

Imagining the Great Bengal Famine: Unveiling the hunger paradox in retrospection

Sonalika Chaturvedi and Renu Bhadola Dangwal*

Abstract: A distant thunder reverberates across the world, echoing a deepening crisis that extends far beyond the realm of hunger. The global food crisis, with its multifaceted dimensions, strikes at the core of societies, politics, and ethics, exposing the complex interplay of forces shaping our modern world. This crisis, as depicted in Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's evocative work *Distant Thunder* symbolizes the impending danger and urgency surrounding the issue of food shortage. This research paper therefore interrogates the hunger paradox and offers insights into the food crisis probing into food insecurity, socio-economic disparities, the intricate relationship between geopolitics and famine through a critical examination of how cultural representations depict relationships within and between human societies, exploring these connections any ways in which these interactions influence and are influenced by the social relationships.

Keywords: hunger paradox, food crisis, ecoculture, socio-economic disparities

Introduction

In his foreword to the seventh edition of the *Global Report on Food Crises 2023* António Guterres (2023, 6), the Secretary-General of the United Nations writes, "More than a quarter of a billion people are now facing acute levels of hunger, and some are on the brink of starvation... As always, it is the most vulnerable who bear the brunt of this failure". Guterres' agony about the state of global hunger emphasizes the urgent need for action while underscoring the severity

* Sonalika Chaturvedi (✉)

Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, National Institute of Technology, Uttarakhand (India)

e-mail: sonalika.phd2020@nituk.ac.in (corresponding author)

Renu Bhadola Dangwal (✉)

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, National Institute of Technology, Uttarakhand

of the current state of starvation amidst the deprived communities of the world. Likewise, the World Food Programme (2023) in a blog post “A global food crisis” mentions that compared to last five years the current state of hunger is ten times and it continues to upsurge. According to it, “More than 900,000 people worldwide are fighting to survive in catastrophic hunger/one step away from famine”. Despite technological advancements and increased agricultural productivity, millions still suffer from food insecurity and starvation which is more a man induced disaster than a natural calamity. Throughout human history hunger paradox, a seemingly contradictory phenomenon—where hunger coexists with food production and abundance, has persisted. The enigma of abundance coexisting with deprivation raises profound questions about the underlying causes, power dynamics, and systemic injustices that perpetuate this crisis. To address this complex issue, it is essential to look back at historical precedents and examine contemporary examples. As studying the past struggles lend valuable insights that inform our actions. Literary texts have long served as mirrors reflecting the complexities of human existence and the anomalies that surround it. By examining fictional texts that explore past calamities, we can deepen our understanding of this crisis and its impact on individuals and societies. Bella Lack (2022), an environmentalist, and ambassador for the Born Free Foundation contemplates, that ecological emergency stems from excessive consumption, release of carbon emissions, and the pursuit of profit by corporations, “[b]ut it’s also a crisis of miscommunication”. This confusion occurs because the responsible bodies fail to create public awareness and understanding of the magnitude and urgency of the ecological crisis. Similarly, at the heart of the global food crisis lies a paradox that defies comprehension. It is difficult to understand the incongruous persistence of hunger and food insecurity in an era of unprecedented agrarian efficiency and technical signs of progress. Nonetheless, it is in situations like these when through stories literature empowers us. By capturing human experiences, it evokes empathy and emotional connections, enabling and allowing readers to engage with the issue on a personal level. Moreover, it emancipates the reader to question prevailing systems and ideologies that perpetuate the food emergency. No Scientific enquiry is as equipped as a story that can trigger an emotional response. Lack advocates, “unlike numbers or facts, stories can trigger an emotional response, harnessing the power of motivation, imagination, and personal values, which drive the most

powerful and permanent forms of social change” (Ibid). A distant thunder reverberates across the world, echoing a deepening crisis that extends far beyond the realm of hunger. The global food crisis, with its multifaceted dimensions, strikes at the core of societies, politics, and ethics, exposing the complex interplay of forces shaping our modern world. However, the literary representation of such a doom is seemingly scarce.

