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The 1943 Bengal Famine: Nehru's Critique of British Wartime Policies in
The Discovery of India

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Abstract

This article examines Jawaharlal Nehru's analysis of British colonial practices in his work *The Discovery of India*, with a special emphasis on the 1943 Bengal Famine which killed over three million people. Nehru was not of the opinion that the 'Bengal Famine of 1943' was just a natural phenomenon or catastrophe, rather it was the result of long continuing policy of economic exploitation by the British, their misguided and ill-motivated administrative mechanism and their reckless diversion of essential resources for the Second World War purpose at the expense of human life. This article first contextualizes the historical context which gave rise to the devastating situation of the Bengal Famine. Thereafter, this paper delves into the Nehruvian critiques not only of the politico-economic policies of the 'British Empire' in India, but also the deep-rooted colonial racist attitude of the British administration which worsened the calamity. The role of native Indian businessmen and their profiteering motif even at the cost of humanity and their complete detachment from their native roots are also highlighted. Nehru was also critical of Winston Churchill from the very day when he became the Prime Minister of Britain and his misguided policies and racist apathy towards the Indian in aggravating the situation which are also examined and analysed. Finally, this paper concludes with lessons of the Bengal Famine on Nehru and how he attempted to mitigate such events from reoccurring in the post independent India through proper planning and administrative interventions.

Keywords: Bengal Famine (1943), British Colonial Policies, Administrative Inefficiency, Winston Churchill, Food Security, Post-Colonial Governance.

Introduction

The 1943 Bengal Famine was one of the most catastrophic and tragic disasters that took place in the British Indian Empire during the time of the Second World War. Perishing over "three million deaths" (Sen 52), the famine was an embodiment of colossal "failure" of the British-Indian colonial

administration “in higher echelons” (Mukherjee150) which prioritised wartime necessities and “priority class” over general human life (Mukherjee 94) with criminal neglect of governance responsibilities and exposed the glaring lack of administrative “accountability” (Mukherjee158).

Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India and one of the founding fathers of modern Indian state as well as a pioneer of Indian non fictional writing in English, while being in prison during that time of national upheaval, addressed quite substantially the famine in his magnum opus *The Discovery of India*. The Nehruvian perspective to this issue provides a very important critical lens through which the causes and the consequences of the famine are foreground in a colonial administrative system which not only highlights the systemic and structural failure of it – “a picture of poverty and ugliness of British rule” (Nehru 496), but also examines “a deep-seated organic disease” (Nehru 535) - the moral, ethical, communal and political implications, delving deep into the relationship between colonialism, governance, and humanitarian crises.

I. Historical Context

Before analysing the Nehruvian critique of the British wartime policies vis-a-vis the ‘Bengal Famine of 1943’, it is a prerequisite to contextualise the events with its external and internal frameworks which allowed such a crisis to precipitate. The ‘Bengal Famine of 1943’ happened during the peak of the ‘Second World War’ which itself caused “disruption” in the global food supply chain (Rojas-Reyes et al 8). But, the situation in Bengal was exacerbated by the “Japanese occupation of Burma” (Sen 52) which was a major source of rice import for Bengal. Burma used to supply a substantial amount for Bengal’s rice trade and the fall of it made a large source of food supply to Bengal evaporate. Another important intervention was the cyclone of “October, 1942” which struck the southern Bengal district of “Midnapore” (Mukherjee 91) - the main paddy producing area - flooding vast areas “due to which crop production was severely damaged” (Sweety 79). Moreover, “diseases of rice Fungus and locust attacks caused many crops to fail” (Sweety 79) – apparently ravaging paddy fields in the same year causing heavy losses to the rice producing areas of Bengal.

