



Bengali Literature and Fiction: The Context of the 1940's

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18692758>

In 1943, Bengal witnessed a devastating famine that shook the entire Indian subcontinent. Much like an epidemic or a natural disaster that relentlessly ravages human life, this famine rendered survival itself a severe ordeal for the people of Bengal. The cyclone in Odisha, widespread drought, and deteriorating agrarian conditions collectively plunged the agricultural landscape of India into a dire crisis. Yet, what exacerbated the calamity was the extreme apathy of the then colonial administration towards Bengal—a region that had historically sustained the food demands of a vast portion of India. This indifference was instrumental in ushering in the famine.

The unbearable plight of the oppressed, deprived, and hunger-stricken people found poignant expression in Bengali fiction. Literary responses such as Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay's *Manvantar* and *Chintamani*, Gopal Halder's *Un Panchashhi*, Subodh Ghosh's *Tilanjali*, and Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's *Ashani Sanket* stand as powerful testaments to this tragic chapter. The wrath of nature is vividly reflected in these narratives, reaffirming the notion that literature serves as a mirror to society. Thus, the harrowing reality of the famine inevitably permeated contemporary novels and short stories. However, a critical question remains: Was the Bengal famine truly the result of natural disaster alone, or was it the consequence of human agency and governmental self-interest? To adequately explore this question, it becomes essential to turn to historical analysis.

Three of Gopal Halder's novels gained prominence for their focus on the Bengal Famine of 1943. These are *Panchasher Pathe*, *Un Panchashhi*, and *Terosh Panchash*. The first volume, *Panchasher Pathe*, unfolds around the mid-point of the year 1942. The second volume, *Un Panchashhi*, published in January 1946, chronicles events spanning from 1943 to 1944. Regarding the challenges of writing historically grounded fiction, Halder himself remarked: "*This is the difficulty in writing any truly historical novel. The events cannot be distorted. In such novels, the event itself becomes the protagonist. Yet, there remain protagonists and heroines—perhaps more than one. Some are swept along by the tide*



of events, some reach the shore, and others never even glimpse the shore." The period of writing these three novels he wrote was roughly from 1942 to 1944. Historically, this period witnessed events like famine, epidemic, war. Along with this, the Quit India Movement, World War II, and various activities of the organization made this decade very important.

At the centre of *Panchasher Pathe* is the character of Dr. Binoy Majumdar, who returns to Bengal from Burma. He is deeply disturbed by the miserable condition of the impoverished masses in Bengal. His earlier experiences in Burma—Japanese military assaults on civilians, brutal killings, and the terror of bombings—had already wounded him psychologically. As a Bengali, he perceived these acts as a deep humiliation. He desired India's independence. Binoy had seen heaps of corpses in Rangoon. As he recalled: "Two thousand people perished within half an hour on the roads of Rangoon, due to bombs and bullets. And after that, someone said 'That's all?'—as if that was the extent of what war meant."

Another significant character in the novel is Haru, who embodies a spirit of protest. During this period, the Indian populace was increasingly eager to be liberated from British colonial rule. Many believed that the arrival of the Japanese army would drive out the British and bring about Indian independence. Since Japan, like India, belonged geographically to Asia, there was an assumption that this shared regional identity would foster solidarity. However, through the character of Haru, the author sharply critiques this assumption. Haru vehemently protests: "Treachery, you say! Isn't Japan our enemy? A thousand times, yes. Just because the British are killing us, will Japan's bullets feel any sweeter? The British enslaved us—do you think Japan is here to set us free? Didn't the British also claim to liberate us from the Nawabs? Treachery is the same everywhere. All traitors of the world belong to one caste—what does it matter if they're white or black?" At the time, black marketizing and inflation were on the rise. Rice mill owners were profiteering at unprecedented levels. Villagers, desperate for food, began to flock to the cities in large numbers. In this novel, Halder deliberately underplays the role of aesthetic craftsmanship in favour of documentary-style realism. He later admitted: "I deliberately pushed the narrative aspect into the background in order to retain what one might call a documentary quality. The story emerged, but perhaps quite consciously, I prioritised factual necessity even at the cost of literary aesthetics."