In 2021, the world commemorated the centenary year of a classic storyteller and filmmaker Satyajit Ray. Whose films are mostly based on eco-socially relevant regional texts. One of the authors, Ray draws on the most is Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay who renders a true reality of the rural populace in his novels, and brings to life the plight of the ordinary people of Bengal in his texts like *Pather Panchali*, *AdarshaHinduHotel*, *Ichamati*, and *BipinerSansar* and *Aran yak* to name a few. One of the most relevant texts by Bandyopadhyay is *Ashani Sanket* that depicts the anthropogenic emergency-world food crisis. Translated into English as *Distant Thunder* by Chhanda Chattopadhyay Bewtra, the novel symbolizes an impending danger and urgency that surrounds the food security. The novel locks in social memory the lives of ordinary people struggling to survive amidst scarcity, portraying the devastating consequences of hunger, poverty, and societal breakdown. It paints the inexpressible misery, starvation, and exploitation of the rural-indigenous people. The story thus becomes the representation of famine struck Bengal. This research paper interrogates the hunger paradox and offers insights into the food crisis probing into food insecurity, socio-economic disparities, the intricate relationship between geopolitics and famine through the ecocultural study of the novel *Distant Thunder* (2018).

Reading Hunger: The Bengal Famine of 1943

Having claimed the lives of three million people (Mukherjee 2015; Grada 2010), the Great Famine of Bengal, a haunting episode in the history of British India, has been the subject of extensive research by scholars (Greenough 1982; Sen 1983; Grada 2010; Mukherjee 2015). Historian, Janam Mukherjee (2015, 2), asserts that to understand a famine is “to unfold the dialectics of power and powerlessness”, as it becomes a battleground where power dynamics manifest and play out. The powerful exploit their positions to maintain control over resources, consolidate their authority, and protect their own interests, while the powerless struggle to survive, facing hunger, displacement, and even

death. In context to the Bengal Famine, Mukherjee explains, “(it) is not simply the story of a woeful human tragedy, it is just as importantly the story of how annihilating inequality and material deprivation both stem from and impact identifiable structures of power” (Ibid., 2). These structures of power refer to the socio-political systems and institutions that shape the distribution of resources, access to opportunities, and social mobility when adversity hits. These hierarchal edifices become responsible for increasing the socio-economic disparities in society. Therefore, while famines are commonly associated with inadequate food supply, the Bengal Famine of 1943 was not directly caused by a significant shortage in food production. Renowned economist Amartya Sen, who for the very first time brought a fresh outlook to the issue considers it to have stemmed from an “entitlement failure”. Sen (1983, 1) writes, “Starvation is the characteristic of some people not having enough to eat. It is not the characteristic of there not being enough food to eat”. This suggests that the distribution of food throughout Bengal was mainly impeded by economic factors that hindered the ability of certain communities to afford food. Tirthankar Roy (2012, 26), an Indian economic historian, in his book *Natural Disasters and Indian History* says on a similar note, that “famines happened because the poverty of the peasant left the government too poor to deal with the effects of crop failure”. The period surrounding the famine was tumultuous. The conquest of Burma (Myanmar) and Singapore by Japan during World War II led to the cessation of rice exports from those regions (Mukherjee 2015; Roy 2012). Furthermore, a cyclone in October 1942 damaged the autumn rice crop and put pressure on the following year's harvest as subsistence farmers were forced to consume grain meant for planting in order to survive (Grada 2010). However, it is important to note that the cessation of rice imports to India in 1942 did not directly trigger the famine, and the crop yield in 1943 was in fact sufficient to feed the population of Bengal. The situation escalated into a catastrophic famine due to specific factors associated with the war. British authorities, apprehensive about a Japanese invasion, stockpiled food for defending troops and exported significant quantities to British forces in the Middle East. As mentioned in the *Bengal Famine an Unpunished Genocide*, Indian politician Syama Prasad Mukherjee writes, “food allocation of soldiers is considerably more than the common man's...the government kept warehousing to ensure one million tons of food grain remain every day, for the soldiers’

