



The Famine Of 1942– 1943: Its Reflection In Bengali Novels

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ABSTRACT

The famine of 1942–1943, which unfolded in the immediate aftermath of India's Partition, stands as one of the most devastating humanitarian crises in modern South Asian history. Although overshadowed by the more widely documented Bengal Famine of 1943, this famine left deep scars on the social, economic, and cultural landscape of Bengal. Its traumatic effects, widespread starvation, displacement, disease, and the breakdown of traditional rural structures found powerful expression in Bengali novels of the period. This study explores how the famine has been represented in Bengali fiction, highlighting the literary strategies employed by authors to portray suffering, resilience, and social injustice.

Bengali novelists responded to the famine with narratives that combine realism, social criticism, and psychological depth. Their works illuminate not only the physical horrors of hunger but also the moral and political failures that intensified the crisis. Novelists depict the collapse of agrarian livelihoods, the indifference of the ruling authorities, and the exploitation faced by the rural poor. They also foreground themes of human dignity, survival instincts, and the complex emotional experiences of individuals caught amidst scarcity. Through rich characterization and vivid descriptions of rural Bengal, these novels serve as testimonies of collective trauma while simultaneously critiquing structural inequality.

Furthermore, famine-themed Bengali novels provide a critical lens on the Partition-era disruptions, demonstrating how socio-political turmoil and communal tensions worsened food insecurity. In doing so, they document a crucial period of transition in Bengal's history, offering insight into the region's evolving identity. The literary portrayals of the 1942–1943 famine thus transcend mere storytelling; they function as socio-historical archives that preserve the memory of suffering and resilience. This study underscores the importance of Bengali novels in understanding the human dimensions of the famine, revealing how literature becomes a space for remembrance, moral reflection, and resistance against systemic injustice.

Keywords: Bengal Famine (1942–1943), Bengali Literature, Partition-era Fiction, Socio-economic Crisis, Trauma and Memory, Famine Representation, etc.

Introduction:

The Bengal Famine of 1942–1943, though less frequently discussed than the catastrophic famine of 1943, stands as one of the most defining humanitarian crises in the early years of independent India and Pakistan (East Bengal). Occurring during a period of intense social restructuring, mass displacement, and political turbulence, this famine unfolded in the shadow of Partition, communal violence, and the administrative transition from colonial governance to newly formed nation-states. The famine did not strike suddenly; rather, it was the culmination of structural failures, continuing food scarcity from the previous decade, refugee influx, inflation, political mismanagement, and the breakdown of traditional agrarian systems. Its impact was especially severe in rural Bengal, where millions faced acute starvation, disease, homelessness, and economic ruin. As with earlier famines in Bengal, the tragedy of 1942–1943 left deep marks on society, shaping collective memory, cultural expression, and literary imagination.

Bengali literature, with its long tradition of socially engaged writing, responded sensitively to this tragedy. Novelists of post-Partition Bengal, both in West Bengal and East Bengal (later Bangladesh), captured the lived experiences of starvation, displacement, exploitation, and moral collapse caused by the famine. These narratives do more than document historical suffering; they critically engage with the socio-political structures that produced and intensified the crisis. Through powerful storytelling, vivid imagery, and psychologically rich characters, Bengali novels portray the famine not simply as a natural calamity but as a human-made disaster rooted in systemic neglect, flawed governance, class exploitation, and political upheaval. Novelists reframed the famine as a literary lens through which to explore the contradictions of nationalism, state formation, caste dynamics, and the rural economy.

The famine fiction of this period, written by authors such as Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay, Manik Bandopadhyay, Narayan Sanyal, Satinath Bhaduri, and others, reflects a complex intersection of realism, humanism, and socio-political critique. Their works illuminate how ordinary people negotiated hunger, migration, loss of livelihood, and the erosion of social bonds. Many novels foreground the voices of marginalized communities, peasants, sharecroppers, daily labourers, women, and refugees, revealing how famine disproportionately affected the vulnerable. Through their narratives, writers expose the failures of the state, the indifference of the wealthy, and the exploitative practices of landlords, moneylenders, and food hoarders.

