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# Bodies in hunger: literary representations of the Indian home-front during the Second World War

## **Abstract:**

In this article, I look at the representation of bodies on the Indian home-front in 1943, the year of the Bengal Famine – caused by rising inflation, wartime shortages, Churchill's food policies and the loss of Burma to the Japanese. I begin by examining letters Indian soldiers wrote to their families from Middle Eastern battlefronts, and analyse the empathic role of soldiers' bodies as they imagined distant hunger. I then move on to study Bengali novelist Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's *Ashani Sanket* (*The Intimations of Thunder*, 1944–1946), where he imagines the Second World War as a predatory beast, feeding upon the bodies of Bengali villagers. While the first section focuses on the cultural history of the Bengal Famine, recovered through the wartime letters, the second section engages with literary criticism, analysing how hunger and its contexts influence form. I argue in this article that letter-writing and literature read alongside each other yield new layers of meaning to the experience of hunger in the homeland.

**Keywords:** famine, Bengal, hunger, Bibhutibhushan, Churchill, Bengali novel, life-writing, letters

## Bodies in hunger: literary representations of the Indian home-front during the Second World War

‘Dear brother, *Salaam* [greetings]. I received your FA [family allowance] once only and after that I did not get anything. I am dying without money. Please do help me.’

- A letter sent by the brother of a sepoy in an Indian Field Ambulance, from Kasur in Lahore District, December 1943. These two lines are its only contents.

‘Everyone still wondered, do people really die from not having enough to eat? Surely that danger could never befall them.’

- Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, *Ashani Sanket (Intimations of Thunder)*, published serially between 1944–46)

The Bengal Famine was the culmination of large-scale hardship and suffering in regions of the Indian subcontinent during the Second World War, compounded by colonial policies of resource extraction. Instead of a Japanese invasion, as was feared in 1942, war reached the Bengal home front in 1943 in the form of dearth and slow death. Over three million people died, through a combination of starvation and the associated diseases of cholera, diarrhoea and dysentery (Srimanjari 2009: 2; Mukerjee 2011: i; Mukherjee 2015: 3). The most affected regions were largely in east Bengal, including the districts of Dacca, Faridpur, Noakhali, Mymensingh, Pabna and Khulna, while the sub-divisions of Contai and Tamluk in the district of Midnapur and Diamond Harbour in 24 Parganas, were the main regions affected in west Bengal (Srimanjari 2009: 188–189). Those whose lives were most financially precarious in rural Bengal suffered the most – the very young and the old, women, artisans, labourers, landless farmers, wandering minstrels or ‘*bauls*’, village artists and painters – some of whom would have best been able to represent hunger in Bengal but became instead the worst victims of famine. Along with the tremendous scale of death, the famine ‘caused irreparable damage to folk memory’ (Srimanjari 2000: 258–290; 2009: 209). Thousands of villagers walked miles from rural heartlands to reach Calcutta in the hope of obtaining food, begging for a little ‘*phyan*’ or rice-starch, only to die on the streets. Historian Indivar Kamtekar (2002: 212) notes: ‘In sheer scale, the tragedy of the Bengal Famine bears comparison with any other of the Second World War, and dwarfs other incidents in India. The dead outnumbered the entire Indian industrial working class.’ And as the future Prime Minister of independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru, would say, the Bengal Famine eventually became ‘the final judgment on British rule in India’. (cited Siegel 2018: 23)

The most famous analysis of the Bengal Famine, provided by Amartya Sen’s 1981 Nobel-prize winning *Poverty and Famines – An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, argues that the famine was manufactured – a man-made product rather than a natural one. Later research (for example, Goswami 1990, Tauger 2009) has predominantly confirmed the significance of a political entitlement to food, rather than an overall shortage of its supply. Recently, historian Iftekar Iqbal,

by drawing attention to the long-term environmental contexts of a decline in food availability along with changes in land ownership and production, has mapped out an important 'ecological prehistory' of the famine too (Iqbal 2010: 160). A sustained analysis of the Bengal Famine as a product of the socio-political conditions of wartime India is an emerging field of scholarship (Bose and Jalal 1997, Kamtekar 2002, Srimanjari 2009, Mukerjee 2011, Mukherjee 2015, Siegel 2018) to which this article seeks to contribute. Mukerjee (2011) uses the famine to suggest deliberate imperial rapacity, particularly with regard to Churchill's wartime policies for India; Mukherjee (2015) offers a granular account of political machinations to highlight the decisions that exacerbated famine conditions; and Siegel (2018) argues that the famine was an impetus for the final phase of the Indian independence struggle against the British Raj.

