

## Visuals Representations of Bengal Famine 1943: “People’s Art” and “Radicalization of Mainstream Nationalism”

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The title of my paper consists of two important phrases – first one is “Bengal famine” which occurred in 1943 and goes on till 1944 – which takes a toll of almost 3 million lives, considered as one of the most fatal blows and significant incident that exposes the brutal nature of the empire, “strategies of violence” to quote Said and naturally it instigates many socio-economic inquiries during the famine and thereafter when it is over and again during post-independence period that provide us significant insights about the incident and almost all of the investigations reach to the final conclusion that the famine is not a natural disaster caused by crop failure but it is “man-made”, a failure of strategies which caused artificial food crisis and a complete mismanagement of colonial food distribution system and policies adopted to combat with such situations. The other keyword is the “visual representations” of that famine. By visual representations I tried to mean the visual documentations of the famine that brings forth the situation and plight of the colonial subjects, the common people of undivided Bengal. This category of visual representation encapsulates documentaries in form of films and photographs taken during the phenomenon as well as sketches made by several artists of the Calcutta group which was established in 1943. Photographs taken by Sunil Janah are significant visual documentation of the period. It also includes various interpretations of the famine in celluloid, among which Mrinal Sen’s film *Akaler Sandhane* (In Search of Famine) produced in 1980 is most popular. But in this study, I would like to delimit my paper and exclude them as they are mostly city centric – Sunil Janah’s subjects are mostly in Calcutta and adjacent areas of Calcutta and that of Mrinal Sen’s is the urban gaze of a film making unit that tried to interpret the time almost 35 years after the actual incident and, thereby, fails to belong to the category of “document”. For this deliberation, my focus will be on two artists – Cittaprosad Bhattacharya and Zainul Abedin – two important members of “people’s art” movement who visited various districts of Bengal during famine to capture the

deplorable condition of the impoverished commoners that they have seen. Significantly, both Bhattacharya and Abedin mention actual date and, in some cases, actual places and names of the subject which qualify them to be in the category of actual document, part of what subaltern historian tries to cite as “history from the below”. Interestingly, Bhattacharya, Abedin, and other artists like Somnath Hore, Gobardhan Ash and other belong to the Calcutta Group become part of visual culture movement which started with Nandalal Bose, successfully carried out by Ramkinkar Bej who tried to, as one of the significant art historian of the contemporary time, Tapati Guha-Thakurta opines, “transfer the notion of Gandhian agenda from the larger history of Indian Nationalism to the more specific history of Indian art in the decades preceding Independence[?]”. (122) She further tries to see them from the angle of “Partha Chatterjee’s seminal formulations on the three constitutive ‘moments’ of ‘departure’, ‘manoeuvre’ and ‘arrival’ in the ideological journey of Indian Nationalism.....whose artistic possibilities are effectively appropriated, contained, and subsumed in the making of the new official art of the nation[?].....recasting the visual form, in redefining the notions of ‘art’ and ‘Indian-ness’..... foregrounding the public political role of the artist.” (122) Taking the cue from Guha-Thakurta, my argument goes further. In this presentation, I would like to argue that artist like Cittaprosad Bhattacharya and Zainul Abedin altered the model suggested by Guha-Thakurta. Instead of making “new national art for the people” (Guha-Thakurta 123) they tried to foreground the people and “People’s art” as the model of new national. Through their paintings and sketches, they present “cultural codes loaded with predominant sense of “national self-determination” (Pradhan – ii), which not only contributed to the construction of new “nation” but questions the ideals of “national” and thereby resulting “radicalization of mainstream nationalism” (Das 58). And here we reach to our destination – these two phrases “people’s art” and “radicalization of mainstream nationalism” construct the subtitle of my deliberation.

Let us begin with a quick historical overview of Bengal famine of 1943 – the painful incident of endless hunger, suffering and death. I will not discuss the phenomenon in details as much has been already discussed by a lot scholars from different perspectives to indicate the cause of the “historical wound” (Chakrabarty 21), depth of the scar and various after effects caused by the mismanagement of resources and different ramifications caused by the mismanagement; rather I will present some

of their findings before you to save the time of the presentation and of course it will save a lot of sweat of me to reconstruct the actual human condition of the famine. I would like to request to remember the word “historical would” as it will come up again towards the end of my discussion when I will try to justify my investigation and try to find out what are the significance of such investigation.