The famine of 1942–1943 is thus not only a historical event but also a cultural and literary watershed. Its representation in Bengali novels offers rich insights into how literature can function as both testimony and indictment. These novels resist the erasure of suffering by documenting lived realities that official records often overlook. At the same time, they reinterpret famine as a site of ethical questioning, exploring themes such as human dignity, survival, community breakdown, gendered suffering, and the fragility of social justice. This research paper examines how the famine of 1942–1943 is represented in selected Bengali novels, analysing the narrative strategies, thematic concerns, socio-political contexts, and literary techniques employed by writers. It investigates how novelists re-imagine the famine through realism, symbolism, allegory, and characterisation, and how these texts contribute to broader discourses on Partition, nation-building, and rural Bengal's agrarian crisis. By studying their portrayals, the paper seeks to understand how Bengali fiction transforms a historical catastrophe into a compelling literary archive that continues to inform contemporary discussions of food politics, social inequality, and human resilience.

Description:

There is a deeply emotive, poetic portrayal of famine-stricken Bengal. The following verses capture the harrowing human tragedy brought on by starvation, where the desperate plea, "Give us food," echoes across the landscape, symbolizing the collective suffering of the people. The imagery is intensely visual: frail bodies collapsing, children looking toward their mothers with their final breath, and death occurring openly on roads, forests, and fields without dignity or shelter.

The following verses juxtapose human suffering with the macabre presence of scavengers like jackals, whose "wild delight" highlights the collapse of social order and the brutality of nature during famine. The raised tail of the jackal serves as a stark symbol of death's omnipresence, emphasizing the helplessness of the starving masses.

Through its stark realism and lyrical intensity, the passage reflects the moral, social, and political failures that enabled such catastrophic loss of life. It is not merely a literary depiction but a historical testimony to the human cost of famine. The emotional tone, vivid imagery, and symbolic contrasts effectively bring out the despair, helplessness, and moral urgency associated with the famine experience. In this connection, the following verses may be exemplified:

"Anna dao go, du'muṭho anna, rob shuni shudhu chār dike, Dhaliyā porite sukumār prāṇ śesh chāōyā chāy mār dike, Kholā rājpothe, bone, prāntore. Dhukiyā dhukiyā abhāgārā more. Ūrdhwapuchchha shibādal jāy bikato-ullāse tār dike." ¹

("Give us food, just a handful of grain, A desperate cry echoes from all around. Tender young lives collapse on the ground, Their final glance turned toward their mothers, On the open highways, in forests, in fields. Wretched souls gasp and perish in agony. Meanwhile, the jackals roam with lifted tails, Howling wildly as they rush in that direction.")

The poet, through his writing, presents the dire conditions people had to face at that time due to the lack of food. Starving people collapsed and died on roadsides, and foxes and dogs would tear apart and devour those dead bodies.

When the powerful nations of the world become divided, they engage in war to demonstrate their strength. As a result, in 1939, the Second World War began, spreading across the entire world. This war caused severe social degradation, and the prices of essential goods increased sharply. Food shortages, starvation, violence against women, and selfishness became widespread. And if such conditions occur in a colonized country, nothing could be more devastating.

The British ruled India for nearly two hundred years. During this time, they plundered India's wealth and took it away to their own country. This government snatched away the people's freedom. In such circumstances, when the British enemy Japan attacked India in 1942–43, the British became even more ruthless. To resist the Japanese soldiers, they adopted several policies. As a result, the people of Bengal had to

face extreme disaster. Without any consultation with the rural people of Bengal, the British imposed their decisions forcefully upon them, which led to catastrophic consequences.

The policies adopted by the British government included the “Scorched Earth Policy,” the seizure and destruction of bicycles and boats, and the forced acquisition of homes for military use. They even forced local agents to seize rice and paddy from Bengali farmers for British military needs. Moreover, when Japan occupied Burma, rice imports from there stopped entirely. Moreover, a massive cyclone in Medinipur destroyed everything. Altogether, these events produced a horrific famine in Bengal.