If these recent studies have been historical in scope, this article adopts a literary and cultural perspective to interrogate the complex representational terrain of the Bengal Famine. My aim here is to make an important intervention in the literature of twentieth-century war writing by arguing for the significance of colonial experiences of hunger and its representation in textual form. Here, I situate food in 1940s India as a means of establishing interpersonal relationships. Wartime shortages and colonial policies violently disrupt such connections by creating widespread famine, most severely in Bengal in the east, but also in Travancore in the south. A focus on the textual, as Srimanjari (2002) indicates, reveals how the famine transforms a means of interrogating the bankruptcy of late imperial rule as well as the violence of indigenous and localised power structures. I also examine here whether hunger – or the empathic perception of another's hunger – can become a new form of physically imagined connection.

In this article, the experiential, the testimonial and the literary are interpreted in relation to each other, bringing attention to the depth and scale of the Indian experience of wartime famine. Reading letter-writing and literature alongside each other allows for fresh layers of meaning to emerge from such a comparatist approach: we understand the diverse ways in which hunger in the homeland was experienced, imagined and represented. While the first section of the article focuses more on the cultural history of the Bengal Famine, recovered through the wartime letters, the second section engages with literary criticism, analysing how hunger and its contexts influence form. Middle Eastern and North African battlefronts and Bengal's rural spaces form new connections in this reading.

Furthermore, throughout this article, I investigate the ways by which wartime communities of knowledge and bonds of empathy were being formed. How did Indian soldiers, fighting for the British and stationed in the Middle East and North African fronts, discover that there was widespread hunger in their homeland, despite the censorship of their letters? How did they conceive of the food they consumed as army rations while knowing that others at home remained hungry? And in what ways do the formal aspects of letter-writing lend themselves to testimonial narrative when used by Indian civilians who did not themselves starve, but witnessed the ravages of famine?

'We become crazy as lunatics': distress in response to hunger in Indian soldiers' letters

During the Second World War, two-and-a-half million soldiers from undivided India served in the British Indian Army, still considered to be the largest volunteer army in the world (Raghavan 2016: 1). They were posted in nearly every single theatre – Persia, Iraq, Palestine, Egypt, East Africa and Abyssinia, Syria, Aden, Greece, Italy, Burma and Malaya. Out of these, the Middle Eastern and North African battlefronts proved particularly significant, as Indian troops played a vital role in the battles of Tobruk in Libya in 1941 and El Alamein in Egypt in 1942, before contributing to the liberation of Greece and Italy (Raghavan 2016: 95–121; 122–149; 356–375). The Middle Eastern and North African fronts stretched from the Persian Gulf to Iraq, Transjordan (present-day Jordan) and Palestine, and from Cyprus to Cyrenaica (eastern Libya), Tripolitania (western Libya), Egypt, Sudan and Somaliland (Raghavan 2016: 95). Extracts from thousands of letters, written between August 1942 and March 1945 by Indian soldiers stationed here, are archived in the British Library as part of military colonial censorship reports from the war. These letters were not simply read by family and friends at home. Intercepted by colonial censors, they were translated from Indian vernaculars into English, and extracts selected to comprise military censorship reports, which became official testaments testifying to the ‘morale’ of Indian soldiers. The reports also incorporated extracts from the letters that the soldiers received from the Indian home front.

These censorship reports on epistolary exchanges between men in the Indian Army and their loved ones at home make extensive references to the Bengal Famine. They provide us with multiple glimpses into the lived realities of the famine and its reception on international battlefronts, and even responses from the colonial censor himself. Becoming in Achille Mbembe’s words ‘a montage of fragments’ (Mbembe 2002: 21–22) this particular archive, then, consists of the voices of the dead themselves. It also foregrounds how the art of letter-writing and editorial censorship policies were employed to record living and dying during the famine.

