

## **BODY TRADE AND FAMINE: HOW FAMINE FACILITATED TO THE RISE OF PROSTITUTION IN INDIA**

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Bengal region in India was affected by severe hunger in 1943. The situations lead to social, cultural and economic transformation. Through the analysis of the famine, it is important to understand how human trade and hunger are connected, and what factors forced women to engage in prostitution during harsh conditions. In addition, through the critique of different secondary sources, the paper discusses evidences to whether hunger is the main factor to the rate of prostitution in India. The information used in this discussion is based on a critique of different secondary materials.

**Keywords:** Bengal famine, food crisis, death, prostitution and seasonality.

### **Famine**

Famine is one of the worst natural disasters on the globe, and effects are widespread and can last for a long time. Some of the time, it is as a result of other natural disasters such as floods and whirl winds. In most of the situations, one of the main causes of famine is the absence or inadequate rains resulting in crop failure. Famine can also be caused by manmade factors such as wars and poor utilization of resources. The effects of famine can be death of animals and human beings as well as malnutrition. Throughout the human history, the main incidences of famine, which resulted to death of millions people include the great famine of Ireland, Vietnam famine of 1945, famine in Russia in 1921, Bengal famine in 1770 and 1943, Chalisa famine, and Chinese famine in 1907.

### **Effects of Famine**

Apart from death and malnutrition, there are other effects of famine such as immigration, the conditions of early life on the health of late life and mortality. Unbalanced nutrition during the period of extreme hunger has had serious effects on the development of thrifty phenotype and human fetus development. A study on the effects of Dutch potato famine showed that famine affects the life expectancy and late life mortality. In addition, famine has effects on demographic structures of population as well as the social transformation (Eraly, 2011). The social and biological attributes of women conceiving during the periods of extreme hunger is different from those who conceive in other periods.

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**Bengal Famine**

The Britons were ruthless people in regards to their operation in India, which was not inclusive of the empathy to the native citizens of the country. During their rule, India had numerous encounters of famine. However, the worst affected region was the Bengal region. The first tragedy hit the region in 1770; this was followed by severe encounters of famine in 1783, 1873, 1866, 1892 and 1942. Initially, when the incidence of famine occurred in the country, the native leaders were very fast to respond to it, while at any time, initiated appropriate control measures. After the British conquest, the incidences of famine were a result of delays of monsoon winds, together with the exploitation of natural resources by the colonial masters for their own financial benefits (Brennan, 1988).

The British rulers forced the Bengal residents to grow the cash crops such as poppy and indigo, which had higher market value and yielded more profits for the Britons, but could not relief the population in case of hunger. The colonial masters did not allow the Bengal residents to plant edible crops, which could reduce the incidences of severe hunger in the region (Brennan, 1988). In 1771 and 1943, the famine resulted to death of three million people and forced others to eat human flesh and grass, all in an attempt to survive.

In 1943, hunger spread in the Calcutta region at a very fast rate. The hungry population spread in the whole region to search and beg for food. They went in any kitchen that was free with shells of Coconut and Earthen Pans to beg for food (Kane, 1987). In his novel, Bhattacharya "So Many Hungers" attempts to explain the situation in Bengal. He states that in Bengal, there is hunger for wealth, hunger for food, power, sex, and fame.

**So Many Hungers**

Bhattacharya uses the Kajoli and Rahoul families to explain the destitute situation in the streets of Bengal. In the first part of the novel, Rahoul packs his things and pay a visit to Baruni, a village close to the Bengal Bay. He was visiting Devesh Basu, his grandfather, who had peaceful coexistence with the locals. His grandfather explained the importance of National movements in the Country (Sharma, 2014). Through this discussion, he understood the importance of the movement in sustaining food security, and other freedoms, which were the basis of income in the human life.