Madhushree Mukherjee researched the Bengal Famine of the 1940s. She held the British government entirely responsible for the famine. According to her, the British created this famine artificially. She states:

“On 12 January 1943, during a meeting of the War Cabinet, when Amery raised the issue of India’s severe food crisis, Churchill probably did not reveal the final decisions he had in mind. Instead of sending wheat by ship, the War Cabinet preferred to send to India an official with some experience of supplying small quantities to Middle Eastern colonies, someone who would be able, by any means necessary, to extract harvests from the farmers. The topic of India seemed unusual to the Prime Minister; inwardly, he was ‘full of joy’ because he knew that he would soon be going to Casablanca to meet the American President.”²

Indeed, Churchill and the British government deliberately pushed the people of Bengal toward death through a kind of conspiracy. The cruel policies they enforced were responsible for the deaths of millions. During the month of Ashwin, the sound of the shehnai would traditionally fill the air during Durga Puja. But one year, a strange, discordant note was heard, so jarring that it hurt the ears. Upon inquiry, it was discovered that the shehnai player who performed every year had died of starvation. His entire family had also perished from hunger. In fact, no one in his neighbourhood had survived. The famine had wiped out the whole village.

Shishir learned of this from one of the organizers of the Puja. The boy said:

“What could we do? This year, we couldn’t find Haru Dom from Pirpur to play at the Puja. Not just Haru, his son Nitai, his brother Shyamu, and not a single shehnai player from Haru’s village could be found. Somehow, after much effort, we managed to bring in an inexperienced player from another village. Without the sound of the shehnai, it doesn’t even feel like Puja.

But what happened to Haru Dom? Why couldn’t you find him?

You will never find him again. They are all gone. The famine has taken their lives.”³

In the city streets, thousands of men and women could be seen lying on the pavements. Beggars went from house to house asking for leftover rice-water, scraps of food, or a coin or two. Some waited hopefully for the food distributed at the community kitchens. Among them, women were the majority, each with a child in her arms. All of them sat there in the hope of receiving something to eat. If someone wished, they gave a little; if not, these people remained hungry. Many died while waiting like this. The government showed no concern whatsoever. Nor did political leaders meaningfully step forward. Traders hoarded food items, causing prices to soar. Essential commodities were unavailable in the open market, and many could not afford the high-priced goods sold in the black market. As a result, they stood in long queues at ration shops, yet even there, obtaining supplies was uncertain. Ration dealers secretly sold the goods on the black market. People standing in line often quarrelled among themselves, sometimes even coming to blows. One had to stand in line from dawn, otherwise, nothing could be obtained.

Even clerks and lower-level employees were not spared from hardship. Their salaries were meagre, while the prices of rice, flour, sugar, and other necessities rose daily, but wages did not. They, too, had to join the ration lines. By the time they returned home with rationed goods, office hours had already passed. If this continued, their jobs would be in jeopardy. The worst suffering was in the coal queues. People had to wait until the supply truck arrived. If they failed to get the coal the moment the truck came, the shopkeeper would quietly sell everything elsewhere and claim that the stock was finished. This forced people to wait in line for hours, clinging to their place desperately.

“Standing in the ration line had become a habit for Abani. Those who regularly waited in the queue now recognized Abani’s figure. Even those who fought like dogs over places at the front or back of the line were eager to make room for him.”⁴

People had nothing to eat, yet during this misery, a newborn child arrived. For Gangacharan, it became nearly impossible to provide food for the infant and its mother. Desperate to save them both, he rushed to the supply office in the subdivision town, taking Khetro Kapali along with him. After travelling two to two-and-a-half *krosh*, he discovered that the quantity of food allotted for each person was extremely meagre. Even worse, the food items themselves were of very poor quality. The flour and semolina available in the market were practically inedible.

Gangacharan pleaded repeatedly with the official, hoping that, since he was a Brahmin, he might receive a little extra. But no such concession was granted to him.

“Hakim dhamoker sure bollen—Aa: ki chai?

Aata, chini, suji, ektu mishri, Oshob hobe na. Na dile more jabo huzur. Ektu doya kore, Hobe na. “Aadher sher aata hobe, ek poa suji, ek poa mishri” — bole khosh khosh kore kagojey likhe Hakim Gangacharoner hate tule diye bollen — “Jao—”⁵

(The officer scolded sharply, “Ah! What do you want?” “Flour, sugar, semolina, and a little candy...” “That won’t be possible.” “If you don’t give it, we will die, sir. Please show a little mercy—”

"It won't be possible." "You will get half a seer of flour, one 'poa' of semolina, and one 'poa' of candy." Saying this, the officer scribbled on the paper and handed it to Gangacharan, saying, "Go.")

