



THE FAMINE OF BENGAL IN 1943 AS DESCRIBED BY SHYAMAPRASAD MUKHOPADHYAY IN HIS BOOK 'PANCHASHER MANVANTAR': A HISTORICAL EVALUATION

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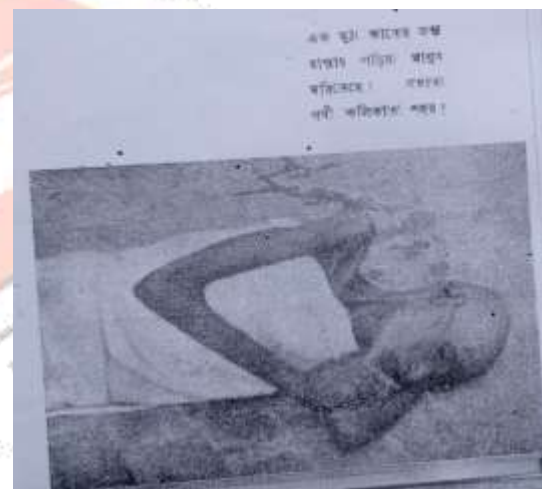
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Abstract: The major causes of famines in all over the world are excessive rainfall, drought, loss of crop, flood, plague, insect infestation etc. India, being a large and less technologically depended country in general used to follow the traditional system of agriculture. As a result, when any one of the above causes was inactive in a large scale, India had to face famine year after year. There were no other exceptions, for India, but to undergo this experience since ancient times. This article will focus to evaluate the terrible famine of Bengal in 1943, which was discussed by renowned scholar Shyamaprasad Mukhopadhyay in his contemporary writing '*Panchasher Manyantar*'.¹

Key Words: Famine, Bengal, 1943, miserable

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large and less technologically depended country in general used to follow the traditional system of agricultural. As a result, when any one of the above causes was inactive in a large scale, India had to face famine year after year. There were no other exceptions, for India, but to undergo this experience since ancient times. This article will focus to evaluate the terrible famine of Bengal in 1943, which was discussed by renowned scholar Shyamaprasad Mukhopadhyay in his contemporary writing '*Panchasher Manyantar*'.²



¹ Mukhopadhyay, Shamaprasad: *Panchasher Manyantar*, Bengal Publishers, Calcutta, 1943, P-1-122

² Ibid. P-1-122

From various sources of the British period, it is known to us that the Famine at different times ruined the social life of Bengal. After getting *Diwani* in 12th August, 1765, Lord Clive took initiatives to collect the revenue from Bengal, Bihar and Orissa.³ Due to the exploitation of the employees of the East India Company, the drought and low rainfall, a terrible famine became inevitable in Bengal. As a result, the famine of 1770 (*Chhiattarer Manvantar*) occurred in Bengal. A stark description of this famine (*Manvantar*) has also been observed in Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's famous novel—*Anandamath*. At that time, the people of rural Bengal were victimized due to pox and thereby the villages of Bengal seemed to be deserted. In fact, a vivid picture of the terrible famine has been perfectly portrayed by Bankimchandra.

Though it was a novel, there was nothing literary exaggeration in this novel when he depicted the picture of the Manvantar of 1770. This had been proved by the report of the Famine Commission formed in the year 1880, which was popularly known as 'Strachay Commission'. In British India, the Viceroy Lord Lytton formed the First Famine Commission under the Chairmanship of Sir Richard Strachay. It was formed to develop a general strategy and policies to deal with the upcoming famines. After the massacre of 1770, there were several famines in Bengal.⁴

Sri Shyamaprasad Mukhopadhyay mentioned the years—1783, 1886, 1873-1874, 1875-1876, 1884-1885, 1891-1892, 1897 and 1900 when the famines were occurred. The same famines years had also been noticed in various Government reports and documents of the East India Company. Amongst these famines the famine of 1943(*Panchasher Manvantar*) was mostly disastrous in every sense.

It has been found that Mr. Mukhopadhyaya, in his book pointed out the causes of the famine by the Provincial Government of Bengal for the Famine of 1943 which were as follows⁵:

- 1) Scarcity of adequate crops in 1942 in Bengal
- 2) The production of seasonal paddy(*Aaman*) was too poor in 1942-1943
- 3) Severe production damage in Midnapore and 24 Parganas
- 4) Crops were destroyed by insect attacks
- 5) Due to the Boat Control Policy of the Government, the communication through river was disrupted
- 6) The removal of people from the coastal area which caused loss of production,
- 7) Lots of people came from Burma and Arakan
- 8) The supply of labor in industrial centers increased
- 9) Import of rice from Burma was stopped, so there was a shortage of rice



³ Ibid. P-1-122

⁴ Mukhopadhyay, Shyamaprasad: *Panchasher Manvantar*, Bengal Publishers, Calcutta, 1943, p-7

⁵ Ibid. P-03-04

- 10) For the construction of air bases, the cultivable land was reduced
- 11) As the number of military personnel increased, there was a shortage of food
- 12) Imports from other provinces were very low

This is to be noted, in 4th November, 1943, a debate about India took place in the British Parliament where inflation was cited as the main cause of the Famine of Bengal. But inflation was not mentioned among the twelve causes referred above. Sri Shyamaprasad Mukhopadhyay repeatedly said that the Government of India had not taken any strong decision to curb the inflation. He argued that the biggest buyer in the Indian market was the Government, the largest stockpile was also the Government and the factory owners and capitalist class were the main supporters of the Government. He questioned who would account for the wastage of food in stock?

