

Decolonising Starvation in Postmodern Famine: A Re-reading of Bengal Famine of 1943 from Cinematic Lens

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Abstract— *Famines were a part of Indian colonial history. It is a condition of paramount shortage of food, or want of food, hunger and starvation in a defined area or part of a country. A famine can be an economic and social phenomenon characterised by the widespread unavailability of food resources which in the absence of external aid leads to the demise of those affected. Famine scholarship has taken a conceptual shift from pre-modern to post-modern famine with Stephen Devereux's(2007) publication of The New Famine. The Bengal famine of 1943 is one among innumerable post-modern famines that made its occurrence. It is estimated to have engulfed the lives of millions of people under colonial patronage. The famine unveiled the discriminatory politics, profit driven principles of East India Company (hereafter, EIC). The chapter aims to explore how the EIC systematically destroyed the Indian agricultural system, fuelling deindustrialization in the country and ultimately making the region vulnerable to famine. In doing so, the paper shall focus on parallel cinema or new indian cinema, a movement that originated specifically in Bengal around the 1950s. Against the understanding of parallel cinema, the paper attempts to decode the politics of representation that continuously engages in redefining famine, through cinematographic art forms, such as - Mrinal Sen's Baishey Sravana (The Wedding Day) 1960, Akaler Sandhane (In Search of Famine) 1980 and Satyajit Ray's Ashani Sanket (Distant Thunder) 1973. The paper proceeds through four thematically entwined arguments. Firstly, to trace the Bengal famine of 1943 as a new famine. Secondly, to unearth the strategies of weaponisation of hunger and gradual rise of faminogenic practices in British colonial India. Thirdly, to grasp the progress of counter-cultural cinematic representation of the Bengal famine through selected films. And finally, through the meditative reading of the films, the paper tries to understand the films as an anti-imperialist force of artistic production. In doing so, the paper remains qualitative in nature, substantiated with scholarship provided by Marxist Film Theory, is employed to establish a theoretical framework. The paper therefore is divided into six interconnected sections, commencing with an introduction to famine studies and selected films and culminating with a suitable summation to support relevant claims.*



Keywords— *Post-modern famine, hunger and starvation, famine films, food insecurity, representation.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Famine is a condition of paramount shortage of food grains, or yearn for food, resulting from hunger and starvation in a defined region or geographical area of a country. It is worthwhile to note that famine has been a part of the world in history immemorial and it is considered to reside in history, but as we broaden our perspective, famine

continues to ravage the earth till present days. Some examples of recent famines are: Ethiopia, Sudan, South Africa (Malabi) and West Africa (Niger). The body of scholarship that claims, famine - a thing of the past, and present day technological improvement has brought down the chances of famine to next to nil. To counter argue that statement, The Sudan famine needs an immediate mention.

Officially recognised as the most recent famine, it is believed to have occurred in Sudan's North Darfur Region in the year 2024 as a result of prolonged war, conflict and human displacement. Both published in the year 2009, works like, *Six Months in Sudan* by James Maskalya and *War Child* by Emmanuel Jal, narrates the disturbing scenario of a war torn Sudan at the brink of famine. Diving into the paradox of persistent famine in the contemporary world, authors like Stephen Devereux(2007) in *The New Famines: Why Famines Persist in an Era of Globalization* makes a distinction between the 'old' and 'new' famines. In elaborating on the concept of old famine, Devereux alludes to the Malthusian theory of population growth. Thomas Robert Malthus, an English Economist in his renowned work *An Essay on the principle of the population*(1798) propagated population growth as geometric progression, while the food production as arithmetic progression. Therefore, the world witnesses a shortage of food supply with a rising population. Categorised famines, earthquakes, floods and other disasters as 'positive checks' by nature, in maintaining a balance. Although the theory was developed keeping in mind a pre-industrial Britain which did not undergo globalization, technical advances in food production, green revolution and enhanced mass transportation, a shortcoming persisted. While in the old famines the crisis happened due to disruption of the food system as a result of natural calamities (earthquake, flood, drought etc), resulting in unavailability of food, in the new famine, it was more access and entitlement prone. With an understanding that the natural calamities today, if not prevented, can be supervised and controlled more efficiently- with the progression of industrialization and globalization, commencement of the Green Revolution in the mid-20th century, new farming technologies, high-yielding varieties, improvised irrigation systems which led to a substantial upsurge in food production providing a framework capable of combating hunger, wide-spread starvation and famines. Despite the success in agrarian field and food management, the causes of famine in the post twentieth century have undergone a paradigm shift, from-environmental vulnerability to political instability. Devereux's, 'New famines' or post-modern famines, are therefore, mostly political in nature, and hence, preventable. If one were to think that famines are preventable social and political phenomena rather than natural disasters then who should bear the accountability? Making both the Sudan's and the Bengal's famine (1943) as politically motivated and economically crafted *new famines*. Concentrating on the subject matter, why did such a momentous number of population, one of the largest in the annals of history of famines in the world, had to suffer and die in 1943?

