

THE BENGAL FAMINE OF 1943: COLONIALITY AND HOW FAMINES ARE MAN-MADE

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ABSTRACT

The Bengal Famine of 1943 killed an estimated three million people in colonial India, and its causes remain contested. This paper argues the famine was man-made not only materially, through collapsed entitlements and denied aid, but epistemically: colonial power authored the categories of drought, scarcity, and market failure through which it was measured. Drawing on Sen's entitlement approach alongside Said, Spivak, Foucault, and Mbembe, it examines how colonial statistical control decided who was sustained and left to die. Engaging Roy's work on the Deccan famines, the paper shows entitlement failure generalises beyond Bengal, and concludes that the reluctance to label the famine a genocide is itself constitutive of the same colonial epistemology that produced it.

Keywords: Bengal Famine; Colonialism; Entitlement Theory; Famine Studies; Biopolitics; Necropolitics; Postcolonial Theory

Introduction

The 1943 famine in the Bengal Province of British India, and the consequent disease epidemics, resulted in around 3 million lives lost (Greenough, 1982). These three million lives lost have been debated for the last 8 decades. Discourses and literature on famine have been abundant, but it has also been divided. Devereux (1993), in his text on theories of famines, argues that there cannot be one overarching theory that can explain the causes and effects of famines. This paper shall seek to study the Bengal Famine of 1943, critically analyze it under the frames of different theories presented and conclude with a synthesis. Regardless of what school of thought on famine studies one belongs to, it has been quite evident, and as Goswami (1990) argued for the case of the Great Bengal Famine, that famines are inherently man-made.

This paper argues that the Bengal Famine of 1943 was man-made not only in its material causes – the collapse of entitlements, the diversion of grain and the refusal of aid – but in a deeper, epistemic sense: colonial power authored the very categories of drought, scarcity and market failure through which the famine was measured and explained, and it is this same colonial epistemology, inherited by later discourse, that has determined whether the famine is remembered as tragedy or as atrocity.

Theories on Famine

Famines cannot just be classified as one set of causes and effects. The most prevalent approach to famines has been the “too many mouths, too little food” (Ayckroyd, 1975). Devereux (1993) argued that the definition of Famine has evolved from hunger, food shortages and mass starvation to

include war, poverty and market failure. This necessarily calls for a social-science-backed analysis of the 1943 famine, only using the economic lens will not do justice to the intricate details of what unfolded in Bengal in 1943. Sen's work on the Bengal famine is a classic. He argues that famines are not an effect of less food; they are caused by an ineffective system of food distribution (Sen, 1982). This opens up vast avenues of new thought processes for academia- what the economists had always labelled as a "market failure", and the Darwinian 'Survival of the fittest' (Tauger, 2003), has been opened up to the possibility of being man-made. The debate now moves from the naturalness of famines to their contingent nature. This anthropogenic aspect of what was traditionally considered "natural" is a major shift in the academia on nature, drought, famine and disaster. Disasters, famines and loss of lives are hardly ever natural, it is the product of policy, human intervention and methods of distribution that create disasters and mass-scale loss of lives (Hewitt, 2014).

It is worth pausing here on how the very categories used to study famine – drought, scarcity, market failure, "natural disaster" – were themselves products of a colonial knowledge apparatus. Said's (1978) account of how imperial power produces the categories through which the colonised world is known helps explain why a food crisis in Bengal was legible to the metropole primarily through the vocabulary of climate and population, rather than policy and violence. Colonial administrations did not simply observe famine; they generated the statistics, crop reports and price indices through which "famine" was defined and measured in the first place (Mallik, 2022). This meant that the imperial state controlled not only the material conditions of scarcity but also the epistemic frame within which scarcity would or would not be recognised as a crisis, and whether that crisis would be attributed to nature or to governance. Knowledge production was therefore not a neutral backdrop to the famine but one of its causal mechanisms: a famine that is measured, classified and narrated by the very power responsible for it is unlikely to be classified as man-made by that power's own records. This is precisely why revisionist work such as Sen's (1977) and

Goswami's (1990) had to first contest the official data before it could contest the official explanation – the numbers themselves were an instrument of colonial framing.