During the visit, Rahoul comes across one of the stories in the newspaper, which involves moral degradation. The story is about a starving mother, whose child died while she was breastfeeding. Rahoul had a witness of the American soldiers being showed breasts by a young girl for one, or two Indian rupees. The second part of the novel explains the life of Kajoli's family. Kajoli was married to Kishore, but died from an accident when travelling to Calcutta. Since Kishore was a provider for the family for a short period, Kajoli's family started to feed on figs

and roots for survival (Reddy, n.d). A Calcutta brothel agent attempted to engage Kajoli in the business, but she rejected. Kajoli was raped by a soldier, who gave her a piece of bread for sexual satisfaction. After Kajoli was discharged from the hospital, she made a decision to engage in prostitution to provide herself and her family with food. The food scarcity in Bengal made the rich people in the region to be money minded and soulless. Abalabandhu and Samarendra took this situation as an advantage of the troubled to sell their bodies. As of that time, the brothel business of Abalabandhu was growing at a very fast rate.

### **Food Crisis in the Bengal Region**

The situation in Bengal in 1936 and 1943 resulted from numerous factors. The economic condition of 1936 with the application of the increase in money supply, assisted most hunger affected regions. The hunger of 1943 was not as a result of inadequate food, but the crisis in the economy resulting from inflationary efforts of financing the war (Brennan, 1988). This resulted to a decline in real wages of various groups in the society, such as transport workers, agricultural laborers, and fishermen, who could not afford to provide for their families.

In addition, the condition of 1943 deteriorated because the state government did not provide relief to the destitute as it had done in 1943. The state government failed because of three main reasons. The Japanese were in control of Burma, and other main provinces, which provided the Bengal region with grains. Therefore, most traders were not able to supply the Bengal region with food. Even if the government mobilized some resources to stop the famine, there was no time to plan given the different circumstances.

It was important for the various organs of the government to coordinate, in order for the destitute to access food and finances to purchase the same. Since the Department of Revenue and the District Commissioners controlled the distribution of food in various parts of Bengal, their cooperation was crucial (Mahalanobis, 1933-1960). However, problems arise, which affected the relationship between the food distributors in the region.

The hunger was further facilitated by the land ownership in the region. 70% of the families in Bengal had less than two acres of paddy land possessed by each family. The classification of land ownership per every family was equal to the level famine incidence during the period of hunger. The families, which possessed land that was below the level of subsistence, were more vulnerable. Therefore, the problem of land ownership also facilitated to hunger.

Before the occurrence of the famine, the number of plough cattle fell below the required number in cultivating the Aman paddy. The decline of plough cattle was experienced due to selling and deaths. 65 per cent of the total population of plough cattle was sold, while the 35 per cent died due to other factors such as hunger and diseases. The number of the sold cattle was higher than the number

that was being bought. The transfer of cattle did not take place from one family to another in the rural areas. Majority of the contractors outside Bengal bought the cattle because of high consumption of meat by the army (Mahalanobis, 1933-1960). The number of cattle used for cultivation declined across all groups because of these factors. However, the most affected groups by the reduction of plough cattle was the laborers and agricultural groups.

### Effects of the Bengal Famine

The destitution rate increased during the period of famine, when the number of residents depending on charities increased as compared to the other previous years. It was estimated that rate of destitution in the families as of 1943 was 6.0 lakhs. The highest rate of destitution was among the younger age groups (Brennan, 1988).

“While thousands of people in the cities lost their lives, most of the people sought refuge in the neighboring region of Calcutta in search of work and relief from the severe effects of hunger.” (Reddy, n.d, p. 141). From this quote, it is evident that the Bengal famine affected the population in the Calcutta region. Its impact was forcing most of the residents to flee from their homes in search of food, and, therefore, putting pressure on the resources in the neighboring region.