People across the villages were dying from starvation. Those who produced crops and supplied food were themselves without food. There was no rice left in their homes. Driven by hunger, they collected leafy greens from forests and fields to survive. They caught small fish, snails, and shellfish from ponds and marshes. Many even died after eating these raw, half-cooked things. Some fled their villages entirely, going elsewhere to beg for food. Hunger forced people to abandon their homes; it drove some into wrongdoing and immoral relationships, and, in extreme cases, compelled them to take up prostitution.

In the novel *Ashani Sanket*, the younger wife of the Kapali family had spent several days without food. Eventually, she realized that dying of starvation was worse than struggling to stay alive. She went to meet Yadu Pora at the brick kiln. Yadu Pora worked as a contractor, and he arranged some rice for her. In truth, people like Yadu Pora deliberately set traps, pretending to help women until they gained their trust, and then later selling them for large sums of money.

The Kapali's young wife was saved from his clutches by Ananga-bou.

"Du'diner modhye chhoto-bou'er tiki dekha gelo na. Khoja-khuji jatheshto kora hoyeche. Kalicharon nijeo ashpaas-er grame sandhan koreche. Ananga-bou ratre bole, 'Ki holo?' Gangacharon hese bolle, 'Ki ar hobe? Se palieche sei Jadu Porar shonge, sei thekedaar byata, bhoyankor dharibaj.' 'O ma! Se ki sarbonash! Hya go, ki hobe or? Chhutkir?"

*'Oke lathi mere tarie debe shokh mitte gele. Tokhon naam lekhat hobe shahore giye, noyto bhikhe korte hobe.'*⁶

("For two days, the younger wife was nowhere to be seen. A thorough search had been carried out. Kalicharan himself had gone around neighbouring villages looking for her.

At night, Ananga-bou asked, "What happened?"

Gangacharan replied with a laugh, "What else could have happened? She has run away with that Jadu Pora, the contractor fellow, an absolute scoundrel."

"Oh my! What a disaster! But what will happen to her now? And to Chhutki?"

"She'll be kicked out once he loses interest in her. Then she'll have to get her name registered in the city, or else she'll be forced to beg.")

Many people had lived well, but once the famine began, countless individuals lost their jobs, and disaster struck their households. They were forced to sell their belongings, land, household items, and even their homes. When that was no longer enough, they borrowed money at extremely high interest rates, after which their lives took a tragic turn. This is exactly what happened to Pradyot-babu in the novel *'Manvantar'*. He had borrowed money from a Kabuliwala at interest, and when he failed to repay it, he began receiving threats. Although Brahmin woman Ghatki saved him on that occasion by paying the money, escaping one danger only drove him into another. Ghatki, of course, did not help him for nothing. She took Pradyot-babu's daughter, Gita, into her own house for prostitution. Gita's mother, helpless and desperate, told her to obey whatever the Brahmin lady said, believing that if Gita complied, they might at least have food to survive. Yet Gita believed that Ghatki was taking her to show her to a potential groom for marriage. Only extreme poverty and desperation could drive parents to such a horrific act.

"After seeing Gita's photograph, the supposed groom had sent clothes for Gita and her parents, requesting that they send the girl along with Ghatki so he could see her. He claimed it would be impossible for him to go to the slum to meet the bride. Ghatki then took her to her own house, where a secret prostitution business was run. Ghatki sold her as a commodity for that trade. ... Snatching the words out of his mouth, Gita said, 'Mother knows, Kanuda, Mother knows.'

*"She knows. She knows. Of course, she knows. Otherwise, why would she have told me, when I was leaving, Whatever the Brahmin-didi tells you, obey her, my child. If we can get a little food because of you, we may survive. Otherwise, we shall starve to death."*⁷

Although the villagers had never faced a shortage of food before, and the harvest that year was plentiful, no one understood how all the grain suddenly disappeared from the entire village. The simple, unsuspecting farmers sold their paddy for a slightly higher price; some even sold the crop while it was still standing in the fields. They thought that if they somehow managed to survive a few months with difficulty, the next harvest would arrive, and things would return to normal. But that did not happen. Instead came the famine.