Objective

The objective of the paper, therefore, is: (1) to look into the strategies of weaponisation of hunger and gradual rise of faminogenic practices in British colonial India. (2) to trace the Bengal famine of 1943 as a new famine. (3) to unearth the politics of representation of the Bengal famine through counter cultural cinematic art forms (4) And lastly, to see how select films challenge the established narratives and therefore, become an anti- imperialist force of artistic production.

The refusal to acknowledge poverty, starvation and famine in the everydayness of Bengali geography has been a part of a bigger narrative in colonial politics. Although Bengal has faced vulnerability repeatedly in the past, (1770, 1873) but the famine of 1943, popularly called *Panchaser Manwantar* (Famine of Fifty), alludes to the Bengali calendar year of 1350 has been the most recent one. While Bengal and independent India has been rescued from the clutches of recurrent famines post its independence, it is worthwhile to note India has shamefully ranked number 102nd out of 123rd countries in the Global Hunger Index 2025. Focusing on the subject matter, the Bengal Famine of 1943 under British imperialism; among many other things, was essentially a repercussion of the geo-politics of the second world war. Never recognised or labeled as a famine, until recently the dark chapter of the history remains unnoticed in pages of history textbooks. Rightly observed by British anthropologist Alex de Waal in *Coverup Playbook* (2025) where Waal opines that governments of powerful countries weaponise hunger and sustain starvation on weaker nations by deliberate political refusal in naming it, therefore barring the nation from global help. As a British colony, India witnessed the beginning of the Second World War in 1939 and its cumulative result of economic, social, and natural factors led to the outbreak of the 1943 famine. While Colonial governance performed at the peak to erase the 'slow violence' Nixon (2011) of the 1943 famine, writers in Bengali language such as Bijon Bhattacharjee, Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay, Kaji Nazrul Islam, Sukanta Bhatterjee, Bhowani Sen and anglophone writers and artists, such as: Ella Sen, Zainul Abedin, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Freda Bedi, Somnath Hore, Sunil Janah, Chittaprosad among many others offered counter discursive art that formed anti-imperialist cultural resistance.

The films as a medium were essentially moulded as 'counter-discourse', a term coined by Richard Terdiman(1985) in his famous work *Discourse/Counter-Discourse: The Theory And Practices of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth Century France*. Counter-discursive art forms showed resistance to dominant strains of established discourse posting an alternative, therefore,

they were popularly known as alternative cinema. Published in 1996, Susan Hayward in *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*, traces the conception of the idea of counter-cinema to the 1920s, imbued in the practice of questioning Hollywood's hegemonic cinematic representations. To historically locate the beginning of counter discursive cinema in Bengal, mention should be made of Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* (1955) which paved the way to a different kind of art form secluded from concepts of accepted entertainments. *Pather panchali* not only acknowledges the everydayness of Bengali poverty, but also paves way to death by starvation which later on flowers the blooming of famine films.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Published in 2016, Aamir Mufti's *Forget English!: Orientalisms and World Literatures* famously questioned the role of language as a means to reach the world stage. Mufti's dialogues became significant in the context of Bengal famine's cultural production as most of what came to be known as 'Bengal Famine literature' were written in Bengali, a regional language which does not enjoy the free mobility into world literature. On the other hand, Cormac O Garda's 2005 publication *Eating People Is Wrong* and Mike Davis's (2000) *Late Victorian Holocausts*, insignificantly address the same famine but somewhat enjoys a wider readership. While precious works by Bengali language authors and artists such as Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, Sukanta Bhatterjee, Kaji Nazrul Islam, Bhowani Sen and others fail to grab attention in a broader spectrum.