However, the famine was not solely a result of external or environmental factors. In fact, the British colonial policies played a significant role in worsening the crisis. The war effort was the priority for the colonial government, leading to “the diversion of every industry to war production, which had left a dearth of products for civilian use” (Mukherjee 140). The rice export ban was too late which “led landowners to store grain for survival, unscrupulous agents to hoard for speculation, and the government itself to stockpile for the war effort” (Mukherjee 119), which fuelled prices. “The Government of India had no policy at all in regard to food till the middle of 1943 when famine was already beginning its disastrous career” (Nehru 498). The famine itself was, therefore, a consequence of “complete” “break-up of the agrarian economy” as well as of “the old feudal classes” (Nehru 318). The colonial government’s revenue collection at any cost and a focus on cash crops resulted in “outright plunder” that “gradually took the shape of legalized exploitation which, though not so obvious, was in reality worse” (Nehru 297).

II. Nehru’s Critique

In *The Discovery of India*, Nehru examines the ‘Bengal Famine of 1943’ in detail and the famines in India in general. He situates the 1943 Famines in the larger context of colonial exploitation, war time misleading priorities, criminal apathy and administrative inefficiency. In his words, he opined that those deaths “had no purpose, no logic, no necessity” and “it was the result of man's incompetence and callousness, man-made” (16).

Colonial Exploitation and Economic Policies:

Nehru, in *The Discovery of India*, emphasized the long-term effects of British economic policies on India's agrarian economy as one of the prime causes of famine. He expressed that the focus of the

colonial government on revenue extraction and cash crops had marginalized food security and made India vulnerable to agricultural crises, such as the Bengal Famine. The commercialization of agriculture while ignoring food production for local use were, demonstrably in Nehru's view, the consequences of colonial priorities. In terms of an instance of colonial exploitation, Nehru cited the Permanent Settlement of 1793. Nehru lamented that in "Bengal, because of the permanent settlement and for other reasons, the condition of the tenantry was worst of all" (371). In fact, by fixing land revenue in perpetuity under an astronomical amount, the British colonial legislation predetermined the burden of taxes for Indian peasants, and a heavy concentration of land to a few *Zamindars* (landlords). The agrarian distress and large indebtedness that followed, hindered farmers from remotely investing in food production, and catalyzed continued vulnerability to shocks like the famine of 1943. Nehru noted such policy as the "outright plunder" which "gradually took the shape of legalized exploitation which, though not so obvious, was in reality worse" and "the corruption, venality, nepotism, violence, and greed of money of these early generations of British rule in India is something which passes comprehension" (297).

Wartime Priorities and Neglect of Indian Welfare:

Nehru denounced the British Government for favouring wartime resources over the wellbeing of the people of India. As proof of the colonial administration's indifference to Indian suffering, he cited a diversion of food supplies and an unwillingness to provide adequate relief. Nehru reasoned that the British Government, motivated by the need of war, prioritized the allocation of resources for military purposes, above providing for the basic sustenance of the Indian population. This argument is consistent with current scholarship which emphasizes the "war economy" as a key aspect of the famine's severity. He noted that "the Government of India started a food department three and a quarter years after the war began in Europe and over a year after the Japanese war started" when "it was common knowledge that the Japanese occupation of Burma vitally affected Bengal's food supply" (498). In fact, despite famine warnings, Britain "exported 71,000 tonnes of rice" (Mukherjee 132) from India in 1943 - 40,000 tonnes to Ceylon, 20,000 to the Middle East, and 11,000 to Allied food stockpiles - accordingly, surprisingly, underlining military needs. Further, in May 1942, anticipating Japanese landings after Burma's fall, the British authorities launched a "denial policy" (Mukherjee 66), seizing boats and rice stocks along Bengal's 500-mile coast. Large number of boats - fishing vessels and transport barges - were confiscated or destroyed, crippling supply chains and fishing livelihoods. "The Government of India had no policy at all in regard to food till the middle of 1943 when famine was already beginning its disastrous career", regretted Nehru with adding that it was "most extraordinary how inefficient the Government always" was in "every matter other than the suppression of those who challenge its administration" (498).