consumption” (Purkayastha 2022, 28). Mukherjee further exposes the critical situation, “abundant food grains rested in the hands of the business men and they were hoarding it with the hope of making undue profits” (Ibid., 33-34). As a consequence of these British actions, concerns about food shortages led to looting, speculation, and subsequent price inflation, rendering a basic subsistence diet unaffordable for numerous workers in Bengal. The government in Bengal failed to fulfill its responsibilities, displaying a shocking disregard for its subjects, by not taking appropriate actions to remedy the dreadful state. Corresponding to this Justyna Kurowska (2021, 61), a renowned scholar comments, “the colonial government which had criminally neglected its subjects and was unprepared to address issues such as the need to control prices, combat corruption among traders and government agents or provide quick relief measures”. The public administration’s failure to stop rice exports or seek relief supplies from other sources exacerbated the situation, resulting in a catastrophic disaster that claimed the lives of the marginalized section. Roy (2012, 27), asserts, “famines that started in some of the harshest and economically marginal regions, therefore, caught the government in the role of spectator, and exposed its weakness”. Analysing these economic, political, and social dimensions of the famine provides a deeper understanding of the circumstances that the people had to go through and the reasons responsible for such a calamity that could have otherwise been averted.

Onset of famine: Unravelling the complexities and confronting the paradox

Bandyopadhyay’s *Distant Thunder* unfolds with the journey of Gangacharan Chakrabarti, and his wife Ananga as they embark on a quest for a more tranquil life in a secluded village in Bengal. Ananga mentions about calamities that she had to face at the previous place of her stay. At the very outset of the novel she says, “There was a bad drought in the village I come from. You have never seen anything like that. There was only one marsh, which would dry up in summer. We had to bathe with only one bucket of water” (Bandyopadhyay 2018, 3). The family’s hardships which had plagued them in the previous village, gradually start to alleviate when Gangacharan assumes multiple roles of a priest, primary teacher, and local doctor simultaneously in the new village. But this happiness doesn’t last very long, the initial signs of doom first appear before Gangacharan from

afar, he meets an old Brahmin, Dinabandhu Bhattacharya who shares his plight resulting from rice scarcity, he mentions his deplorable condition, “I am starving. Have not a grain of rice at home. The price of rice is soaring. Used to be four and a half, now it is 6 rupees. Have five or six mouths to feed. How can I manage it?” (Ibid., 43). The initial brunt of the crisis fell upon the landless villagers, who were the first to bear its consequences. These poor people had no personal means of sustenance, and the situation degraded further because the rich stopped giving alms or any other help. In *Hunger and Holocaust: Three Trembling Famine of Colonial Bengal*, noted historians Souren Bhattacharya and Subhasree Pal explain, “[v]illage charity, traditionally in the form of rice gifts, dwindled not only because rice was in high demand, but also because it had become such an expansive commodity. Those who relied on charity were quickly reduced to starvation” (Bhattacharya and Pal 2021, 126). Several months later, Dinabandhu pays a visit to Gangacharan's home, seeking a meal and engaging in a deeper conversation about the underlying causes and repercussions of the prevailing scarcity. They delve into the intricate connections between scarcity and global events, such as the ongoing world war, the presence of the Japanese military, the fall of Singapore, and the sudden disappearance of affordable Burmese rice from the local market (Bandyopadhyay 2018, 52). Through this dialogue between Dinabandhu and Gangacharan, Bibhutibhusan enumerates the key reasons behind the food crisis. In the novel, the impact of war and famine is not portrayed as isolated events, but rather as an everyday violence manifested through the drastic surge in food prices. Gangacharan and Anangabou's socio-economic identity no longer remains confined to that of a frugal bengali brahmin couple. Instead, they become inextricably intertwined with the catastrophic consequences of a global war. Gangacharan soon experiences the calamity on a personal level when he finds himself unable to obtain kerosene oil and rice, despite having the means to purchase them (Ibid., 45). Startled with the ongoing misfortune of deprivation he warns Ananga that “if we don't buy whatever rice is available now, it may soon completely disappear from the market.” (Ibid., 48). The poor people of the village had already lost all agency and were forced to beg for ‘phan’- the water that remains after cooking rice, because no one had enough rice to spare. Nabin Parui from Koira village laments, “We can't live without rice, Baba Thakur, we can't live without rice. For last three days we have had none” (Ibid., 60). Bandyopadhyay's

fictional apprehensions become more visible as one reads Syama Prasad Mukherjee:

On 30 April 1943, a newspaper carried a report that in the course of post-mortem of a famine victim, grass was found inside his stomach. Faced with extreme hunger, that helpless man had eaten grass but could not digest it. Abundant food grains rested in the hands of the business men and they were hoarding it with the Hope of making undue profits. (Purkayastha 2022, 34-35)