In Indian soldiers’ letters, life is measured out in food prices. The letters become ledgers where the materiality of starvation is logged in excruciatingly granular detail; they serve as textual connectors that convey this despairing knowledge from home-front to the battlefield. Rising price lists are mentioned regularly, as a letter from Bengal to a Havildar Clerk or junior officer notes: ‘The prices are as follows – Rice Rs. 40 a *maund*; Atta Rs. 35 to 38 a *maund*; Coal Rs. 2½ a *maund*. Sugar is not procurable and the prices of other things are at least five times in comparison to pre-war prices’ (MEMCR 655, 11 August to 24 August 1943). Death rates form a grim counterpoint to these price lists. From Bombay a letter-writer observes in Marathi: ‘In Bengal daily deaths by hunger are increased by 31’; from a Captain in the Indian Medical Service: ‘I think half the population will be wiped off in near future’; from Malabar, in Malayalam: ‘You will be astonished to see that ¼ of our neighbours have left for the better world – when you come back with anxiety to see them’; and from a village near Medha, in Marathi: ‘People are dying of hunger and if this goes on for another two or three months, then you won’t find a single soul alive in our village. God knows when this wretched war will end’ (MEMCR 655 8 September to 21 September 1943, 2 June to 15 June 1943, 25

August to 7 September 1943, 8 September to 21 September 1943, Incoming Mail).

These metrics of death within families and communities are countered by repeated references to the inability of language to express the pain of witnessing, as though the task of narration has been passed on to numbers. 'The plight of our country is beyond description', writes a family member from Bengal to a doctor in the Indian Medical Service, while another, addressed to a Captain in the Indian Medical Service, asks: 'What will happen if the war lasts longer? Can you imagine?' (MEMCR 655, 2 June to 15 June 1943, Incoming Mail) Civilian letters reveal that, though the conditions of famine were at their severest in Bengal, other parts of India – such as Malabar and Travancore in southern India – experienced famine conditions too, a little-remembered fact which historian P. Priya (2014) has recently drawn our attention to. A letter written in English from Travancore in south India by 'a Hindu' man on 21 April 1943, where he depicts starving people begging for alms, forms a valuable counterpoint to one by the wife of a doctor in the Indian Medical Division, who recalls reading about the abandoned children of famine in Bengal. The 'Hindu' man begins with the inability of language as a mode of representation:

I cannot explain to you the extent of poverty in Travancore, but this form of misery is not anything peculiar to this place only; the whole of India is experiencing difficult days. On our way from Bombay we could see hundreds of men, women and children of all ages sitting on the sides of the roads and crying for alms. The sight of those naked and half-naked wretches reduced to skeletons was too strong even for the most strong-hearted persons. They were begging from all indiscriminately and even soldiers of other nationalities took pity on them and gave them alms. These wretches had left their villages and were moving towards the towns in crowds. (MEMCR 655, 21 April to 5 May 1943, Incoming Mail)

The passage reveals to us the physical markers of the violation of the human body during famine, 'naked and half-naked', visualised in the collective, with no individual contours or definitions. Humanity has depleted, shrunk, 'reduced to skeletons', and reduced too to pleading for help. Linguistic choices become illuminating here, particularly so since this letter was originally written in English. The word 'strong', for instance, is repeated in the sentence: 'The sight of those naked and half-naked wretches reduced to skeletons was too strong even for the most strong-hearted persons.' If one remains 'strong-hearted' and emotionally unaffected even while witnessing terrible hunger and suffering, such strength is highly morally culpable, the writer suggests. As Shoshana Felman (1992: 111) says in her analysis of the relationship between historical crisis and the creation of narrative, the role of testimony is to transfer to the witness a certain form of knowledge, 'knowledge of the way in which history is the body's business'. If these starving bodies become the vehicle on which the violence of famine is inscribed, its recording by another human being, a witness, is inevitable – this is the very basis of a shared humanity. To not respond to such distress, to not record such misery, would be unconscionable.

The doctor's wife focuses, instead, on what she has read rather than witnessed – the breakdown in traditional familial and social structures wrought by famine. She observes:

The situation in the Punjab is not so miserable compared to Bombay and Bengal where people are starving due to lack of foodstuffs. The other day I read in a paper that many unclaimed children are wandering in the streets. Their parents are helpless to feed them so they have turned them out of their homes upon God's mercy. Now foodstuffs are being sent there. Also some co-operative societies have reached there. On reading of these events one's hair stands on end. May God have mercy on all of us. (MEMCR, IOR/L/PJ/12/655, 25 August to 7 September 1943, Incoming Mail)

A complex response of empathy and horror suffuses this letter-writer – relatively secure from food shortages herself – at how children too are victims of hunger. She may not have direct knowledge of the lives of the children thus turned out by their parents, but she recognises the extent to which this act subverts core social bonds as famine severs parental duties of care. Again, historian Yasmin Khan (2015: 213–214) notes a different kind of famine observation, that by British soldiers themselves:

[...] soldiers waiting for action in Burma now found themselves on the front line of a very different kind of calamity. They witnessed deaths more shocking than the violence of war itself [...] For the soldiers, the sights were distressing and disorienting. How could they justify their presence as colonial overlords if this was the result of British rule? How could they help alleviate such a tragedy? And what was the war all about if the empire was unable to protect its own inhabitants?