Administrative Failures and Lack of Accountability:

Nehru was also enraged by the lack of strategic thinking and administrative failure in dealing with the Bengal famine. The province of Bengal was "nearest to the theatre of war and possible invasion" and a "widespread famine and collapse of the economic structure would inevitably injure the capacity for the defence and even more so for offence" (496). Thus, in the opinion of Nehru, the "Government of India" failed in "discharge its responsibility for India's defence and the prosecution of the war against the Japanese aggressors" (496). Further, as Nehru pointed out, the "central and provincial governments also at last woke up" and "realized the immensity of the crisis and the army was utilized in the relief operations" (497). Had such a waking up been done earlier, the catastrophe might have been averted to some extent. "Not scorched earth but scorched and starved and dead human beings by the million", wrote Nehru, "were the emblems of the policy that the Government has pursued" (497). "The Famine Inquiry Commission, presided over by Sir John Woodhead" revealed "in restrained official language the tragic succession of official errors and private greed which led to the Bengal famine" and the report itself condemned "the policy, or often the lack of policy or the ever-

changing policy, of both the Government of India and of the Bengal Government" (498) which not only exposed the criminal neglect on the part of the War administration, but highlighted the impunity and lack of accountability prevalent at the time of the 'Second World War' in the 'babudom' of the country and administrative mechanism.

Moral and Ethical Implications:

The famine, as Nehru pointed out, revealed India was "thin veneer of the prosperity of a small number of people at the top – a picture of poverty and ugliness of British rule" (Nehru 496). It was the very climax and consummation of immoral and unethical 'British rule' in India. This famine was result of no "calamity of nature or play of the elements that brought this famine, nor was it caused by actual war operations and enemy blockade" and in fact, "it was a manmade famine which could have been foreseen and avoided" (496) and that "there was amazing indifference, incompetence, and complacency shown by all the authorities concerned" (496). Even "[r]ight up to the last moment, when thousands were dying daily in the public streets, famine was denied and references to it in the Press were suppressed by the censors" (Nehru 496). "When the Statesman, newspaper of Calcutta, published gruesome and ghastly pictures of starving and dying women and children in the streets of Calcutta, a spokesman of the Government of India, speaking officially in the central assembly, protested against the 'dramatization' of the situation" (Nehru 496) as to him it "apparently was a normal occurrence to the British authorities for thousands to die daily from starvation in India" (496). "The tragedy of Bengal and the famines are the final judgment on British rule in India", said Nehru with a depressed tone adding that "the British will certainly leave India, and their Indian Empire will become a memory, but what will they leave when they have to go, what human degradation and accumulated sorrow?" (499).

III. The Two India(s)

Another important aspect which struck Nehru deeply during the 'Bengal Famine of 1943' was the stark difference of attitude and lifestyle between the haves and the have-nots of Calcutta. Nehru wrote that "[w]hile all this was happening and the streets of Calcutta were strewn with corpses, the social life of the upper ten thousand of Calcutta underwent no change" and there "was dancing and feasting and a flaunting of luxury, and life was gay" (497). Further, the "horse races in Calcutta continued" and "attracted their usual fashionable throngs". Though the transportation system "was lacking for food, racehorses came in special boxes by rail from other parts of the country" (497). In this "gay life both Englishmen and Indians took part" for "both had prospered in the business of war and money was plentiful" and during "that money had been gained by profiteering in the very foodstuffs, the lack of which was killing tens of thousands daily" (497). "India", notes Nehru, "is a land of contrasts, of some very rich and many very poor, of modernism and medievalism, of rulers and ruled, of the British and Indians", but "[n]ever before had these contrasts been so much in evidence as in the city of Calcutta during those terrible months of famine in the latter half of 1943" (497). Another thing that made Nehru astonished was the attitude of Indians of upper echelons. It was understandable that there were racial disconnect between the ruling elite and the natives as for "most Englishmen this was perhaps easier for they had lived their life apart and, caste-bound as they were, they could not vary their old routine, even if some individuals felt the urge to do so", but "those Indians who functioned in this way showed the wide gulf that separated them from their own people, which no considerations even of decency and humanity could bridge" (497). The famine actually highlighted the division and fissures existing within the Indian society itself and there always existed two India(s) - one for the select prevailed few and the other for the wretched of the earth.