In discussing the visual representation of Bengal famine, works on various poets and artists, mention should be made of Bhabani Bhattacharya's immediate publication of famine texts such as- *So Many Hungers!* (1947) and *He Who Rides the Tiger* (1954). While the former, questions the very fragmented meaning of the word 'hunger' and shows it not only denotes the want of food but also human dignity. In the later, Bhattacharya directly discusses the hegemonic dominance of caste in Bengal and greater India. While caste based experiences are explored in Bhatterjee's work, Ela Sen takes upon herself the responsibility of representing woman centric experiences in her story collection *Darkening Days* (1944). The collection also portrays the drawing of Zainul Abidin, a Bangladeshi artist famously called *Shilpachariya* or the Master of Arts. From the perspective of a poverty stricken artist, Sukanta Bhatterjee echoes the pain of a hungry generation in his famous poem *Hey Mahajibon* published in *Charpatra* (1947), a collection of poetry. The poem's immortality lies in the metaphoric comparison of the shape of the full moon

to a scorched roti, while Nazrul Islam, the national poet of Bangladesh goes on to write various poems on the subject, such as *Daridrot* or Poverty, *Amar Koifyot* or My alibi and *Mrityukshuda* or The Hunger of Dead.

From a Marxist economic perspective, groundbreaking work has been done by Nobel laureate Amartya Sen. Published in 1981, *Garibi Aur Akaal* (Poverty and Famines: An essay on Entitlements and Deprivation) puts forth his 'entitlement approach'. In an Austenian tone, he ironically names the second chapter of his work 'Concepts of poverty' explaining, "To live in poverty might be sad, but to offend or [be] hurtful to society, creating problems for those who are not poor' is, it would appear, the real tragedy" (p 9). This is specifically true while looking at the 1943 Bengal famine. Because the hunger cries of millions in Calcutta were mostly ignored because helping the poor never served profitable to those in power. Sen rightly concludes, famines occur not from a direct decline in the availability of food but from what he calls "The failure of Exchange Entitlements", which signifies not a shortage of food in an absolute sense but rather a breakdown in the ability of the most vulnerable and marginalised section to provide for an adequate exchange value. The pain of hungry millions is heard while the logic of the socio-economic system determines that without entitlements, food can go to waste while people starve and die. Drawing on Sen's assessment of entitlements, other modern famine scholars, such as Sugata Bose (2009) in his, *Pondering Poverty, Fighting Famine: Towards a New History of Economic Ideas*, Mike Devis and Meghnad Desai opinions that same. Although other scholars such as Paul Greenrough's in his *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943- 44* refutes Sen's theory by stating the famine against the backdrop of a longer decline in the Bengal peasantry.

Historical Background of the Bengal Famine

Bengal has faced vulnerability repeatedly in the past, (1770, 1873) but the famine of 1943 among many other things, was essentially a result of the second world war. As British colonial India witnessed the beginning of the Marxist movement in the 1930s, the ideology got further intensified by the commencement of the Second World War (1939), Nazi invasion of Germany (1941), Quit India movement (1941), Japan's attack on India (1942), Bengal Famine (1943), and many mass uprisings in the post war period like the Naval Mutiny (1946), movement by INA (1945), Tebhaga and Telangana revolts (1946), and Indian independence coupled with the partition (1947). Published in 2019, David Lockwood records in *Calcutta Under Fire: The Second World War Years* a brief history of the political instability caused by world war II. By the end of 1942, Lockwood records, the city of Calcutta was under perpetual

threat of Japanese air strikes which eventually took place on 20th December. He elaborately details the happenings of the following months- frequent air raids, and subsequent migration of thirty lakh people in and out of the city. Reports of acute shortage of coal and paper. The sharply ascending prices of commodities and the utter chaos in the society. Nature's inconsistency worsened the existing situation with a devastating cyclone hitting southwest Bengal, particularly in Midnapore and the 24 Parganas. On top of which, Churchill's Denial policy was enforced. The cumulative result of economic, social, and natural factors led to the outbreak of the 1943 famine. While Colonial governance performed at the peak to erase the slow violence of the 1943 famine, artists like Bijon Bhattacharjee, Ella Sen, Kaji Nazrul Islam, Sukanta Bhattacharjee among many others produced art as an anti-imperialistic force of artistic production.