This epistemic asymmetry runs deeper than measurement. Spivak (1988) argues that colonial power did not merely misrepresent the colonised; it structured the very conditions under which they could be represented at all, producing an archive from which the subaltern's own testimony of hunger and death is largely absent. The primary sources for the Bengal famine – crop returns, price indices, the Famine Inquiry Commission's own report – were assembled by the same administration whose conduct is now in question, so that even the strongest revisionist case against colonial responsibility must be built out of colonial paperwork. Sen's (1977) recalculation of the 1943 harvest, for instance, works within the figures the Government of Bengal itself produced; it corrects the colonial account rather than escaping it. This is not a flaw unique to Sen but a structural condition of famine historiography under coloniality: the coloniser's ledger becomes the only available terrain on which the coloniser's guilt can be argued, which means the very terms of the debate – shortage versus distribution, drought versus policy – were set in advance by the apparatus being investigated. What counts as evidence, and therefore what counts as cause, was never epistemically neutral ground.

Causes of the Famine

Droughts are classified as a period where annual rainfall and moisture levels in soil fall below expected levels (Mishra et al., 2019). An important distinction to be drawn here is the difference between a drought and a famine. While famines are usually caused by droughts, it is not necessary that they follow. Out of the famines in India, post-1800s, all were linked to a drought except the Bengal Famine of 1943 (Mishra et al., 2019). It would be safe to argue that famines can happen without there being the conditions of a drought. The causes of the 1943 famine are contested in the academia. While the majority of the academia argues that Food Availability Decline- that is the fall of food levels below consumption levels- was not the prime cause of the famine (Sen 1977,

1981, 1982, 1983, 1997 & Mallik, 2022 & Bose, 1990 & Daoud, 2017), some believe that the famine was caused by a decline in food levels, and that the overall decrease in supply caused the prices to sky-rocket (Bowbrick 1987, 2021 & Islam, 2007).

Sen's entitlement thesis in the 1977 paper is that the Bengal Famine was caused by a decrease in the

bargaining power (exchange rate) of the average person's endowments (what they owned/produced) compared to the price of grain (rice and wheat) (Sen, 1977). The most severely hit were the already disadvantaged people- especially the field labourers and fishermen.

Year	Wage index	Food grains price index	Index of exchange rate
1939-40 (1940)	100	100	100
1940-41 (1941)	110	109	101
1941-42 (1942)	115	160	72
1942-43 (1943)	125	385	32
1st half of 1943-44 (1943)	130	385	34

Figure 1: Exchange rate for agricultural labour with food grains 1943. Source: Amartya Sen quoting Famine Inquiry Commission (1945)

He argues that the 1943 supply was only 5% lower than the average of the last 5 years, and, in fact, 13% higher than 1941- the year that saw no famine (Sen, 1977). This claim purports to show that the famine was not caused by an inherent fall in food levels but because of a decrease in exchange rates against food prices. This resulted in a tumultuous change to the entitlements of people but, at the same time, reflected the differences in class and entitlement of different groups in Bengal. Daoud (2017) argues that the grain supply to the urban regions was not halted and the Famine Inquiry Commission (1945) reported that the Government of Bengal focused on urban areas like Calcutta as well. They aimed to keep a steady ration of supplies in Calcutta, regardless of what had been going on in the rural regions. More than half of the Indian war machine in WWII was powered by Calcutta and more than a million military men were stationed there (Ó Gráda, 2020). This naturally meant that the crown focused on increasing the supply to these areas, while others faced the consequences of the price hike (Mallik, 2022). It is of utmost importance here to remember that one of the major causes of famine, according to this school of academia, were the colonial policies. Lord Wavell, the then Viceroy, went on to say that 'the vital problems of

India are being treated by His Majesty's Government with neglect, even sometimes with hostility and contempt' (Wavell, 1973). The famine was never actually declared a famine either (Sen, 1977). The colonial government was in denial of the fact that they were losing out on the Atlantic front in the war. Plus the classic Malthusian argument was powerful from their side as well- that "the Indians breed like rabbits" (Churchill as quoted by Tharoor, 2016).