Witnessing famine, then, starts exposing the brutality of Empire, even for those fighting to protect it.

In Middle-Eastern and North African battlefronts – Egypt, Cyrenaica and Tripolitania in Libya, Palestine, Syria and the British Protectorate of Transjordan – rumours of a great and devastating famine sweeping parts of India, and particularly Bengal, in 1943 reached Indian soldiers, despite censorship of news and letters. Contrasted against British soldiers' self-questioning of the enterprise of Empire, Indian responses implicate themselves more directly in the material conditions of famine. A Havildar, part of the Sappers and Miners unit, writes:

From my personal experience I can tell you that the food we get here is much better than that we soldiers get in India. But whenever I sit for my meals, a dreadful picture of the appalling Indian food problem passes through my mind leaving a cloudy sediment on the walls of my heart which makes me nauseous and often I leave my meals untouched. (MEMCR, 655, 2 June to 15 June 1943, Outgoing Mail)

The soldier highlights his identification with this imagined community of sufferers through images of his own body, and his reactions are expressed in physiological

terms – he visualises the walls of his heart being covered with ‘cloudy sediment’ at the thought of food shortage in India. The spectre of famine in India hovers, Banquo-like, before him every time he sits down to eat his rations carefully provided by the colonial British government, but while Banquo’s ghost arouses guilt and fear in Macbeth, the Havildar feels only the pain of distant hunger in his nausea.

Indian emotional responses to famine move from nausea to madness, from being witness to victim, a co-sharer implicated in the same misfortune. How can the soldier’s earnings help his family when the latter cannot afford to buy food because of soaring rates of wartime inflation? A Havildar Clerk writing to relatives in South India relates soldiers’ helplessness caused by famine to the extraordinary conditions of the wartime marketplace:

I am terribly sorry to learn about the food situation in India and it seems as if there is no salvation for me. From my earliest days to the present time I have always been in this abyss of misery. It was with grim determination to see you all free from poverty that I allotted my whole pay of Rs. 85/- to you, but cruel Fate is determined to defeat me in all my purposes. What is the use of money when we are unable to obtain the necessities of life in exchange for it? The situation would drive even the most level-headed of us to madness and when we think of conditions in India we become crazy as lunatics. (MEMCR 655, 22 September to 5 October 1943, Outgoing Mail)

The letter highlights how the standard material benefits of serving in the imperial army are no longer sustainable for the soldier and his family because of the extraordinary economic conditions of war, which have led to the famine and priced poorer sections of Indian society out of food. Indivar Kamtekar (2002: 200) notes how, despite all government efforts, taxes and loans could not raise enough money in wartime India, and more money was simply printed: ‘There was an outpouring of paper currency. The amount of currency in circulation in India multiplied about six and a half times during the war years [...] Inflation was the inevitable result.’ This drastic reduction in purchasing power is an intensely traumatic experience for the soldier even as he participates in, and witnesses, heavy fighting on the battlefield – evident in his linguistic choices, filtered as they are to us by the English translation: ‘madness’, ‘crazy’, ‘lunatics’. The Havildar Clerk’s very identity as a soldier, then, is ruptured by the recreation of hunger in the homeland within his mind.

The process by which empathy is generated in Indian soldiers’ minds is re-enacted in another Havildar Clerk’s letter, where he, writing in Marathi, observes to his family:

I am arranging that you may be provided with ration cards. And as you say, that it is difficult dear, and grain is unobtainable. But look at these people in Bengal. Their attention is ten times worse than our home district. There are many Bengalies [sic] in the army here with me, and when they get their letters from home, they seem to be very worried and by their appearance, I guess that the public in Bengal is suffering badly. Many times they have



shown me their letters and when I read their sufferings, it breaks my heart.  
(MEMCR 655, 8 September to 21 September 1943, Outgoing Mail)

Information about conditions at home was thus being shared amongst Indian soldiers abroad through the circulation of letters, bringing knowledge of the home-front to the warfront rather than simply to an individual soldier. As this extract shows, soldiers were also physically circulating their letters across regional differences. The Havildar Clerk's letter is written in Marathi, widely spoken in west India, and he expresses his solidarity for Bengali fellow combatants as he reads their letters from home. Does 'reading' itself, then, broaden to become understanding and commiserating? The epistle reveals once again how writing and reading letters during the war blurs the borders of the private and the public, much as the censorship reports themselves do. As communities of knowledge were created on international battlefronts, so too were these deep bonds of feeling.