IV. Churchill and his Premiership

The proverbial 'elephant in the room' and the role of a personality whose contribution to the cause of Bengal famine cannot be overlooked is the British wartime conservative Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill. In fact, there has been much debate on Winston Churchill and his administrative

policies during the War period in creating and continuing the Bengal Famine. On one hand, there is a school of thought that it was the wrong wartime policies of Churchill that aggravated the situation in Bengal, on the other hand there is also a view that the situation was not linear but was a complex interplay of events where one single person cannot have been singled out or blamed. However, Nehru was unequivocal in his criticism on Churchill on the Bengal Famine. He declared that it was not only the misguided policies of Churchill, but his very racist attitude and imperialist mindset that blinded his vision on the sufferings of common Indians. "For Mr. Winston Churchill", Nehru noted, "it was a war of restoration and nothing more, a continuation, with minor changes, of both the social structure of England and the imperial structure of her empire" (Nehru 482). In fact, Mr. Winston Churchill "declared", with special reference to India, "I have not become the King's first minister in order to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire" (Nehru 491). Even long before the war, in January 1930, he had said, "[s]ooner or later you will have to crush Gandhi and the Indian Congress and all they stand for" (Nehru 438). In July 1944, "Winston sent me a peevish telegram to ask why Gandhi hadn't died yet!", Lord Wavell, the then Viceroy, noted in his diary adding, "[h]e has never answered my telegram about food" (Mukherjee 235).

V. The 1943 Famine's Influence on Nehru's Policies after Independence

The Bengal famine had a substantial impact on Nehru's politico-economic thinking, which manifested itself in his policies after partition in 1947. Nehru's thinking on the famine has implications for many a vital aspects of governance after independence as enumerated in his *The Discovery of India*.

Self-Reliance of Food Production:

Nehru strongly believed that India had to secure food production to do away with the problem of food scarcity in future. As a result, his policies under his premiership led to the reform of agricultural land ownership, modernization of agriculture and irrigation, increase in storage facility and a robust food distribution system through Fair Price Shops (FPS), which drastically increased India's food supply, storage and distribution in subsequent decades as noted by Frankel in his *India's Political Economy, 1947-1977: A Gradual Revolution*.

Planned Economic Development

The famine stimulated Nehru's conviction of the necessity of the state to plan economic development and the government "began to talk of planning" (Nehru 500). His government implemented Five-Year Plans that aimed to promote industrialization and improve the agricultural sector to decrease dependency on external resources and imports.

Foreign Policy and Anti-Colonial Position

Nehru's criticism of Churchill Wartime Government's policies during the famine influenced his foreign policy approach later. He became a major organizer of the "non-aligned" movement that argued for newly-formed nations to counter imperial political-economic dependence and exploitation (Gopal 185).

Conclusion

The *Discovery of India* by Nehru offers a strong critique of the 1943 Bengal Famine and British colonial policies. He casts the famine specifically as a product of British failure. He also highlighted how economic exploitation, diversion of supplies for the war, and racism led to millions dying of starvation. Nehru's analysis of the famine solidified his already critical position on self-rule, state allocation of resources, and food security as part of his vision for an independent India. Churchill's Wartime Government's policies during the famine stand as the most egregious example of British rule in all of India and Nehru's writing represents the continued repudiation of colonial rule. Ultimately, Nehru's reflections on the Bengal famine were not only a critique of history but were part of the foundation of

arguments for India's need to end the colonial state of British rule. The famine was not simply another disaster of starvation experienced by Indians but also a sign of the corrosive and harmful failure of imperialist governance that Nehru took measures to avoid under the leadership of independent India.

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