Famine inquiry Commission which is also known as Woodhead Commission has been established in 1944 to “investigate and report to the Central Government upon the causes of the food shortage and the subsequent epidemics in India, and in particular Bengal in the year 1943....”. The commission collected its data covering a period of six weeks. “During the period we heard 130 witnesses in Calcutta.....and to obtain further evidence [from several districts of Bengal] 33 official and 55 non-official witnesses were heard in rural Bengal”.(1) Though the commission pointed out some of the major causes of the Famine, yet they are not ready to accept it as a famine and considered it, as the report speaks, as mere “food shortage”. The second thing that I would like to draw your kind attention is the number of people they met – only 130 in Calcutta and 88 people in rural Bengal. How can a commission come into a conclusion with such small number of sample population? Sanjukta Ghosh in her article “Famine, Food Crisis and the survival in Calcutta 1943 -1950” published in the book *Calcutta: the Stormy Decades*(2015), edited by Tanika Sarkar and Shekhar Bandyopadhyay, captures the dilemma of describing famine as “food shortage” that “[f]amine was culturally embedded in the city’s consciousness, the horror of which evoked a battle of consciousness in the bureaucratic circle. The moral tension was evident in the verbal struggle to agree on a descriptive nomenclature that would justify the exact magnitude of the city’s food insecurities.” (221) One of the earliest study has been done by Indians was by Prasanta Chandra Mahalanabish, Ramkrishna Mukherjea and Ambika Ghosh in Statistical Laboratory in Kolkata, which is Indian Statistical Institute now, the result of which was published in *Sankhya, The Indian Journal of Statistics* in 1946 to determine “ To give a concrete idea of the economic background of Bengal famine of 1943 and its after-effects” and “To indicate the kind of results which can be obtained by socio-economic enquiries carried out by the method of sample survey”. The survey has been done in collaboration with K.P. Chattopadhyay, Head of the department of Anthropology in Culcutta University. The study had discussed, in details, the economic and other aspects during the famine period and came into the conclusion that “the

famine of 1943 was thus not an accident like an earthquake but the culmination of economic changes” (342) and “economic deterioration had set in definitely in the pre-famine period and that the famine itself was its culmination.” (342). Another important piece of work that provides significant insight of the famine is *Hungry Bengal*, a book by Prof T. K. Dutt which was published in 1944 by Indian Printing works, Lahore. Dutt opines in the introduction of the book that “Hungry Bengal is merely a shadow of hungry India.” (1) He quotes the presidential address of N.C. Chatterjee delivered at the All India Hindu students’ Conference at Amritsar in December 1943 that “due to starvation, malnutrition and disease millions of our people have perished.....From the denial policy enforced by the Governor of Bengal to the reckless purchasing schemes sponsored by the League Ministry, it has been a tragic chapter of bungling, inefficiency and corruption..... The horrible sights of death and desolation would melt the stoutest heart.” (4) In his book *Famines in colonial India: Some Unofficial Historical Narratives* (Delhi 2007) Brahma Nand incorporated the study of J.K.Bose, a professor from the Department of Anthropology in Calcutta University who described his experience when he was collecting “facts from Ballygunge area within Municipality of Calcutta....” (Bose 423) and adjacent areas and offered the “story” of some of the destitute “who were daily visiting the gruel kitchen.” (423) His conclusion showed that he is apprehensive about the agricultural labourers, and pointed out that “our enquiry among them in the villages of 24-Parganas and Howrah reveals how this agricultural labour class is in the verge of extinction and if proper arrangements to send these people to their original villages are not made in time, Bengal will face the problem of disruption of the families of agricultural labourers.” (426) Due to paucity of time, I am not quoting their narratives which shows how famine caused economic impoverishment of the families of those agriculturalists or agricultural labourer, how economic downfall led to malnutrition which further leads to epidemic and death.