This drastic turn of events leads to further deterioration of the society. The desperate and hungry villagers' resort to looting locally available rice from the village head, Biswas. In the chaotic incident Gangacharan gets physically assaulted (Bandyopadhyay 2018, 63-64). The famine ensues, bringing with it the inevitable hardships and widespread hunger. Within this fable, the connection between the immediate and distant is forged and shattered repeatedly as the search for rice, often met with disappointment, becomes a prevailing theme. Villages and towns alike find themselves collectively drifting towards the grip of famine, as the dire circumstances encompass larger areas. Amidst the relentless battle to secure food, Ananga-bou getting apprehensive about the future ponders, "[a]ll the rice had suddenly disappeared from the land, just like camphor! Even the large market at Gobindapur did not have any rice" (Ibid., 108). For common people like Ananga it becomes difficult to process the depravity and sudden scarcity of food in the society. Because innocent villagers have faith in their government that the ruling body will provide for them and serve them honestly. A subtle, socially stratified narrative is interwoven in the story. Reverberating the Bengal Famine Janam Mukherjee (2015, 6) writes:

... characterized by a shocking proliferation of local venalities: the hoarding of the middle classes; the cruel expedience of extortionary intermediaries; and the mute complicities of an increasingly callous society at large, increasingly inured to death, becoming increasingly more indifferent, month after month, and then year after year. It is also the story of a mushrooming and pervasive moral bankruptcy that stemmed from the burden of a thousand banal decisions made in the face of an increasing silence of despair.

This poignant humanist narrative further focuses on the degeneration of society to moral corruption that gives rise to lust and greed as reflected in Chutki and scar-faced Jadus episode. In the midst of a

severe rice shortage, Chhutki, a friend of Ananga, makes a surprising decision to elope with a man from a furnace plant whom she had previously rejected. This is the same man who had earlier given her a mound of rice that she had discarded. The unfolding events severely shape Chhutki's dilemma, highlighting the intricate choices and pressures that arise from the food crisis. The episode depicts the impact of famine, revealing the complex and harsh realities of social life in rural Bengal, where many such social and moral evils prevail other than hunger and scarcity. In this way the novel not only becomes a study of the great famine of Bengal, but that "of the vulnerability of the human spirit" (Roy and Dwivedi 2021, 51). Reflecting on the economic side of the paradox the narrative subtly suggests that both the supply and demand sides play crucial roles in causing the famine. This is evident as Gangacharan, in a state of utter frustration, expresses his exasperation regarding the scarcity and exorbitant prices of rice, which seems to persist both locally and in other places (Bandyopadhyay 2018, 48). These instances in the novel question the status of food security in the country while reflecting the prevalent socio-economic disparities. Albeit placing an emphasis on local economic reactions or local-level adaptation to global upheavals, it reflects the loopholes of a process that contradicts the goals of sustainable development. Under the mango tree near Ananga-bou's house, the village of Notungan witnesses materialising of the famine in the form of Moti-Muchini's death (Ibid., 149). Moti-Muchini's lifeless body serves as a profound symbol through which the villagers perceive a foreshadowing of their own impending fate. She transforms into a haunting and terrifying object, a victim not just of the brutality of war but also the deeply ingrained caste and gender hierarchies, and transpires as the onset of a calamity that seemed distant. According to Mukherjee (2015, 6), "famine in Bengal is a harrowing tale of the fracturing of an entire population along class lines (demarcated existentially), which could also be mapped rather easily along lines of caste, community and gender". The impact of the famine is never uniform across all segments of society but varies based on socioeconomic status, caste hierarchies, communal affiliations, and gender dynamics. These intersecting factors exacerbate the suffering and inequalities experienced during the famine, further fragmenting the population and intensifying the harrowing consequences of the crisis.