Sen's entitlement approach deserves to be stated more precisely than as a simple claim that exchange rates fell. Sen (1977) models each social group's access to food not as a fixed quantity but as an 'entitlement mapping': the set of food bundles a person can command given what they own or produce – their endowment of labour power, land, boats or tools – and the rate at which that endowment can be converted into food through production, trade or wage labour. A famine occurs when this mapping collapses for a specific class of people, regardless of whether the total stock of food in the region has fallen. This is the precise sense in which the entitlement approach differs from FAD: FAD asks whether there was enough food in aggregate; the entitlement approach asks whether particular occupational groups retained the capacity to

acquire the food that already existed. The occupational data in Figure 2 make the distinction concrete — fishermen whose boats were requisitioned or destroyed under the crown's denial policy, or paddy huskers whose labour lost value as war inflation outpaced wages, could starve in a district where grain was still being sold, because their endowment no longer converted into an adequate food entitlement. The implications of this shift are significant. Analytically, it relocates the object of study from crop yields to wages, prices and occupational structure, which is why the exchange-rate data in Figure 1, not harvest statistics, function as the decisive evidence in Sen's argument. Politically, it relocates responsibility from an impersonal natural shortfall to specific, alterable policy choices — wartime procurement, the denial policy, the refusal of price controls — because entitlements are constituted by law, markets and administrative decision, all of which are man-made and could, in principle, have been made otherwise.

Although the prevalent argument in academia is as mentioned above, there exists opposition. Bowbrick (2021, 1987) argued that the famine was a classic example of a Food Availability Decline (FAD). He argued that it would have been impossible for the same quantities of food to be in the market and for people to starve- it is only possible if the urban population starts consuming 14 times their daily intake of calories (Bowbrick 2021). He further argued that the famine came to an end when the excellent 1943/1944 rice crop came to the market, which suggests that the famine was caused by crop failures (Bowbrick, 2021). Bowbrick(2021) and Islam (2007) both attack Sen's (1977) argument that the food supply was greater in 1943 than it was in 1941 on accounts of miscalculation of data. Goswami (1990) argues that the data from 1943 is not trustable. The Aman crop (the winter crop of rice in Bengal) was at least 17% lower than the average of the last 5 years. The Famine Inquiry Commission of the Crown reported that the crop available in 1943 was sufficient for 49 weeks (Woodhead, 1945), and Bowbrick (2021) argued that Sen's thesis was no different from that of the commission- that there was no shortage of grain in

1943. The argument is developed purely on economic terms from there, with little to no importance to the socio-political aspects. Islam (2007) agrees with Sen that the levels of FAD were nowhere near famine levels but Bowbrick (2021, 1987) fails to challenge that thesis.

This entitlement-versus-FAD debate, however, has recently been challenged from an unexpected direction. Roy (2021) argues that Indian famine historiography is skewed by a near-exclusive focus on Bengal: the three Deccan droughts of 1876–77, 1896 and 1899 killed an estimated 20 to 22 million people, roughly ten times Bengal's toll, yet have generated a fraction of the scholarly attention (Roy, 2021). Roy's substantive claim is that these dryland famines were caused primarily by water scarcity rather than food distribution failure, since surface and groundwater are fixed in space in a way that grain is not, so that the market and entitlement failures central to the Bengal debate do not straightforwardly apply. On his account, the Deccan famines ended not because of politics or the end of empire but because of largely uncoordinated infrastructural interventions between 1880 and 1930 — well-digging, urban waterworks, and later social movements contesting caste-based exclusion from water sources. From this, Roy draws a sharper methodological conclusion: that building a general theory of famine, or of colonial culpability, out of the Bengal case is a category error, since it 'begs the question why India's British rulers were so stupid to allow their taxpayers to die in millions' in the far larger Deccan disasters if colonial rule were straightforwardly the cause (Roy, 2021). His target here is explicit: Roy singles out De Waal (2017), already drawn on earlier in this paper, for 'tak[ing] the equation between famine and food for granted' and for attributing tropical famines to an undifferentiated 'imperialism' without specifying a causal mechanism (Roy, 2021).

Roy's challenge is useful in one respect and unpersuasive in another. He is right that famine historiography has been narrow in its geographic and evidentiary base, and that treating Bengal as the template for all Indian famines risks flattening real differences in causation across two very different ecological zones. But his central methodological move — that entitlement failure is