Another of his notable novels, *Un Panchashhi*, depicts how government agents began confiscating essential goods and food supplies from civilians to prevent them from falling into Japanese hands. The government stockpiled these in warehouses, which further exacerbated the shortages of food and clothing across the country. The novel also critiques war profiteers like Shachiprasad, a businessman



who made enormous profits by supplying materials for the war effort. Such individuals were indifferent to the famine and widespread starvation. As employment opportunities grew scarcer, people began migrating in search of work, raising troubling questions in Binoy's mind: "Is this struggle truly not the Congress's? ... He began to wonder—what kind of *Un Panchashhi* has come upon him, upon his country, upon his times?" Binoy misunderstood the communists, but as he began to understand the deeper causes behind the widespread suffering, he developed a respect for communist ideals. Through Binoy, the author may well have voiced his own ideological beliefs. Though the government introduced a rationing system during this period of crisis, it was far from adequate given the growing population. Halder's final novel in the trilogy, *Terosh Panchash*, presents Binoy returning to the village to stand beside famine-stricken peasants.

While Halder's early narrative focus was on the famine itself, his later writings transitioned into more subdued, eventless storytelling.⁶ Those with some education managed to secure livelihoods—there was a demand for workers in wartime industries. However, the poor continued to lead increasingly desperate lives. So dire was their condition that some women, unable to clothe themselves, were driven to suicide. In *Terosh Panchash*, Halder describes a Bengal in the month of Paush where even rice, oil, salt, matchsticks, paper, and coal were unavailable. People drowned themselves or took their lives by hanging.

Gopal Halder was born in Bikrampur, in present-day Bangladesh. For his anti-colonial activities, he spent five years and ten months in prison. A committed communist, he used fiction as a means of reflecting on and critiquing the socio-political realities of his time.

The 1952 issue of *Desh* magazine contains a significant account of the cloth famine that plagued Bengal in the early post-independence years. The government had indicated the possibility of introducing a system of cloth rationing in the city of Calcutta. In this context, Shriyukta Suryakumar Basu Mahashaya, Director of the Dhakeshwari Cotton Mill, remarked during a speech at the Rotary Club in Dhaka that for the past four to five months, government-ordered cloth had been gradually accumulating in the warehouses of the Dhakeshwari Cotton Mill. "By the end of April, the stock of cloth had reached nearly a thousand bundles. The authorities have put us in a difficult position by failing to take delivery of this material." In order to facilitate the distribution of cloth across various wards in Calcutta, clerks had been appointed. However, the quantity of cloth allocated to the ward committees for distribution remained alarmingly low in both volume and frequency. Furthermore, a persistent shortage of yarn was noted, which adversely affected the overall production of cloth.



The Bengal famine left a significant imprint on Bengali fiction. When the famine was spreading on a massive scale in 1943, the first task of the despised relief team of the Calcutta government was to remove the famine-stricken from the streets of the British Empire's second city. This was done to prevent the spectacle of the death march from hunger from becoming an international headline. Hence, the "sick and destitute" were forcibly picked up by the police and military trucks and transported to "repatriation camps" outside the city, where they were detained. Even in these camps, the food rations were limited. Historians believe that the famine was one of the major factors behind the communal riots in Calcutta in the 1940s. Anger was steadily mounting among the famine-stricken. People were dying in large numbers, yet their corpses remained uncremated. Vultures and carrion birds tore at these unburied dead. The government took no effective measures to address the suffering of the famine victims, which further incited public resentment. In his book *Communal Riots in Bengal*, historian Suranjan Das, while discussing the impact of the famine on the common people of Bengal, writes: "The man-made famine of 1943 was a horrific experience for the inhabitants of Calcutta, when thousands of starving people from all corners of the province, having lost all hope of obtaining rice, came to Calcutta to beg even for some rice gruel. Countless people died of hunger on the open streets, which led to devastating epidemics of cholera, malaria, and smallpox in the city... As a result of these events, there was a blunting of the human sensory experience—life lost its value in the eyes of the common man. A large-scale brutalization of human sentiment seemed to prepare the people psychologically for the inhuman incidents of August 1946."

In retrospect, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad remarked that the devastation caused by the 1943 famine would take many years to restore to its previous state. He held the British Government, the Bengal Government, and the Indian Government equally responsible for the catastrophe. Jawaharlal Nehru also vehemently protested against the famine. He pointed out the tragic irony that, while there were no vehicles available to transport food to Bengal, horse-drawn carriages for Calcutta's racecourse had never been in short supply. This indeed stands as a profoundly tragic episode.