Most popular view of “food crisis” in any famine in general and Bengal Famine in particular has been counter argued by Amartya Sen. In his study “Starvation and exchange entitlements: a general approach and its application to the great Bengal famine” which was published in *Cambridge Journal of Economics* (Vol 1, No. 1) in 1977 argued that Bengal famine is not a case of FAD (Food Availability Decline) but a

case of “Exchange Entitlement” and by exchange entitlement he means “ the ability to change a unit of commodity x into a certain amount of commodity y.” (34) He came into the conclusion that “The failure of the government to anticipate the famine, and even to recognize it when it revealed itself, seems to have been the result largely of erroneous theories of famine causation, rather than mistakes about facts dealing with food availability.” (55) To me another observation of Sen appears as very significant. While most of the surveys and reports of the Bengal famine of 1943 largely Calcutta centric as Calcutta appears to be a nodal agency, most of the intellectuals and bureaucrats were seated there and the city suffered from a sudden influx of poverty stricken, starving people that caused enormous psychological trauma, Sen opines that “The Bengal famine was essentially a rural phenomenon. Urban areas, especially Calcutta, substantially insulated from rising food price by subsidized distribution schemes, saw it in form of an influx of rural destitute. (42) By bringing the focus from citycentric statistics, analysis and conclusions of Bengal famine to the rural Bengal, the actual epicenter, Sen’s study is a real eye-opener.

Now, it is one of the most pertinent questions in relation to my topic is what was the creative writers and artists did at that time? The answer is simple – through their brushes and pens they are creating consciousness at ground level and putting forward a space for resistance. This resistance has some definite political orientations – here I am again delimiting my discussion, as because I wanted to focus on the visual representations, I would deliberately not enter into the politics of the time, and the political orientations of the writers and poets; this can be a topic for another long lecture. However, if I do not at all mention the significant political orientations of the writers and artists and some of the literary outputs of the time, our understanding of “human condition” of the famine will remain partial. Therefore, I will only mention that much of political scenario which is needed for the understanding of the time without any bias and judgement of the rights and wrongs of the political activities. The rise of Communist Party of India (CPI) in 1930s and subsequent rise of “People’s Art” mark a significant departure from capitalist and bourgeoisie aesthetics in favour of common man’s life and their needs. The Marxist Cultural movement in Bengal gave rise to so many groups of artists, as well as so many controversies, which bear witness of, as I mentioned earlier, “ideological history of social progress” (Pradhan ii) resulting into “human brotherhood, or universal fraternity, and .....a growing demand for the

right of national self-determination (ii). Groups like Progressive Writers' Association (1936), Indian People's Theatre Association (1943), Antifascist Writers' and Artists' Association (1944) are the most illustrious example of the case and their outputs can be seen as a form of protest – “popular pressure from below in shaping the nature of national outbursts” (Das 58) which “enriched our understanding of regional variations in nationalist agitations....” (Das 58) Literary outputs of the period was very much influenced by that “popular pressure from below”. Sukanta Bhattacharya, the poet revolutionary, questions if the landlords and hoarders during the time of famine were at all human being? He declares himself as the poet of the famine:-

I am the poet of a famine  
Haunted by daily nightmares of  
Glaring images of death  
My spring I spent queuing for grub  
My sleepless nights resonating  
To the blare of ominous sirens.

The villages of Bengal abandoned, deserted and lying desolate are described in a touchy manner by Subhash Mukhopadhyay

The village has moved out to the city  
Leaving deserted homes and empty granaries behind  
The land abandoned, with the seed planted in it  
The alter of the basil, without its earthen lamp  
Wrapped in the descending darkness,  
The weed stretching over the courtyard.

Bijan Bhattacharya, notable Bengali playwright, wrote *Nabanna* (1944) (the “New Harvest”). The begging cry of the protagonist “Phyan dao go Maa” (Mother, give us the starchy liquid waste of the rice) and a skeleton figure cries from one corner to the other corner of the stage, almost mortified in hunger, touched the heart of perceptive audience. *Manvantar* (1944) by Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay, *Ashani Shanket* (*The distant Thunder*) by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, *Terosho Panchash* (1943) by Gopal Halder, *Kalo-Ghoda* (1944) by Saroj Kumar Roy Choudhury, *So many Hungers* (1947) by Bhabani Bhattacharya ..... the list can be stretches on.