Representation of strategies of weaponisation of hunger and gradual rise of faminogenic practices in British colonial India

Ashani Sanket, a masterful depiction by Satyajit Ray of the Bengal famine of 1943, is a brilliant cinematic adaptation of the literary work by the renowned Bengali author, Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay. In a strong sense, Ray portrays the binarism of old and new, at one end is the pre-famine golden Bengal while at the other, is post-apocalyptic dystopian famine. The opening shots of the film sets out a vivid picture of nature in its full glory, with lush greenery and abundance filling the countryside of Bengal. As Andrew Robinson highlights in *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye – The Biography of a Master Film-Maker* (1989), “Distant Thunder is more than just famine: it shows the eclipse of a whole way of life.” (223). The protagonist, Gangacharan (played by Soumitra Chatterjee), along with his wife Angana (played by Bobita), moves to a new village, leaving behind a small, nameless town. Gangacharan quickly rises to prominence within the rural community due to his inherited caste privileges. As an upper-caste Brahmin, he exerts an ideological power and dominance on the minds of the villages.

The articulation of hunger takes place in part through the central character - Gangacharan. Gangacharan, settles in his new habitat with his beautiful wife Angana. The film opens with women folk of the village taking a dip in the nearby pond, creating a playful bond between and across caste barriers where Angana also participates being aware of her inherent superior strand. They laugh, gossip and share a delicate bond of female solidarity. Moti, Angana's close friend/acquaintance from the past is introduced to the narrative through Angana's eyes. Even in distress, she finds a sympathetic listener in Moti as she shares the news of the

recent birth of her daughter and her struggle with hunger and poverty. Though it is the first time the concept of poverty is introduced in the film, contemporary audiences of the 1970s would recognise and relate the hunger experience of Moti with their own memory of the famine.

Ashani Sanket, produced in 1973 directly criticizes the efforts of prioritizing the war. The film depicts the onslaught of famine and starvation with the character of Dinobondhu Mukherjee, an old frail brahmin from the neighbouring village, dressed in a dirty dhoti and a pair of sturdy shoes. Pertaining to age he fails to find work and depends on others' help for the means of existence. He invites himself in the domestic space of Gangacharan's household in his absence and declares his caste in the narrative, even before voicing his name. (*Ashani Sanket* 00:30:55- 00: 30.5). Providing the audience with a glimpse of the hegemony of caste in 19th century rural Bengal. Dinobondhu demands some food from Angana, whom he calls “Ma laxmi”. According to the Hindu mythology, Lakhmi is the wife of Vishnu. She is the goddess of prosperity and fortune. By placing Angana as Lakhmi, Dinobondhu pushes her psychologically into a state/role of an ideological provider. The Brahminical patriarchal society conferred upon women a social responsibility to feed guests (Brahmin) in the household as long as he/they wishes to stay. Catering to their needs was believed to have brought prosperity in domestic space. In the background, Ray depicts the famine with a camera spanning out on human-like figures walking on foot with hunger cries of children and adults alike. The golden village steadily approaches the famine giving rise to starvation and deaths, while the Laxmi of the chatterjee household disperse food and help to the mass of migrating beggars.

The reference to the old Brahmin as Dinobondhu may allude to the idea of a faithful friend in vernacular Bengali. It is through his eyes that the camera records the famine. Ironically, Dinobondhu does not have any material offerings to Gangacharan, but to the audience he remains an encyclopedia of the 1943 famine. Patiently arguing and explaining the causes and results of it. The film uses Dinobondhu as a mouthpiece to explain the inflation in rice price in the land of abundance. He talks about Japan's occupation of Burma in 1942. A year prior to the famine, Burmese was the largest supplier of rice for the rural populace of Bengal, because of their easy availability, cheap price and fatty texture, burmese rice supposedly took more time to get digested, making them ideal for physically hard working professionals. (labourers, unorganised peasants, tribals etc). Pertaining to war, the usual supply of Burmese rice was absolutely and abruptly cut off. Taken in context, Bengal also remained exposed and vulnerable for probable Japanese invasion, a “denial policy” was further

implemented in coastal areas such as Midnapur, Bakerganj, Khulna. All of these resulted in the birth of Bengal Famine.

