enquiry. We sincerely feel that the sooner we forget about the Great Calcutta Killing the better it is for all of us. The bitter memory of those days, 16th to 20th August 1946 might jeopardize the smooth working of a plan which has been accepted by the major political parties, and we think it should not be adjourned, but the whole proceeding should be dropped.¹⁷⁷

The President of the Commission and all presiding Members concurred. Since that time few have taken up the case.

By the time the Commissions convened, India was a sea of dislocation, massacre and despair. The greatest "exchange of populations" in recorded history was underway.

¹⁷⁷ CDCE, Vol. XI, S. A. Masud, p. 244

Independence from colonial rule was within arm's reach, but the partition of India was excoriating the human landscape. In 1946, following close on the heels - and in direct relation to - the Calcutta riots, there had been riots in Noakhali, Bihar and the United Provinces. Communal hatred only gelled further in the oven of these outbreaks, feeding a pernicious dynamic that made hatred and revenge ever-more central in each echo of violence. The Punjab, in the west of India, erupted into pandemonium in 1947, and communal carnage there scarred the population for generations to come. When all was said and done, as many as a million people had been violently killed and at least ten million had been permanently "de-territorialized."

Though the Calcutta riots were the spark that ignited the conflagration, they have received little scholarly attention. They deserve attention and they deserve explanation. That explanation rests in the truly devastating, unremitting and calamitous violence that preceded the riots. The profound and pervasive links between war, famine and riot are tortured and complex, but they are also manifest. They are, moreover, far from uncommon. Whenever there is civil war, ethnic violence, communal riots, or any other type of horizontal violence - particularly in the Global South - look for the hunger that preceded it, and it is more often than not all-too-easily found.

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