In this context of literary outputs, I would specially like to mention *Hungry Bengal: A Tour through Midnapur District, by Chittaprosad, in November 1943*

(1943) by Chittaprosad Bhattacharya and *Darkening Days: Being a Narrative of Famine-Stricken Bengal* (1944) by Ela Sen which includes “Drawings from life by Zainul Abedin”. Both the books, rich with visual representations, have been banned by the then government. Chittaprosad’s book has been confiscated and almost all copies has been destroyed except one copy which has been saved by her sister who somehow managed with great difficulty to retain her copy and in 2011 Digital Art Gallery (DAG) conducted a retrospective on him in Delhi and during this a part of it has been reprinted. The catalogue of the exhibition declares that it contains “heart-wrenching sketches and drawings, alongside protests against colonialism, economic exploitation, urban poverty and depravity”. Ela Sen’s book which contains 11 of the pictures of Zainul Abedin suffered a bit better luck. Though a printed copy is not available, some of the archives offer digital version of the book. While Ela Sen wrote from the viewpoint of a woman, describing an woman and her sufferings, Abedin’s sketches heightens its impact through visuals. As some of the sketches which has been digitally restored by various digital galleries, due to copyright issues, I am not using them. I am only using those sketches of Chittaprosad and Zainul Abedin which are available in WikiArt Commons and other copyright free website.

Chittaprosad, (Slide) as the DAG website declares “A self-taught artist, poet, storyteller, and an active member of the Communist Party of India, Chittaprosad drew inspiration for his art from village sculptors, artisans as well as puppeteers. In 1943-44, he experienced the Bengal famine first-hand, resulting in his brutally honest depiction of human suffering in stark drawings and sketches made in pen and ink. These drawings and reports were published in *People’s War*, and culminated in *Hungry Bengal*, an eyewitness report comprising of written text and profuse sketches in stark black-and-white, copies of which were seized and destroyed by the British. Chittaprosad’s *Hungry Bengal*, written as a travel report through the famine stricken Midnapur district in November 1943. Its fiery image-word sequences continue to resonate as a testimony to the escalating horrors. Chittaprosad’s epic narration on the operations of mass starvation and colonial bondage commences at a railway platform:

In the crowded railway compartment on my way to Midnapur, the daily scenes on Calcutta’s pavements kept on coming back to my mind—the procession of famished, helpless living skeletons that once formed

Bengal's village society—fishermen, boatmen, potters, weavers, peasants, whole families of them; the five corpses I counted one morning in the short stretch of road between Amherst Street and Sealdah station.

Powerful and emotive, his art of caricature emerged as a statement in favour of the oppressed masses and as a denunciation of the ruling class. As a self-conscious, reflective testimony, the drawings and caricatures of this period were a forceful outcry against the tyranny of domination and an indictment of prevailing conditions. Underlying the biting humour was a compassionate humanism and his images were essentially an appeal on behalf of the labouring poor and the marginalised.” Let's have some visuals: ( Fig. 1 – 14). Zainul Abedin (Slide) was a trained artist who was appointed as a teacher in Government art school when he was himself a student there. Abedin depicted this inhuman story with very human emotions. These drawings became iconic images of human suffering. “In the terrible days of famine of 1943, the young artist....took on the role of a chronicler with paper and brush, trudging the streets and lanes of the city, with his stock of cheap paper, ink and brushes. The confident strokes of his dry brush on light coloured paper recorded harrowing images of the distresses and the starving huddling on the city's pavements, heartrending treatments of nightmares. There are times when the paper absorbs the ink, giving smooth dynamic lines a more rugged and harsher quality.” (Sen 26) (Slides)