The film spares no criticism of the government policies taken before the famine, through a conversation with Gangacharan after dinner, Dinobondho elaborates on the idea of "scorched earth policy" a common military strategy taken in times of crisis under which everything utilitarian is destroyed and systematically used by the government. The policy was renamed as boat denial policy to make it appear in Mukherjee's term 'less incendiary' (p 66) Dinobondhu realises that the colonial government places more value on feeding the soldiers fighting the war rather than the ordinary subjects directly alluding to the idea of weaponisation of food where some are prioritised over the other. The scene briefly cuts focusing on a pair of torn shoes won by Dinobondho, probably pertaining to the lost prosperity of the old brahmin and at large of Bengal. Reminiscenting the past where a person who once could afford a pair of shoes (which was a marker of luxury and not utility) was forced to beg for a living. While the famine did not paint the lives of the characters wholly, it nonetheless destroyed the financial capabilities of many.

A pivotal moment in the film sharpens our attention is the death of a character, Moti. As food becomes a political weapon, the film records the gradual journey of nameless beggars migrating to Calcutta in hope of food, although death touches the scene only through the character of Moti. As in her post-partum fragile health, she succumbs to starvation. Moti is not a typical migrant woman; she does not walk away from her "home", instead she is forced to dislocate under the circumstances like millions of others. In the process, she became a representative of an analytical outlook on the crisis in the life of Bengali peasantry and a victim of British colonial faminogenic practise.

The concept of 'border' plays a very crucial role in our understanding of Ray's work, as he portrays it as a socially constructed boundary which Moti crosses due to hunger. Driven by the need for food, she migrates from one village to another. Towards the end she pulls herself for help, with a glazed look she unwillingly tries to glance at the food. She manages feebly to raise her hand with five extended fingers gesturing she has not eaten a morsel for five days. Unfortunately due to malnutrition, exhortation and lack of rest she draws her last breath right in front of them. A poignant moment unfolds in the narrative when two naked, pot-bellied children, hiding behind a tree, quickly snatch the plate of food placed near her lifeless body. This iconic scene in Ray's film captures the fragility of human morality, illustrating how rapidly it dissipates when faced with a crisis.

Moti becomes the face of crisis as it is the only death caused by hunger that directly occurs in the film, serving as a harbinger of the countless others that are to follow. Ray's *Ashani Sanket* translates as "Distant Thunder" in English, a title that symbolically alludes to the looming storm of starvation-induced deaths. Here, 'thunder' symbolically signifies the innumerable deaths at bay. The devastation is taking place out of sight. Therefore, the film does not chronicle the death and destruction of famine as such, but palate out its causes.

From a Marxist perspective, *Ashani Sanket* serves as a cinematic critique of class hierarchy, economic disparity, and the structural violence of colonial capitalism. *Ashani Sanket*, offers a significant insight into the complexities of human desire and aspirations through the character of the greedy, scrupulous rational master. The character of Biswas Babu, the ration master is emblematic of the intermediary bourgeois subject who sustains the colonial-capitalist order. His scrupulous rationality and avaricious greed mirrors the ideological conditioning of the *petit bourgeoisie*, whose moral consciousness is subordinated to the imperatives of economic rationalism. Biswas Babu's insistent alignment with the structures of state-sanctioned distribution reveals how the colonial apparatus operates through localized agents ensuring the maintenance of class divisions. His eventual confrontation with the impoverished desiluted villages dramatizes a quintessential Marxist dialectic, the struggle of class antagonism between the *haves* and the *have-nots*, between those who control the means of distribution and those whose labor sustains the social order yet who are systematically excluded from its benefits.

From a Marxist economic perspective, groundbreaking work has been done by Nobel laureate Amartya Sen. Sen, in his essay *Poverty and Famines: An essay on Entitlements and Deprivation* (1981) puts forth his 'entitlement approach' providing a better framework to analyze the causes of poverty and the larger context of famine. In an Austenian tone, he ironically introduces the second chapter of his work *Concepts of poverty* by saying, "To live in poverty may be sad, but to 'offend or [be] hurtful to society', creating 'problems for those who are not poor' is, it would appear, the real tragedy (p 9). He concludes, famines occur not from a decline of available food but from what he calls "The failure of Exchange Entitlements", which signifies that a famine is not a shortage of food in a literal sense but rather an inability experienced by certain societal groups to afford the grains at the given market price.. So, millions starve and perish while the logic of the socio-economic rules constrain food to people in need. Even if it means the food would go to waste, it should not be distributed among the masses. With Sen's groundbreaking

analysis, the understanding of famine as a natural event has taken a step into a man-made disaster.