Subodh Ghosh's novel *Tilanjali* was serialized in *Desh* magazine in 27 installments from 1350 to the 23rd of Boishakh, 1351 (Bengali calendar). The novel is primarily centered on the famine of the 1940s. In essence, Ghosh's writing engages with the acute food crisis and the ideological conflicts of the time. He vividly portrayed the moral and social degeneration that accompanied the famine—for instance, mothers selling their children out of desperation, processions of the dead on the streets, and the greed of black marketeers and self-serving hoarders. The novel opens with the character Shishir, a music-loving and sensitive soul, who is an associate of another central character, Abaninath. Shishir, moved by emotion, composed a musical rendition of Rabindranath Tagore's poem *Dui Bigha Jomi* (Two Bighas of



Land), in which he passionately writes: "It's not merely two bighas of land, it is two bighas of gold. Even if it costs your life, do not let it go. Be it merely two bighas of soil—don't give it up. It is not dust, but the soul of your existence. It holds your granary of rice, your honour's shelter. In your youth, it was your bridal chamber, your companion of life. Even if debt is written page after page in the ledgers of the sahibs, what fear is that? The dignity of your land will remain in your heart—your farmer brother's staff in hand." As Calcutta was the head office and administrative capital, it was relatively well-stocked with goods. For that reason, starving people from the villages migrated to Calcutta. In the novel, Tuna's mother, displaced from her village, pawns her child to Puna for a mere thirteen rupees. Children were often prepared to be used as tools for begging. Amid war and rising prices, the impoverished were subjected to inhuman slaughter. Commodity prices were soaring while the profits of the hoarders and profiteers multiplied, and the poor, consuming inedible substances, edged ever closer to death. Ghosh captured the grotesque realities faced by these displaced, destitute, and famished people.

Another significant aspect of the novel is its exploration of ideological conflict. The novelist clearly did not favour the Communist Party's ideology or its modes of operation. Through the character of Prakash Babu, he remarked: "Know this—our party is named the Communist Party, the very name of which causes Hindustan's narrow nationalist soul to recoil in nightmares. The Jagriti Sangh is merely one arm of this party. Of all tasks, the greatest and foremost task is to strengthen this party. All our slogans exist solely to grow this party. On the path of establishing the party, any influence of any other group must be ruthlessly uprooted—by any means, by force, by strategy."

On the other hand, Subodh Ghosh expressed a degree of support for the Congress's strategies. By 1944, tensions between progressive and nationalist Communists had become pronounced. It was during this period that the *Congress Literary Association* was formed, in which Ghosh played a prominent role. Though sympathetic toward the poor, destitute, and starving, he harboured a dislike for beggars. The impoverished people living along Calcutta's streets were forced to survive in unhygienic conditions, and a serious lack of public health services became evident. The helplessness of these poor stirred the inner worlds of novelists. Bengal witnessed a growing influx of vagabonds and destitute persons during this period. On July 30, 1943, Governor Herbert issued an ordinance related to vagrancy, empowering the police to arrest vagrants. If any person was seen begging in public, they would be identified and detained as vagrants.

In fact, the hoarding of supplies for the army led to a shortage of food grains. An account of the export or import of rice from Bengal in 1941 and 1942 is given in the Famine Commission report:



(In thousands of tone)

Month	1941		Net Imports + Net Exports	1942		Net Imports + Net Exports
	Imports	Exports		Imports	Exports	
January	42	15	+27	29	45	-16
February	62	22	+40	28	60	-32
March	60	31	+29	41	61	-20
April	66	22	+44	8	66	-58
May	51	20	+31	12	32	-20
June	83	15	+68	9	30	-21
July	68	11	+57	8	26	-18
	432	136	+296	135	320	-185