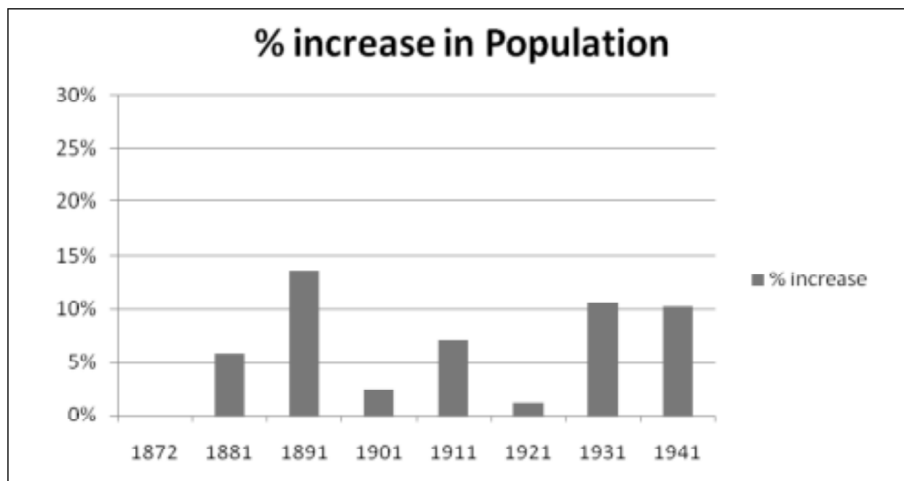


Chart showing the rate of population growth before the 1943 famine in Bengal (Shastri, 2011)

The rate was also higher among women as compared to women in the same age group. In addition, people in the class of agricultural labor constituted the largest proportion of destitute individuals as compared to other social classes. Economic deterioration from hunger caused social economic transformation and high number of women engaged in prostitution, and the activity was the order of the day.

### **Famine and Prostitution**

The analysis of Bengal and Calcutta destitute prove the distressing discontinuities among the population. Reddy argues that, “entirely, people were chastening themselves for food; Rahoul witnessed this incident in a young girl, who bared her breasts to the American Soldier for some cash rupees. However, the act of the young girl was honorable, since she used the money she earned to buy food for her fellow” (Reddy, n.d, p. 81). Women and young children were the most vulnerable in this situation. It is evident that the largest percentage of young girls survived during the period of famine because of sexual submissions (Malik, 2002). The decreased number of young girls, who died out of hunger between the ages of 10 to 15 years in comparison to the number of young men, proved that most young women survived because of commoditization. Several victims of hunger attested to the enforced exploitation of women sexually. Since there was a high presence of military personnel in the region, corps were avenues of survival among the women who were starving in exchange for sexual abuse and submission. Every creature in the region had to look for survival tactics, and, therefore, the situation forced many women in the trade unwillingly.

“The condition of Indian women under the Christian British Raj was especially bad, but under famine it became even worse. Rape, sexual abuse and exploitation of Indian women were normal and accepted British practices. Under the racist justice system in India, white British and Anglo-Indians routinely got away with rape and murder. The Official British propagandas portrayed Indian women as prostitutes and carriers of sexually transmitted disease” (Eraly, 2011, p. 3).

The British soldiers in the Bengal region are exempted from the law in regards to their actions. The traditional Indian society is distracted by the famine. There is no honor accorded to the Indian women in regards to their social character (Eraly, 2011). It is clear that the Indian women do not engage in sex trade out of willingness but out because of their urge to save their children and their families.

Commoditization is one of the pillars of prostitution and sexism. Only a small number of women engage in prostitution because they make a choice to do so. The main reason why women sell their bodies is to sustain their lives economically. Most of the women engage in these activities because there is no alternative for their survival. Discrimination, racism, and poverty are seen to be the main reasons for the large percentage of women engage in prostitution. The Bengal women had tolerated this exploitation from the American and British soldiers to survive the man-made famine. There was no other alternative to provide for their families.

### **Rapism as a Form of Punishment in Some Indian Regions**

In 2014, a woman from West Bengal region was hospitalized after being raped by a group of men for engaging in romantic relationship with a Muslim man. According to the rules of the tribe, she was not supposed to date any man outside her tribe.