*"After many kinds of complicated circumstances had unfolded, the fields finally produced crops. And the yield was good. Waves shimmered in the breeze over the lush, fresh young stalks; thick, heavy clusters of grain swayed here and there. The sight was pleasing to the eye. Yet the heart trembled. A prickling sensation of fear mixed with unease constantly whispered that this harvest would not fill their stomachs. This was not merely a harvest, not merely grain... It felt as if they had fallen into some strange trap, that some unknown misfortune was about to befall them, that hardship was closing in. None of this was normal. Everything had turned upside down; strange and confusing events were taking place. The profit that should have settled safely into their hands was turning into a loss. Who knows what this foretells, what fate awaits them?"*⁸

In the villages, there was a severe shortage of rice. Except for one or two people, no household had any rice stored. Everyone survived by eating boiled pulses, leafy greens, snails, and shellfish. Even in the village of Bhatshala, rice was extremely scarce. There, a woman named Mati Muchini came to the new settlement, to

Ananga-bou, hoping to get a little rice to eat. She had not tasted rice for many days. Before dying, she wished to eat just two mouthfuls of rice.

“Debo, tui kha kha, hyare, bhat paasni koto din re?”

Mati chokh nichu kore kotar patar dike cheye balle, pônoro-sholo din aaj suddho kochu sedhho aar puinshaak sedhho kheye achhi... Bhablam aar to morei jabo, morbar aage bamun didir barite duto bhat kheye asi. Ananga-bou chokher jol muche driptokonthe balle, Mati, tui thak aaj. Bhat toke ami kal khawabo-i. Jemon kore pari.

Mati, muchhuni-ke du din ontor jâhok duto bhat dey Ananga-bou.”⁹

(“Give, I will give you—eat, eat.

Hey, how many days has it been since you last had rice?”

Mati lowered her eyes and looked at the banana leaf, and said, “Fifteen—sixteen days now I’ve been surviving only on boiled taro and boiled Malabar spinach... I thought I would die anyway, so before dying, I wanted to come to the Brahmin lady’s house and eat two mouthfuls of rice.”

Wiping her tears, Ananga’s wife said firmly, “Mati, you stay today. I will feed you rice tomorrow, no matter how I manage it.”

Ananga’s wife somehow provides Mati, the Machhini (fisherwoman), with two servings of rice every other day.”)

But Mati eventually died from starvation. Her death cast terror into the hearts of the entire village.

In Subodh Ghosh’s novel *Tilanjali*, Abaninath sends Shishir to the village to unite the people. The starving villagers were encouraged to seize the hoarded food from the grain merchant’s warehouse. Even with empty stomachs, the skeletal people tried to rise, following Shishir’s words. But they failed. They could not overpower the merchant’s strong goons, and the police were there as well. Shishir eventually abandoned his mission and fled.

“The next day, before noon, crowds of starving people surrounded the granary of Jiyanpur. They would not move unless rice were given. From afar, the Jiyanpur police station merely observed the scene and smiled silently. The warehouse workers burned sacksful of dried chilies, releasing choking smoke everywhere. They filled syringes with boiling water and sprayed it on the crowd. Several dogs barked endlessly, as if protesting the grotesque cruelty unfolding before them.”¹⁰

In the Medinipur region, a terrible cyclone had killed many people and animals. The fields were buried under layers of mud and sand; whatever crops had survived were eaten by insects. Those who remained alive suffered from both hunger and thirst, as even drinking water had turned salty. Believing that they might survive in Calcutta, many left with their children for the city. The roads, pavements, and open fields of Calcutta became crowded with starving people. This tragic reality is reflected vividly in the novel ‘*Manvantar*’.