Sri Mukhopadhyay rightly pointed out that all those employed by the Government in the Food and Supply Department were so incompetent that the employees had to be reshuffled repeatedly. This reshuffling happened so quickly that surpassed the story of any movies.⁶ It is needless to say, the Government was indifferent to solve this problem and that is why the supply system was totally disrupted. Even if people have liquid money, the supply of rice was not available. People had to leave their homes due to hunger. That is why the bodies of dead people were often found on the roads or everywhere.

Government's policy during the Famine:

During the Famine of Bengal in 1943, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardi was the Minister of Labor and Commerce. He was in his Chair from 1st April, 1937 to 29th March, 1943 in the Provincial Bengal Government.⁷ It is noteworthy that he either did not go deep into the problem, or he did not realize the importance of the issue. He described the food problem of Bengal as a '*Psychological Problem*'.⁸ He did not bring the information about the shortage of food grains to the notice of the then Prime Minister of Bengal Provincial Government, A. K. Fazlul Huq.

Sri Shyamaprasad Mukhopadhyay raised the question: why Huseyn suhrawardi did not negotiate with the neighboring Governments of Bihar and Orissa?⁹ He blamed Mr. Surahwardi for his decision. In this way, Shyamaprasad showed the naked policy of the British and their native associates (like Mr. Surahwardi) by presenting the sad pictures of the tragic famine that took place in Bengal due to Government's indifference attitude. There is a lot of evidence in his writings that many people of Bengal lost their lives on the way by sacrificing their



⁶ Mukhopadhyay, Shyamaprasad: *Panchasher Manvantar*, Bengal Publishers, Calcutta, 1943, p-13

⁷ Mohammad Habibur Rahman Talukdar (Ed.): *Memoirs of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardi with a brief Account of His life and work*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1987, p-63.

⁸ Mukhopadhyay, Shyamaprasad: *Panchasher Manvantar*, Bengal Publishers, Calcutta, 1943, p-21

⁹ Mukhopadhyay, Shyamaprasad: *Panchasher Manvantar*, Bengal Publishers, Calcutta, 1943, p-28

relatives. He had even included many images in his famous documented book, by which the wretched picture of famine came to light.

The '*Woodhead Commission*', which was formed to investigate the cause of the Famine in Bengal, had also been examined in detail in this book. The Indian Famine Investigation Committee was constituted under the Ordinance no. 28 of 1944. The Former Governor of Bengal Sir John Woodhead was selected as the President of that Famine Commission. The first session of the Commission began on 18th July, 1944 in Delhi. Its members traveled to various parts of India and prepared their reports by taking testimonies from many Government employees and private gentlemen. The Commission submitted its report about the condition of Bengal in 10th April, 1945. Sri Mukhopadhyay was one of the pioneering figures in Bengal and also a representative of provincial Bengal Government. He argued that if the Nazimuddin (Sir K. Nazimuddin) Government had listened to the people's representative in time, this situation could have been resisted.

After the verification from the all possible aspects, the Commission determined that 15 to 20 Lakh men and women in Bengal in the Famine (*Panchasher Manvantar*) were suffering from starvation and had died of massive famine-related diseases. Sri Mukhopadhyay remarked, "I firmly believe that the death toll is much higher than above statistics." He also opined that 15 to 20 Lakh people had not been killed in global wars in the last six years. So, it is easy to guess how serious accident it was.¹⁰ The Commission had shown the causes of death of countless people. In 1943, the total food resources of Bengal were severely decimated. It was realized at the beginning of the year that it was much less than other years. In 1942, seasonal paddy (*Aman*) crop was partially damaged; the surplus rice had almost nothing left. The shortage of rice made the market volatile. Traders were unable to supply rice due to lack of supply. As a result, the problems of the middle class and the poor became apparent. The situation continues to worsen due to declining Government control. Infertility, flood (in Midnapore) and insect attack complicated this problem.

In his contemporary book, '*Panchasher Manvantar*', Sri Shyamaprasad Mukhopadhyay had drawn an agonizing picture of contemporary Bengal. Every part of his description is omnipresent truth. The information used in the text depends on the Government Reports, contemporary newspapers and extensive interviews with various types of people, who were suffered from this horrible famine. For this reason, the book can be regarded as a Primary Source of Mid twentieth century Bengal. The immediate duties to prevent famine are evident in the Author's writings. Towards the end of his book, the Author also gives a thoughtful opinion on what measures the Government should take to prevent famine. The relevance of his recommendations to government initiatives in today's Covid-19 Virus-ridden world is very significant.

¹⁰ Mukhopadhyay, Shyamaprasad: *Panchasher Manvantar*, Bengal Publishers, Calcutta, 1943, p-92

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