Therefore, she violated the rules, and was entitled to that punishment (Culp-Ressler, 2014). In a separate incident, a young man from the state of Jharkland assaulted a married woman sexually, and the punishment imposed by the village elders was not that pleasing. The elders stated that, his fourteen years old sister was also to be raped. The person who conducted the act was the husband whose wife was raped. As the girl was dragged into the forest, the villagers just looked without offering any help (Poon, 2014).

The cases of gang raping are very common in some remote parts of India, despite the constitution prohibiting such acts. Before the Second World War, the maintenance of human rights was left on the hands of village elders, instead of the state government. However, after various discussions in a number of conferences, it was agreed that the rights of individuals were vulnerable when left on local leadership. Regardless of creation of various organs of the government to handle the civil and criminal violation of human rights, and specifically gender discrimination and sexual abuse among women, some remote parts of India still practice gang rape as a form of punishment to the locals. In most remote parts of India, unelected council of elders are in charge of governance in their areas. However, the laws imposed by these leaders are outside the domain of the constitution (Ray, 1990).

The use of rape as a form of punishment to women has a deep history in remote parts of India. Even if the act according to the constitution of the country is illegal, the factors emanating from traditions and history introduce a barrier towards the implementation of law in those areas. Since a woman is taken a community and family property, rape is not considered as a punishment to the woman, but to the man she is related to. In the case of the daughter and wife, the father and the husband are hurt when their beloved ones are raped.

In regards to the examination of cultural relativism in the context of human rights, specifically on the sexual abuses based on the gender differences, the traditional laws in most of the remote parts of India corrupts the impacts of the modern human rights because of the flaws in relation to them (Ray, 1990). Even if some of the relativist claims that the primary cultures shape the behaviors of most people exclusively, there some situations when the specific norms are violated, especially when they put the life of the victims in danger in consideration of the emerging trends and applications.

### **Disposal of Assets and Getting in Hand with Seasonality**

Under the conditions of extreme hunger, the households in the rural areas minimized their daily consumption, which leads to depletion of food inventories. In order to cope with the extreme condition, it is normal for households to sell their initially non-productive assets. These are inclusive of the jewelry and utensils. The sale of land and animals is the last option to consider, depending on the level of famine.

During the Bengal famine in 1943, women sold utensils and jewelry, since it was rare for them to be absolute owners of land. However, as the productive and non-productive assets got depleted, they had to engage in prostitution, in order to sustain their families during the most difficult situation.

### **The Existing Dilemma on Prostitution**

However, there was a state of dilemma in families where some women engaged in body trade for the purpose of sustaining their members. The dilemmas involved the position of these women in regards to morality and economic terms. Since the presence of the government was not felt in the entire period of famine, most young ladies saved the day by engaging into immoral acts. In addition, there were numerous issues relating to gender dimensions, and, which required reinterpretation of some facts regarding the famine and the gender perspective. After the famine, there were numerous incidences where the families broke up because of the issues relating to morality. There were controversies in relation to the position of religion and the situation as at that time. As a result, 70% of the husbands and wives separated, since the women had engaged in prostitution during the period of famine (Brennan, 1988).

The economic bargaining power of men is much stronger to that of women, since they can walk for long distances without the worry of sexual exploitation (Reddy, n.d). From the family bargaining point of view, most husbands do not cooperate because of the personal physical interests. The justification of most men was that women had to sustain their moral standards regardless of the worsening conditions. Even if the intention of the women during the famine was to sustain their lives and their children, prostitution was not morally acceptable. This resulted to most women returning back to prostitution since there were no alternative remedies.

The Bengal famine resulted to social transformation of most women in India. However, current rate of prostitution may not be based entirely on famine, but on the bases of economic strains. There are many factors, which are incorporated to explain the reason some women engage in prostitution. Some of them engage in the act because of the changing norms in the society (Reddy, n.d). Even if basic needs are at their disposal, there is need to satisfy other needs depending on the changes happening in the society. In addition, the economic dependence is forcing many to engage in prostitution as a source of livelihood.

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