a Bengal-specific artefact that does not travel to the Deccan — is contradicted by his own evidence. Roy documents that secure water sources were private property in law, that access to wells and temple tanks was ‘ritually segregated’, and that mortality fell overwhelmingly on those officials themselves recorded as ‘Hindus of low caste’, who lacked masonry wells and depended on contaminated surface water (Roy, 2021). He further reports that colonial administrators, committed to protecting private property and avoiding interference in what they termed religious prejudice, declined to reallocate access even where secure water survived nearby. This is not a story about the absolute scarcity of water; it is a story about who was entitled to draw on the water that remained, adjudicated by property law and caste, and left undisturbed by a state that had the administrative capacity to intervene and chose not to — in Sen’s terms, an entitlement failure in the water economy rather than the grain economy, the very analytical structure Roy claims does not apply. Roy’s own citation of Ambedkar’s demand for ‘the right to draw water from a common well’, rather than for more water as such, makes the point better than any external critique could (Ambedkar, 1932, as cited in Roy, 2021). His dismissal of colonial agency as a ‘bad theory’ also rests on a non-sequitur: that droughts were not caused by colonial rule says nothing about whether colonial legal and administrative choices determined who died once a drought occurred, which is an entitlement question, not a meteorological one. Even his own account concedes that the state was ‘too timid an agent to upset caste-based privileges in the countryside’ — a description of a political choice, not an environmental fact (Roy, 2021). And where Roy faults De Waal for invoking ‘imperialism’ without a specified mechanism, this paper is not open to the same charge: Famine Code declaration thresholds, denial and requisition policy, and entitlement collapse through wage-price divergence are exactly the kind of specific mechanism Roy demands — and his own Deccan material, read through Sen rather than against him, supplies an equivalent mechanism for water. What Roy’s paper ultimately demonstrates, against his own thesis, is that the entitlement framework generalises further

than he allows: wherever a shock meets a socially structured system of exclusion from a survival resource, the outcome is man-made in Sen’s sense, whether the resource in question is grain in Bengal or well water in the Deccan.

There is also a methodological irony worth naming. Roy’s own evidentiary base for the water thesis is drawn overwhelmingly from the 1880 and 1901 Famine Commission reports and their associated administrative correspondence — the same colonial archive whose circularity this paper has already flagged via Spivak (1988). Roy even tabulates the declining frequency of the word ‘irrigation’ and the rising frequency of ‘cholera’ across successive Commission reports as evidence of a genuine shift in causation (Roy, 2021). But a shift in official vocabulary is at least as plausibly a shift in administrative framing — what the colonial state found it convenient to measure and name — as it is a neutral record of changing environmental reality. An account that relies on the colonial archive to de-politicise Deccan mortality, while that same archive documents the administrators’ own non-intervention decisions, has not escaped the epistemological problem this paper began with; it has relocated it.

Effects of the Famine

Other than the famine itself, a major portion of the lives lost was due to the endemics that developed in the following months. Diseases like Malaria, coupled with starvation, resulted in around 2300 deaths per day in Bengal in 1943 (Mukherjee, 2011). Fungus infestation also swept through the crops when the drought was followed by a cyclone and heavy rainfall. Nothing as devastating as the Bengal epiphytotic of 1942 had been recorded in plant pathological literature. The only other instance that bears comparison in loss sustained by a food crop and the human calamity that followed in its wake is the Irish potato famine of 1845 (Padmanabhan, 1973) (qtd. in Bowbrick, 2021). Sen (1977, 1981, 1982, 1983) and Islam (2007) argued that the famine affected the population on the already existent lines of impoverishment and class- this meant that the already disadvantaged like the agricultural labourers, paddy huskers, fishermen and the beggars and destitute either became destitute or

further destitute. Column A in Figure 2 below elaborates on the levels of destitution in occupational groups.

Occupational Group	A		B	
	Jan 1939–Jan 1943	Jan 1943–May 1944	Jan 1939–Jan 1943	Jan 1943–May 1944
Peasant cultivation and share cropping	0.7	1.3	0.8	1.4
Part peasant, part labour	0.9	1.4	1.1	2.0
Non-cultivating owners	0.7	1.6	1.3	2.4
Professions and services	1.4	2.1	1.9	2.5
Trade	1.1	2.2	1.5	2.6
Craft	3.0	3.8	3.1	4.3
Non-agricultural labour	1.8	3.7	1.8	4.5
Other productive occupations	1.9	4.6	2.2	4.6
Agricultural labour	1.7	4.6	2.5	6.1
Transport	2.4	6.0	30.6	6.9
Fishing	1.6	9.6	1.6	10.5
Husking paddy	3.6	4.7	—	—
Destitutes	87.6	85.4	89.8	87.0

Figure 2: Source: Sen (1977)