It is the film that raises some of the important questions: 'Why did the starving peasants attack the ration master?' While most scholarly work focus of peasant passivity, including the article by Rajender Kaur, titled: *The Vexed question of Peasant passivity: nationalist discourse and the debate on peasant resistance in literary representations of the Bengal famine of 1945* which talks about the lack of peasant agency to form a voice, the film *Ashani sanket* shows otherwise. The answer is well debated by Sen in *Poverty and Famines*. Failure to buy the basic necessities resulted from the absence of four entitlements mentioned by Sen in the essay, which are: production based, trade based, inheritance and transfer oriented, and labour based. Since, the marginalised section of the agrarian peasantry had neither of the entitlements, they perished to the famine. Interestingly, the labour oriented entitlement failed to suffice because of the implementation of the denial policy, which gravely restricted activities in rural Bengal, including the rice denial policy that exacerbated the famine. The government's insistence on procuring food grains for Calcutta, a decision that proved to be fatal for the rural poor. This led to the emergence of a monopolistic hegemony over rice-stockists called 'aratdar' and their agents 'faria' and a nexus between the grain dealers, ration masters, money lenders, land-lords and Mahajas. They absorbed the available rice from the entire country-side and stocked it in their households. The character, Biswas babu played by Ramesh Mukherjee, in the film is one such example of a self-absorbed individual in the exploitative system.

Progression of counter-cultural narrative of famine causation through Mrinal Sen's films: *Baishey Sravana* and *Akaler Sondhane*

The past does not return precisely as it was; it arrives in a different semblance. One of the many differences noticed while analysing *Asani Sanket*, *Baishey Sravana* and *Akaler Sondhane* against one another is its treatment of the famine narrative. While *Asani Sanket* hints at the impending catastrophe of famine, *Baishey Sravana* represents the famine in its entirety and the last, *Akaler Sondhane* unveils the process of producing a historical scenario, constructed against the past and the present. One of the earliest works on the dystopian literary genre, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) records an interesting buildup which inspired many writers of dystopian and disaster literary genre, including that of Amalendu Chakraborty and Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay from whose novels Ray and Sen makes their classic cinematic adaptations.

The dystopian and disaster literary genre, like that of famine testimonies, treat the imminent disaster, in three distinctive phrases. The first: disbelieve, the second: confrontation and the last: disillusionment. As famine-like conditions began to manifest, the illiterate peasantry and lower echelons of the rural villages failed to comprehend the magnitude of the impending danger. False consciousness, a key concept in Marxist theory, lay hold of a mode of misrecognising the true nature of the events. The distorted understanding of reality made it even arduous for people to survive and overcome the danger. With the hegemonic ideology of religion, with their sightless faith in the Almighty and the government, they wholeheartedly believed nothing so harsh can actually happen to them. In the immediate pre-famine phase, local brahmins and priests were called to perform miracles to rid the village of impending evils. There was also a popular myth that the city of Calcutta is an utopia locale where food and shelter abides, therefore Calcutta witnessed overnight migration of millions of desolites who came to be "saved" by the colonial government. The third and last phase, disillusionment happened after they came to terms with their existing scenarios, no relief no shelter dying on the streets like animals. Sen witnessed the Great Famine of 1943 from a very close range during a deeply formative and emotional period of his life. Dipankar Mukhopadhyay's *Mrinal Sen 60 years in Search of Cinema* (2009) records a detailed journey of the filmmaker's footing and gradual turn from a humanistic towards a more mature social-political filmmaking. At the tender age of twenty, he watched the heartbreaking deaths of hundreds on the streets of Calcutta. His acute sense of anger, frustration and helplessness has found its expression in films like *Baishey Sravana* and *Akaler Sandhane*.