Now, how to look at these sketches? Or how to put these sketches within the framework of alternative of “national” or as I have mentioned earlier quoting Guha-Thakurta “making of the new official art of the nation”? Let us quickly have a recapitulation of the arguments put forward by Guha-Thakurta. In her article “Locating Gandhi in Indian Art History” published in the book *Theorizing the present* (Oxford, 2011) she argued that “certain ideological thrusts and motivations in nationalisms, spearheaded by Gandhi, play themselves out in the recasting of visual forms, in redefining the notions of ‘art’ and ‘Indian-ness’, and in foregrounding the public political role of the artists.” (122) To cite examples in favour of her argument, she presented two iconic artist, Nandalal Bose and Ramkinkar Baij, both from Shantiniketan, an “orientalizing institution” (Kapoor 110). She pointed out that Nandalal Bose was given the responsibility of decoration of the venue of three



consecutive Congress – Lucknow (1936), Faizpur (1937) and Haripura (1938) and all these three Congress successfully presented “artistically designed gallery, a composite sense of an Indian heritage that brought together the ‘ancient’ and the ‘modern’, the ‘classical’ and the ‘folk.’” (137) While in Lucknow Congress, the modern has been represented by Abanindranath’s paintings, Jamini Roy’s Patachitra contributed into the ‘popular’ folk element. In the “Gram Congress of Faizpur” which is in Maharashtra, Nandalal again used the village patuas and in Haripura Congress, he used “traditional folk antecedents” (138) Guha-Thakurta opines that “Moving through the Company School folios of native ‘trades and castes’ and through Ravi Verma’s posing of exotic feminine figures from different regions, we arrive at this art historical conjecture at a novel nationalist construction of ‘authentic’ Indian types.” (138) This “authentic Indian type[s]” established Nandalal as one of the leading national artists and he was given the responsibility of decoration of Indian Constitution. Therefore, her conclusion is, to make it over simplified, the rural, traditional folk elements and popular art form depicting the people can be seen as the core of the “national” with the feeling of feel-good factors.

And here, I would like to argue, through the famine sketches of Chittaprasad and Abedin, and many other artists of Calcutta Group like Somnath Hore, Gobardhan Ash, Sudhir Khastagir, Atul Bose, Paritosh Sen, Sunilmadhab Sen, present an alternative model. Through their realist approach which shuns away the feel-good and includes marginal, impoverished famine-stricken, most of the cases nameless individuals as the core of the national. This can also be seen as, as Suranjan Das argued in some other context, “regional variations in nationalist agitations and radicalization of mainstream nationalism” (58). The Calcutta Group was not a solitary affair, the same has been seen in the cases of the Progressive group in the then Bombay, the Shilpachakra in Delhi, the Kashmir Group and the Madras Artists Group. In a conversation with Yashodhara Dalmia published in the Vol – 1 of her book *Journeys: Four Generations of Indian Artists in their own words*, Paritosh Sen, one of the founder members of the group pointed out that “... (with) Man-made famine in Bengal..... all woke up from their stupor to the grim reality.... We felt that we must create something which would grapple with the reality, and have the power and strength to confront the situation.....the aims and objective were to portray the reality around us in a language which could be adequate for the purpose....” (Dalmia 228)

Therefore, the motto was not to 'comfort' like that of Nandalal, but to 'confront' as Paritosh Sen argued. Amartya Sen, in his forward to Nikhil Sarkar's Book *A Matter of Conscience* (Originally written in Bangla in 1994 and translated into English by Sabitabrata Dutta, published in 1998 by Punashcha) commented that "the Bengal Famine of 1943 gave birth to yet another Kalki, in the form of Calcutta Group,.....promising a radical departure in art, symbolized in the logo they chose for themselves – the moving hands of a clock". (Sarkar 35) To me, they have invented a realist-modernist vocabulary which was not seen earlier in the paradigm of "national".

As I have designed my lecture, in the last section of it I would like to refer to the model of "historical wound", as suggested Dipesh Chakraborty to point out the significance of the famine sketches by Calcutta Group in general and Chittaprosad and Abedin in particular. Historical wound refers to "to speak self-consciously from within a history of having been wounded." (Chakraborty 21) He further points out that "Historical wounds are not the same as historical truth, but the latter constitute a condition of possibility for the former. Historical truths are broad, synthetic generalization based on research..... Historical wounds.... are a mix of history and memory..." (22) Therefore, its artistic representations of the past can be more accurate as, for the case of an artist, "accuracy was a matter of being 'true' to his personal experience of the past." (25) Historians observe a distance from the past to be very much objective, while an artist through his subjective "evidence of experience (26) collapses the distance as past was his experience. These sketches are the product of subjective experience, and in demand of better preservation.