Amartya Sen, in his *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, analyzed the causes behind the famine of the 1940s. He divided the period between 1942 and 1944 into three phases: from 1942 to March 1943, from March 1943 to November 1943, and from November 1943 until the latter part of 1944. He observed that a significant number of people died of starvation during the second phase, whereas in the third phase, many succumbed to diseases. On the other hand, Paul Greenough held the government's apathy primarily responsible for the famine. He argued that the state failed to take timely and necessary measures to counter the disaster. In this context, Anuradha Roy has remarked — “Greenough deliberately attempts to blur the distinction between the causes and symptoms of the famine. The British colonial government, which committed grave injustices in the name of protecting imperial interests; the urban hoarders, who, driven by distorted greed, filled their godowns with unimaginable quantities of rice; the affluent peasants, who hid sackfuls of paddy in their homes after removing them from granaries; and those who smuggled rice to other regions under the cover of darkness for greater profit—none of these can be equated with the poor cultivator who, with meagre means, wished to keep his last two or three maunds of paddy for his own family, nor with the man who, unable to provide food for his household, abandoned his wife and children, or the father who, in absolute desperation, sold his daughter.” Among all Indian provinces, Bengal was the worst affected by the famine. The neighbouring



province of Orissa also experienced its devastating impact. In some parts of Bengal, the famine had begun as early as the beginning of 1943.

Among the novels written on the Bengal famine, one of the most significant is Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's *Ashani Sanket (The Distant Thunder)*. In the month of Magh, 1350 Bengali calendar, the novel was serialized in the magazine *Matribhoomi*. Later, in 1959, it was published in book form by Bibhuti Prakashan. Literary figures often perceive time and society with deeper sensitivity. In the novel, the character Gangacharan is a Kulin Brahmin, who lives with his wife Ananga and their two children. For the sake of earning religious merit, the villagers cared for him with utmost devotion. However, the calamity of 1943 cast a shadow over his life as well. The rising price of kerosene, rice, and clothing rendered life unbearable. The novelist here attributes the famine primarily to the war. The rice scarcity deeply unsettled the people. Gangacharan himself had to endure humiliation under the suspicion of rice theft. "Day by day, beggars began flooding the roads and alleys. Everyone wondered where they had been all this time—no one knew. These were not locals but foreign beggars. One day, as Ananga was cooking in the kitchen, suddenly five or six half-naked, emaciated women, accompanied by completely naked children, stood by the veranda of the house and began crying out — 'We want rice water! We want rice water!'"

In 1943, when it was proposed to supply 8,000 tons of food grains to Bengal on an emergency basis, Winston Churchill rejected the request. Due to a shortage of cargo ships, it was not possible to bring food grains from Australia or Canada. "In 2018, Professor Utsa Patnaik, in the 20 October issue of *Economic and Political Weekly*, alleged that the famine in Bengal was not spontaneous. Rather, the conditions were deliberately created. She argued that the excessive war expenditures and the financial mechanisms set in motion to support them were primarily responsible for this tragic situation." Binayak Sen has shown that when Amartya Sen discusses anti-famine policies, his emphasis lies on food supply conditions, the food rationing system, public works programmes, and other such supply-side initiatives.

In 1943, T.J. Narayan of *The Hindu* visited the famine-stricken regions of Bengal and later expressed his outrage in his 1944 publication *Famine Over Bengal*, where he wrote: "Unrelieved suffering, disease, and moral decay have thickened and poisoned the very air. While in the urban areas, the famine has been somewhat driven out, in the rural countryside, it still lingers." During World War II, the British adopted a scorched-earth policy, which caused massive damage to agriculture. This was further aggravated by natural calamities, leading to the destruction of crops. Yet, during Bengal's darkest



hours, the British government offered no assistance. As a result, there were no effective measures to curb the famine. Where government will fail, catastrophe deepened.

Since literature is a mirror of society, the torment inflicted by the famine found expression in the writings of the literary figures. The famine of 1943 might have been contained, but no such intent or initiative was visible on the part of the government at that critical moment. People perished due to lack of food, while others, in desperate attempts to preserve their modesty amid severe scarcity of clothing, resorted to suicide by hanging. Yet the foreign (colonial) government remained indifferent. This injustice and neglect towards the province of Bengal were something the writers could neither accept emotionally nor justify rationally. Hence, through their writings, they voiced their anguish at the betrayal of their motherland and protested against the unbearable poverty and suffering endured by the helpless, hungry men, women, children, and elderly of Bengal. Literature holds a significant place as a source of historical material. In this regard, the discussion of famine in Bengali fiction undoubtedly stands as a testimony of history.

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