“A few people from Medinipur had their houses destroyed into heaps of mud; cattle swept away; tidal waves had covered the land under piles of sand. There was no food, nor even any way to quench their thirst, for the water had become saline. From far-off Medinipur, they had come in search of food. Driven by hunger, the little girl went at dawn to a household door to beg for leftovers, with her frail brother following behind. In that state, while crossing the road, a lorry ran over them.”¹¹

The moneylenders and hoarders had hidden rice away in their warehouses. They released far less rice into the market than was needed. Ordinary middle-class and lower-middle-class people had no ability to buy rice at the high prices of the black market. The rice that traders concealed is revealed in the statement of Kanai’s student, Ashok:

“...Do you know what my father was saying? The most profitable time for the war market is coming now. All this time was just preparation, especially for the business of rice, flour, and sugar. My father was laughing as he said, ‘If the keys to our warehouse go missing for just one week, then on the eighth day no cooking fire will burn in Bengal.’”¹²

When Japanese troops occupied Burma, rice exports from Burma came to a halt. The British government implemented several policies to resist Japan, such as the “Scorched Earth Policy,” seizing or destroying boats, confiscating bicycles, preventing cultivation, and taking away homes and lands for military needs. As a result, complete chaos ensued. People were left utterly confused, not knowing where to go or what to eat. The British government made all these decisions without arranging any alternative support for the people. Gopal Halder presents this situation in his novel *Panchasher Path*:

“Mr. Sen laughed and said: Bluff! Dr. Majumdar, absolute bluff! What will they do? What power do they have? It is a military order. Our magistrate has been instructed directly by the Governor that fulfilling the defence requirements comes first, and everything else later. What can the ministers do? This removal of boats, seizing motor cars and bicycles, handing them over to the police, these matters are being discussed between them and the military.

...When they take away the farmlands, when they seize the boats, what will be the result? Trade in the villages will come to a halt.”¹³

The people of Bengal seemed to be trapped in a vice. On one side was nature, on the other human actions. The poor, the labourers, the peasants, the fishermen, all these classes were being destroyed. Meanwhile, the so-called upper-class people continued doing whatever they pleased. Young women became their prey.

Women were reduced to objects of pleasure. Survival was impossible; even mere existence was becoming unattainable. Bijoy da wrote to Neela in a letter:

"Let me just say this much: there is hardly any difference here between earth and sky. It is the month of Magh, yet I see that the paddy has almost vanished. Last year's denial policy, this year's crop failure, and over it all, the black-market hands covered in dark cloth are pulling away the rice, just the way a lustful man drags away an adolescent girl for vile, demonic pleasure. ...People are dying; in groups, they are fleeing the country, leaving their wives and daughters behind as they escape. Children are being sold, especially daughters."¹⁴

Altogether, the extreme disorder that arose in Bengal in 1942–43 caused hundreds of thousands of people to die simply because they had nothing to eat.

Amartya Sen, in his book *Development as Capability*, quotes Churchill's remarks. Churchill never admitted any fault on the part of the British. Instead, he placed all the blame on the Indians. Regarding the Bengal famine of 1943, Churchill's infamous comment was that it was due to:

"The tendency of the natives to breed like rabbits."¹⁵

Elsewhere, Churchill made another infamous remark:

"Indians are the beastliest people next to the Germans."¹⁶

In truth, policies shaped by men like Churchill, uncivilized, cruel, selfish, and predatory, were among the principal causes of the famine. Neither Churchill nor the British government suffered any loss; rather, they profited by exploiting the people of this land. But India, particularly Bengal, paid a devastating price. Millions of lives were swept away. People could never have imagined that they would die of starvation, especially those who produced the very grain that fed the nation. They were the cultivators, the providers of food. Yet these very food-givers perished.

The combined conspiracy of the contemporary British government, the landlords of Bengal, the moneylenders, and the merchants led to the deaths of countless people in Bengal. Parimal Goswami referred to this tragedy as the "*Great Famine*."

Findings

The study reveals that the Famine of 1943 (also known as *Panchasher Manvantar*) resulted not merely from natural causes but from a complex intersection of colonial policies, wartime disruptions, economic mismanagement, and social inequality. The uploaded document emphasizes that the famine was largely man-made, triggered by British wartime strategies such as the Denial Policy, forced confiscation of boats and transport, destruction of resources, and failure to stabilize food supply chains. These policies disrupted rural livelihoods, restricted mobility, and intensified scarcity.

