

The Bengal Famine of 1943 took the lives of 3 million Indians due to starvation and diseases aggravated by malnutrition and lack of health care; yet it was never declared a 'famine' by the colonial British empire. Still, this milestone in history was a calamity caused by many factors including the war-time policies of British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and the lack of action taken by the British administration. These war-time policies included diverting food and grains from India.

The Famine Inquiry Commission, appointed by the Government of India in 1944 to investigate the calamity concluded that a shortage in rice production was the major reason. But was that really true?

Journalist Madhusree Mukerjee writes in her book *Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India during World War II* that "the scarcity was caused by large-scale exports of food from India for use in the war theatres and consumption in Britain. India exported more than 70,000 tonnes of rice between January and July 1943, even as the famine set in."

The British were so focused on the Second World War and feeding their army that they let shortages in India get out of hand. Furthermore, wartime inflation, speculative buying and panic hoarding diverted goods from an open market to the black market. Prices skyrocketed and were beyond the reach of low-income communities. Next, preferential distribution was given to workers in high-priority war industries to prevent them from leaving their positions, thus diverting supplies from calamity-struck villages.

Also, the British military ordered the removal or destruction of rural boats in anticipation of a Japanese invasion via the eastern Bengal border. Fishermen were not only out of jobs, but this broke down the transport system for the movement of rice.

In March 1942, the occupation of Rangoon by Japan had cut off the import of Burmese rice into India. Next, a severe cyclonic storm in October 1942 ravaged croplands. Fungal spores dispersed across the region, resulting in the spread of a crop disease.

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, though a war hero in Britain, has been severely criticised for his handling of the Bengal famine. In fact he was downright callous as he ignored the fervent pleas for relief measures required in India, saying it wasn't his responsibility. What's more, his statements during the period were insensitive and unforgivable. His response to an urgent release of food stocks for India was, "If food is so scarce, why hasn't Gandhi died yet?" And he believed that no aid would be sufficient as, "Famine or no famine, Indians would breed like rabbits".

After the mishandling of the famine and its disastrous fall out, the British administration made matters worse by not accepting their folly.

Economist Amartya Sen writes in his book *Poverty And Famines*, “One curious aspect of the Bengal famine was that it was never officially 'declared' as a famine, which would have brought in an obligation to organize work programmes and relief operations specified by the 'Famine Code'.”

Thus, the response to the Bengal Famine of 1943, by both the Bengal Provincial Government and the Government of India, was slow. Meanwhile, it was a number of private groups and voluntary workers that came forward with donations of money, food and clothes. The situation started to improve only at the end of the year when survivors harvested a new rice crop.

Still, the famine had been cruel and its impact would be felt for decades. The disaster destroyed the social fabric of Bengal. Families were torn apart, many sold their small holdings, and millions of homeless migrants headed to cities in search of relief and work. Few, if any, escaped poverty and destitution.