The narrative of *Baishey Sravana* embodies a thematic similarity with Arthur Miller's greatest American tragedy, *Death of a Salesman* (1949). Like Miller's Loman, Sen's protagonist Priyonath's livelihood is threatened after an unfortunate train accident, he sustains fractures on his leg and realizes the company to which he has dedicated his entire career offers neither continued employment nor support. Upon losing his job under the pretext of disability, his marital relationship takes a major turn. The famine inexorably walks into his life in the second part of the film. With the deadly cyclone that hit Midnapore on 16th of October, 1942. The unsteady equilibrium of the already disturbed supply of food grains was further dismantled by the cyclone. Succession of three tidal waves hit the coastal regions of Western Bengal, primarily Midnapore and North 24 parganas, causing loss of 800 square miles. Livelihood of people directly affected, food grains completely destroyed. (Famine Inquiry Commission, 1945, pp. 32, 66)

The film beautifully captures the dangerous effects of the cyclone which momentarily separates the young couple, kills the mother, ravages the village carnival and brings death and destruction. The village carnival plays a significant role in preserving the pre-famine bliss where laughter of children, sounds of bangles, tinkling of jewelleries had an atmosphere of joy and festivity rightly described in the borrowed phrase from Rabindranath Tagore's famous poem, *Amar sonar bangla* (my golden Bengal).

Railway as a Troop to Fortune and Loss

One of the key icons in the film is the use of railway transportation. The Famine enquiry Commission of 1880 summarized:

"It is to the future extension of railways that we look the most complete justification of our belief that the trade of the country may be confidently left to provide for the supply of food in time of scarcity[...] with the growth of these means of communication and their continued use, all the requirements of every part of the country will be met by the natural operation of trade, without the necessity of interference on the part of the government." (1880, p. 63)

Despite the ornamental promises, the introduction of railways and modern transportation failed to rescue the remotest area from the grasp of poverty and recurring famines but as witnessed, it did not only failed to provide for those in times of need but also alleviated the regional imbalance in terms of material availability. The train imagery has been repeatedly used in the narrative trope exploring different scenarios: in the beginning of the film, the train journey is Priyonath's workplace as he is a local salesman (*feriwala*), bringing happiness, money and sustenance to the family. His success in selling *alta* drops significantly with the accidental death of his mother, after which he repeatedly misses the train. The train which is his workplace symbolically suggests the disappeared token of fortune for everlasting bliss. It is the same train journey which causes the accident and therefore the disability in the life of the protagonist making the family miserable. In the backdrop of 1943, the prices of rice sores the sky, military vehicles, airplanes replace the bullockarts and become a frequent scene of the broken roads. Beyond the direct relevance with the main plot, the happenings in the background constitute a very significant message that helps the audience figure the fate of the state and the country.

An inescapable part of hegemonic discourse of patriarchy is the bond of a man and his vehicle, which continues to the urban present. As Priyonath parts away with his beloved cycle, in it subtly hinted at the audience that the household has reached its financial limits, already

having sold off Malati's gold jewellery and other valuables. With the cycle being sold off his hard earned sense of identity as a *feriwala* is also passed onto a defeated/dejected persona who not only failed at his work, but also failed as a husband/provider for his family. As he ironically questions the wife : "who is going to give work to a person with a disability?" (1:10:13) For ultimately, the narrative of questioning with Priyonath's situation as a point with which Sen's *bhadrolok* and middle class audiences are required to identify in order to recognise the helplessness.

The same scene puts forth the problem of hoarding, villagers protest for the unavailability of food grains to the local ration distributor, to which irritatingly the distributor remarks: "Are there no laws in the country?" as the scene concludes with priyonath's haunting question "which law has sanctioned the letting of citizens die of starvation, in the country?" (Baishey Sravana 1:13:06)

Akaler Sandhane

In *Akaler Sandhane* (In Search of Famine), Sen thematically tries a historical reconstruction of the starving masses. Ironic in its naming because post-independent India, itself was/is marked by constant poverty, sickness and underdevelopment. The film produced forty years postdating the famine of 1943, captures the horrors of the past, singing mournfully about the forgotten preys, who had been victimised in a political famine and were killed like animals on the streets of Calcutta.