The document finds that food hoarding by traders, landlords, and *mahajans* significantly worsened the crisis. Artificial scarcity created opportunities for profiteering, making rice inaccessible to the poor. The black-market economy flourished as legitimate markets collapsed, pushing the rural poor into extreme starvation. Even middle-class families could not afford rising prices, leading to rapid pauperization across Bengal.

Social breakdown is another major finding. The famine forced people into migration, begging, and degrading survival strategies, including theft, prostitution, and selling children, showcasing the moral and structural collapse of society. Women suffered disproportionately, becoming vulnerable to exploitation, trafficking, and abuse. Literary representations in Bengali novels, such as *Manvantar*, *Ashani Sanket*, and *Tilanjali*, highlight how famine destroyed social bonds, corrupted human values, and exposed gendered vulnerabilities.

The findings also show that cyclones and crop failures in coastal regions, including Midnapore, worsened conditions, but these were secondary compared to political negligence. The British government consistently refused to acknowledge responsibility, with Churchill making racially prejudiced remarks, blaming Indians for the famine. Such statements reflect the deep colonial apathy that shaped administrative decision-making. Another major finding is that the famine revealed the failure of colonial governance, where the state prioritized military needs over human lives. Relief measures were late, inadequate, and poorly organized, contributing to the death of nearly three million people. The rural poor, peasants, fishermen, artisans, labourers experienced disproportionate suffering despite being primary food producers.

The document also highlights that the famine was not only a humanitarian disaster but also a literary and cultural turning point. Bengali novels transformed the tragedy into a powerful critique of oppression, injustice, and human suffering. Writers used famine narratives to expose social inequalities, moral degradation, and the urgent need for political transformation.

Overall, the findings assert that the 1943 Bengal Famine was a human-made catastrophe, intensified by colonial exploitation, wartime policies, systemic inequality, and institutional apathy, leaving a permanent scar on the cultural and historical memory of Bengal.

Conclusion

The study of the Bengal Famine of 1943, as reflected in Bengali novels, reveals a devastating chapter in South Asian history in which human suffering unfolded on an unprecedented scale. The literary texts examined in the uploaded file illuminate how deeply the famine penetrated every layer of society, destroying families, breaking social structures, and exposing the brutality of colonial governance. These narratives collectively

demonstrate that the famine was not a natural calamity but a profoundly man-made disaster, shaped by exploitative British wartime policies such as the “Denial Policy,” forced removal of boats and transport, unfair requisition of food grain, and deliberate administrative negligence. The novels vividly capture how these policies accelerated starvation, displacement, and moral disintegration across Bengal.

Bengali writers portrayed the famine not merely as a historical event but as a lived human catastrophe. Through the depiction of starving peasants, exploited women, displaced families, and powerless villagers, the literature reflects the erosion of humanity when social support systems collapse. These texts also highlight the horrifying rise of trafficking, prostitution born of desperation, and the breakdown of ethical norms, revealing how hunger reshaped gendered experiences and forced individuals into inescapable cycles of exploitation.

At the same time, the novels underscore the stark contrast between the suffering poor and the oppressive class structures, zamindars, hoarders, moneylenders, and opportunistic traders, who profited from scarcity. The moral bankruptcy of these groups, along with the indifference of colonial rulers, is repeatedly exposed as a key contributor to the famine’s scale and intensity. The narratives further reveal how famine dismantled the rural economy, uprooted traditions, and forced thousands into mass migration toward cities like Calcutta, only to face further humiliation and death.

Ultimately, the literary portrayal of the famine confirms that the event was not only a humanitarian disaster but also a moral indictment of colonial rule. The novels serve as powerful historical testimony, preserving the voices of those who had no political power, no institutional representation, and often no means to survive. They transform suffering into collective memory, ensuring that the tragedy is neither forgotten nor reduced to statistical abstractions.

Thus, the conclusion drawn from the uploaded file highlights that Bengali famine fiction performs a dual function: it documents the historical reality of 1943 and simultaneously critiques the broader systems of exploitation that enabled such devastation. By bringing personal suffering, political critique, and social analysis together, these novels remind us that famines are as much about justice as they are about hunger. The literature stands as an enduring monument to resilience, human dignity, and the ethical responsibility to remember and learn from the past.

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