Conclusion

We are standing on the verge of a major food catastrophe. The threat of famine looms large in a world grappling with climate change, environmental degradation, and social inequalities. The fear of food shortage has become real amidst the Covid scare. The marginalized segment of society has been experiencing the most severe repercussions, thereby highlighting the inherent disparities in food security within our social framework. By unraveling the complex web of social, political, and ethical factors at play amid a food calamity, the paper sheds light on the fundamental reasons behind the coexistence of abundance and hunger. Peering beyond the surface level of deprivation and scarcity, it is urgent to delve deep into the socio-political and ethical implications that underpin the food crisis. Moreover, it develops an understanding as to how the social inequalities, power imbalances, and systemic injustices intertwine to exacerbate food insecurity and perpetuate cycles of poverty and deprivation. Revisiting historical precedents and drawing on contemporary examples, help us confront the hunger paradox head-on. Commenting on the history of food shortage Ayesha Mukherjee in *A Cultural History of Famine* states that the concept of food security, encompassing food availability, quality, and equitable distribution, has a longstanding cultural heritage. She enumerates, that it is “not only a history of economics and agricultural ...it is equally a history of human responses, resilience, and representations in the long term” (Mukherjee 2019, 3). Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay’s *Distant Thunder* evolves as an ecocultural platform of analysis providing a landscape of famine in its all-encompassing existence. It goes beyond merely focusing on the immediate effects of food scarcity and hunger, delving into the interconnectedness of ecological and cultural factors that contribute to the famine's existence. The narrative explores how the famine permeates all aspects of life, affecting not only the physical landscape but also the social, economic, and emotional dimensions of the community. By examining the complex relationship between human societies and their environment, Bibhutibhushan provides a nuanced understanding of the famine's far-reaching consequences and invites readers to contemplate the complex dynamics at play during such crises. Therefore, a critical examination of how cultural representations depict relationships within and between human societies, exploring the connections between humans and how these interactions influence and are influenced by social relationships (Ivakhiv 1997), develops a

comprehensive understanding of the global food crisis and generates meaningful insights for potential solutions. This research paper serves as a call for action, highlighting the urgent need for collective efforts to address the social, political, and ethical dimensions of the global food crisis. Only by unraveling the complexities, confronting the paradox, and challenging the status quo can we pave the way toward a more just and equitable world, where hunger becomes a distant memory rather than a harsh reality.

References:

- Bandyopadhyay, Bibhutibhusan. 2018. *Distant Thunder*. Translated by Chhanda Chattopadhyay Bewtra. Parabaas.
- Bhattacharya, Souren, and Subhasree Pal. 2021. *Hunger and Holocaust: Three Trembling Famines of Colonial Bengal*. Clever Fox Publishing.
- Gráda, Cormac Ó. 2010. Revisiting the Bengal Famine of 1943-4. *History Ireland*, vol. 18, no. 4: 36-39.
- Greenough, Paul Robert. 1982. *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943-1944*. Oxford University Press.
- Guterres, António. Foreword. 2023. "Global Report on Food Crises (GRFC) 2023." 2023 - Food Security Information Network (FSIN) www.fsinplatform.org/sites/default/files/resources/files/GRFC2023-compressed.pdf.
- Ivakhiv, Adrian. 1997. "Ecocultural Critical Theory and Ecocultural Studies: Contexts and Research Directions." *Uvm.edu*, www.uvm.edu/~aivakhiv/eco_cult.htm.
- Kurowska, Justyna. 2021. How Real Is Hunger? *Cracow Indological Studies*, vol.2, no.1:55-89.
- Lack, Bella. Dec 16, 2022. "Storytelling Will Save the Earth." *Wired*, www.wired.com/story/environment-climate-change-storytelling/.
- Mukherjee, Ayesha. 2019. "Introduction: A Cultural History of Famine". In Ayesha Mukherjee (Ed.), *A Cultural History of Famine: Food Security and the Environment in India and Britain*, pp. 1-19. Routledge.
- Mukherjee, Janam. 2015. *Hungry Bengal: War, Famine and the End of Empire*. Oxford University Press.
- Purkayastha, Sudip Kar, translator. 2022. *Bengal Famine: An Unpunished Genocide*. By Syama Prasad Mookerjee, Vitatsta.
- Roy, Binayak, and Om Dwivedi. 2021. An Era of Darkness: Satyajit Ray's Anticolonial Project. *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*. Vol.83, November: 51-65. Doi.10.25145/j.recaesin.2021.83.04.
- Roy, Tirthankar. 2012. *Natural Disasters and Indian History: Short Introductions*. OUP India.
- Sen, Amartya. 1983. *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- World Food Programme. 2023. "A Global Food Crisis: World Food Programme." *UN World Food Programme*, www.wfp.org/global-hunger-crisis.