The film uses literature as a weapon to mold public opinion. It presents a dual focus narrative, as it creates a famine-struck situation in a famine over-combed place, where the recreated past seamlessly blends into the constructed present. The narrative portrayal of the film through the lens of an omniscient narrator who forms an all present critiquing eye reading the scenes through the actors on the screen, on one hand and the audience on the other. Narrative interplays between reliability and unreliability. Coupled with Sen's genius and the brutal depiction of famine-stricken Bengal the movie turns out to be one of the finest films the country has produced.

As the film opens with the director and his crew venturing to a village named Hatui, to film a movie on the great Bengal famine of 1943, almost forty years after its occurrence. Residing at a dilapidated mansion with twenty four individual rooms, of a former zamindar, the director along with the crew employs a frame narrative following the tenuous journey of reconstruction of real-life famine. The old dilapidated mansion has twenty-four to five rooms. Smita Patil, the lead of *Akaler Sandhane* while conversing with the character of the old zamindar woman played by Sen's actress wife Geeta Sen who lived in the dilapidated mansion mentions how she was married a year before the

famine and how the state of affairs were different back then. It is through the eyes of this character, it is understood how wealthy people were unaffected in famine times, such as the zamindars. Zamindars, a class that can be identified more clearly as an exploitative strata which controlled the agrarian section of rural India.

It is only after halfway through the shooting the crew, along with the audience epiphanies, that famine is an ever present reality in post-colonial Bengal countryside. Sen's fast moving narrative is laced with an irony, a pathos which only one who has seen it all is capable of recognizing. The film has all the tell-tale characteristics of a typical Sen movie: exploring poverty and complexities of human relationships; its backdrop as a sprawling dilapidated mansion, a feature that had a habit of returning to Sen's artistic canvas again and again.

Through these films, Sen disputes the dominant ideological narratives of Bengal famine by posing a challenge to over-simplified "historical facts". In the movie, the director introduces a guessing game to pass time by showing photographs of famine to the cast. Most of them assume the images are from the 1943 Bengal famine, yet the true context remains unvoiced. During the British Raj (1858–1947), there were around 25 major famines, and it is estimated that between 1770 and 1900, famines caused the deaths of 25 million Indians. This number far exceeds the 5 million deaths lost worldwide due to war.

Interestingly, the narrative of the plot that was supposed to be filmed portrayed a family of farmers owning a small plot of land who secured the lowest of the lowest in the hierarchy of class and power. The character of an old Brahmin comes and offers to buy the land off from the farmer family, so that the money can be utilised to go off to Calcutta where the government provides food. Though the incident is fictional, records of this cruel practice have been documented in various literature on Bengal where the farmers in the pre-famine phase were often forced to sell off the last scrap of land and join the army of landless agricultural migrants.

Reality of the past experience of the 1943 famine and the film blurs into a space marked by mutual experience of the two women, the actress and the domestic help, Durga who is hired to aid the crew. This crisscrossing of identities and experiences may be a part of Sen's intention to suggest that these movements are bound to overlap. When Sen's film captures the horror of famine and its gender specific experience, sex-work is often treated as a gateway to survival, overlooking its exploitative nature. Prostitution has well been accepted as a path of survival in any disaster narrative, the famine of 1943 being no exception. As in the narrative plot of the film, the actress plays the role of a

village woman turned into sex worker as the only means of survival for her child and family. She barter her dignity for some rice and grains but remains at the threshold of social acceptability as her husband demands the source of utilities, being well aware of the situation. The husband's insistent hammering for an answer to a question she knows no answer to, is a narrative irony of experiences of women who were taken advantage of, remaining afresh in every famine scenario.

III. CONCLUSION

In attempting to decode the politics of representation that goes into redefining the Bengal famine of 1943, it is widely learnt in Amartya Sen's words that the Bengal famine was essentially a rural phenomenon. It is important to understand in the question of representation, how some lives have fallen outside the construct of 'worthy'. Coming from the most marginal sections of the society, these nameless victims of a postmodern famine failed to fit in the dominant framework of a life worth saving. Therefore, the imperial administration rightfully prioritized some over the other, making the deaths of millions invisible from the pages of history. Films like *Ashani Sanket*, *Baishey Sraavana* and *Akaler sandhane* formed a part of counter-cultural production showing how some segments of the society remained untouched by the horrors of starvation.

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