Mass-scale migrations from the rural areas to the urban centres like Calcutta became widespread. Moving to Calcutta seemed like an escape to people, for war production was the highest there and they thought that they would escape the famine (Mukherjee, 2015). This resulted in a complete upheaval of patronage networks and rural ties in the eastern part of the Bengali Province (Das, 2008). Other than the upheaval of traditional networks in society, it also resulted in an influx of people in the urban centers. This meant that the rationing practices of the Government were to fail and although the government was adamant about distributing one meal at the same time at all places to the destitute to make sure that no one gets more than one (Commission, 1985), these rationing exercises and price ceilings were not successful and the government had to resort back to an open-market system. There was a large increase in the number of destitute and beggars (Mahalanobis, 1946). Impoverished people were forced to sell their labour to feed their families (Patnaik, 1999). This

destitution and the feeling of exclusion also resulted in a vast number of peasantry resorting to joining the military or government services to regain their entitlements. The famine resulted in a great upheaval of the class hierarchies, it further impoverished the poor and forced the peasantry into destitution.

Colonialism, Bio-Politics and the Anthropogenic Famine

The first question I raise here is of language and the powers that are covertly hidden within the use of the thereof. The Ukrainian Famine, commonly known as the Holodomor of 1932, was a mix of natural causes, soviet policies and the accumulation of grain by the Kulaks (Tauger, 2001). It has been labelled as a genocide by the academia of the West. Bengal, in 1943, saw accumulation by the traders as well, and a scorched earth policy by Britain due to Japanese war threats from Burma (Sen, 1977 & Islam, 2007). Why is it that the Famine of 1943 is labelled as a “natural phenomenon” and the

Holodomor as a crime against Humanity? Denial of the aid of 6000 tonnes of grain by London (Mansergh, 1970) cannot just be let go off as a war tactic for securing the Atlantic front as Bowbrick (2021) argued. There needs to be a theoretical investigation into how colonialism formed such perspectives where “lives that were going to be lost could not be saved, and that is why the war cabinet prioritized not to use the ships in the Atlantic for the aid of the Bengali people” (Bowbrick, 2021). State-sanctioned crimes were normal; food was withheld from prisoners, people were evicted from lands and the state hired people on minimal wages to man the police force and the courts (Duncan, 2020). To absolve the colonial power of any responsibility here, as Bowbrick did, would be a great academic dishonesty. Wavell (1973), who was the viceroy at the time, himself conceded to the fact that the crown had no interest in providing relief. The crown was actually in denial of a famine and as Bowbrick (2021) mentions, India as a whole was not under famine conditions, it was because of other provinces that Bengal was starved. But starvation is not the characteristic of there not being enough food and while it can be the cause of a famine, it is but one of many causes thereof (Sen, 1981). Imports from Burma had been put at a halt, they constituted about 15% of the total rice supply to India (Mallik, 2022). After paralyzing a province, burning their lands and drowning their boats, how did the crown expect there to be imports of grain from other areas—especially Burma and Punjab?

A really important theoretical concept here is the nature of farming itself. The FAD framework is only applicable when a family eats what they grow (Sen, 1977). However, this was not the case in Bengal. De Waal (2017) links famines to production systems and global markets and argues that they are inherently socio-political, not just natural. This market-based discourse on famines leads me to quote Davis (2002), who in his text *Late Victorian Holocausts* argued that the integration of non-European peasantry, the transition from farming for subsistence to farming to sell in a global market exposes the indigenous to a high risk of famine (Davis, 2002). He builds upon Polanyi's (2001) thesis that the free market annihilates the food market. The intrinsic value of

farming is lost to the values determined by supply and demand, this echoes Marx (1904). What happened in Bengal was no different, the fluctuation of price and the inflation disproportionate to wage levels was a direct effect of integration into the world market (Sen, 1977). The concept of Biopolitics and Governmentality (Foucault, 2008, 2019) is also a necessary tool for analysis. Mallik (2022) argues that the crown in Bengal exercised its control over the population through a systematic statistic-driven approach. They had the power to provide relief but they chose not to. Governmentality, as Foucault (2019) envisions it, governs all aspects of the citizen-subject's life, placing it in the hands of the state. The rationing of grain (Woodhead, 1945), the one-meal policy (Commission, 1945) and the abysmal treatment by the law enforcing agencies in Bengal (Duncan, 2020) are all examples of how the colonial government used bio-power to control the masses in Bengal.

The stakes of this framing were not only academic but legal, which is what makes it a genuine instance of governmentality rather than mere rhetoric. Colonial India's Famine Codes, drafted in the wake of the 1880 Indian Famine Commission, obligated the administration to mount organised relief only once local officials formally declared that famine conditions existed (Famine Commission, 1880). Declaration was therefore not a description offered after the fact but a threshold that activated or withheld the state's obligations — which is precisely why it matters that Bengal's crisis was never declared a famine at all (Sen, 1977). Here the epistemic and the administrative collapse into one another: refusing the label was simultaneously refusing the duties the label carried, so that a decision about language directly determined whether granaries opened. Foucault's governmentality is usually read as power that manages life through continuous knowledge of the population — census, statistics, surveillance. In Bengal, the same infrastructure was turned toward a more precise function: knowledge was produced carefully enough to administer the empire, but the single category that would have triggered relief was withheld. Framing was not incidental to the famine; withholding the

correct frame was one of its operating mechanisms.

Foucault's biopolitics, however, describes a power that "fosters life or disallows it," a power organised primarily around optimising the population it governs. This sits uneasily with what actually happened in Bengal, where the colonial state's statistical apparatus was mobilised not to sustain the population but to determine, with some precision, which segments of it could be left to die. Mbembe's (2003) concept of necropolitics is the more exact tool here: he argues that the ultimate expression of colonial sovereignty lies in "the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not" – a power to expose entire populations to death rather than to manage their life. Read alongside Foucault, this suggests a hierarchy within colonial biopower itself: the same statistical and rationing infrastructure that fostered life in Calcutta – the city that fed the war machine (Ó Gráda, 2020) – simultaneously withdrew that infrastructure from the Bengali countryside, producing what Mbembe would call a "death-world," a zone in which the rural poor were assigned the status of the living dead well before starvation itself killed them. The colonial administration was not simply negligent; it was exercising a sovereign power of triage, deciding through census categories, rationing zones and military priority which lives were governable and worth preserving and which were, in effect, ungrievable. This necropolitical reading also explains the discursive asymmetry with which the paper opened: a biopolitical famine, framed as failed life-management, can be narrated as tragic mismanagement or natural misfortune, whereas a necropolitical famine – one premised on a sovereign decision about whose deaths do not count – is much closer to what the West reserves the vocabulary of genocide for, and precisely the vocabulary that has never been extended to Bengal.

Was the famine man-made or not? Knight (1954) claimed that in 1943, India had enough food to avoid famine had it been distributed properly. Bose (1990) called the famine 'Starvation amidst Plenty'. The effects of the famine were highly disproportionate, where no single white man died, the military was protected from its effects and the

government not only denied the existence of the famine but actively turned away aid (Sen, 1977 & Mallik, 2022 & Mukerjee, 2014 & Mansergh, 1970). This cannot be classified as mere negligence, or as an act of nature. Even Bowbrick, although with a very racist undertone towards the Bengalis, established that the local traders had malicious intent, 'that the chief actors were—literally—Bengali men, whose actions reflected Bengali values and Bengali conceptions of what was actually at risk (Bowbrick, 2021). In short, the 'man-made' famine was culturally patterned in its onset, crisis and denouement. (Greenough, 1982, p. 265 as cited by Bowbrick, 2021)

Conclusion

Where does all this discussion leave us? One conclusion that could very well be drawn is that the famine was man-made. It was not caused by a drought (Mishra et al., 2019) and the aid efforts were denied by the crown (Mansergh, 1970 & Wavell, 1973). People had rationed grain and speculations caused the prices to skyrocket (Sen, 1977). The colonial opening of the Bengali market for their wartime spending, the printing of huge quantities of money and the stress on the National Reserves of India resulted in inflation that could not be matched by the rising wages (Davis, 2002 & Sen, 1977, 1981, 1982). The crown preferred to use their ships in the Atlantic to win the war, not provide relief to the Bengalis (Bowbrick, 2021). The request made by the viceroy was half-hearted and the crown did not show must interest in return; they expected that the Indian states would come to the rescue (Tauger, 2003). Winning the war meant the safety of European lives, and the crown preferred these lives over the Bengalis. The Bengal Famine is yet to be labelled a genocide, or even a massacre or ethnic cleansing by the academia, a privilege that the Holodomor, the Holocaust and even the September 11 attacks currently enjoy.

This asymmetry in labelling is not incidental but constitutive: it is the end product of a colonial knowledge system that generated the very categories – drought, scarcity, market failure – through which the famine was first described, and of a necropolitical logic that determined, in advance, whose deaths would register as atrocity

and whose would register as misfortune. To call the Bengal Famine man-made, then, is not only an economic or administrative claim about distribution failures; it is a claim about who was allowed to author the record of the disaster in the first place.

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