Civilian and military responses to the Bengal Famine are mediated through the panoptic gaze of the colonial censor in the Middle East and North Africa, Lieutenant Colonel M.G.M. Mair (Singh 2014: 92), who decides on how much information to filter through to Indian troops, and to the home-front. However, as Sanjoy Bhattacharya (2000: 488) notes:

While the mention of certain issues of strategic import – like references to the location of troop encampments and details of the movement of armed detachments – was deleted from the Indian soldier's correspondence, he was allowed, and indeed, encouraged to state his fears, or misgivings, about the contemporary political situation, wartime problems that affected his family and particular official policies.

Bhattacharya believes that the knowledge thus gleaned was used as the basis for British military propaganda. Thus, while censorship practices played a significant role in communications between civilian and soldier, the censor's role was more about surveillance rather than severely editing these exchanges. Yet, although the censor's authoritarian voice may have shaped the content of these military censorship reports, rarely do his own feelings find expression here. It is the acts of intercepting, reading and editing thousands of letters highlighting starvation and utter destitution, which reveal changes in the censor's own perception of, and response to, the Bengal Famine.

Towards the end of 1942, the censor's initial notes appear begrudging and disbelieving: 'There are the usual grouses about leave and moans from India concerning the cost of living and shortages but there is no evidence to show that this latter correspondence, much of which is highly coloured, is having any adverse effect on the men' (MEMCR 654, 5 November to 19 November 1942, Incoming Mail). However, when such 'coloured' letters continue unabated, he makes a specific observation regarding Bengali soldiers: 'A careful watch is being kept on the reactions of Bengali troops to reports of the conditions in Bengal as reported in the Incoming Mail portion of this report' (MEMCR 655, 25 August to 7 September 1943, Incoming Mail). He then observes how important the soldier is as a financial provider to his family: 'There is a feeling [in India] that the presence of the soldier

from the Middle East will help greatly towards the alleviation of the many wartime hardships' (MEMCR 655, 8 September to 21 September 1943, Incoming Mail). Indian soldiers, however, did not cease fighting in protest against home-front conditions, and the censor highlights how little incitement there is in the letters to antagonising colonial authorities: 'It is somewhat refreshing, therefore, to note that despite the terrible hardships which are being endured in India at the present time, when the worst type of political crisis might well be expected, letters couched in terms of political criticism are very rare. The will to fight remains unaltered' (MEMCR 655, 8 September to 21 September 1943, Incoming Mail). Both soldiers and their family members, of course, knew that their letters were intercepted and read (Singh 2014: 67–69).

The censor's perspective on wartime hardship in India alters further as he continues to summarise the contents of letters from home: 'Letters vary from the angry and frustrated to the hopelessly heartsick. It is understandable that those who return to the Middle East do little to allay the anxieties of their comrades' (MEMCR 655, 8 September to 21 September 1943, Outgoing Mail). From being responsible for the emotional monitoring of Indian troops and the removal of epistolary content considered inappropriate for the soldiers' 'morale', the censor himself becomes a witness to the lived realities of famine as represented by life-writing. He comments on the nature of his work: 'Many alarming reports concerning conditions in Bengal and South India have to be suppressed here to prevent the spread of alarm and despondency. The number of letters containing such reports is however on the increase and some letters must inevitably get through' (MEMCR 655, 22 September to 5 October 1943, Incoming Mail). And he also reveals the psychological damage of continuing in his current role: '[...] deletion from such letters present problems which a humane censor finds very difficult' (MEMCR 655, 8 September to 21 September 1943, Incoming Mail). The human thus disrupts, cutting across asymmetrical power structures that place the colonial censor in control of the Indian soldier and his family's words: the censor finds himself pausing before excising words further. Witnessing famine, then, makes letter writers record their empathy, highlight ruptures in social and economic bonds, and find themselves unable to eat meals placed before them. The censor too does not remain immune. If the pain of famine can 'unmake' the world, to use Elaine Scarry's word (1985), it also suggests an 'unmaking' in the authoritative surveillance and deletion involved in the act of colonial censorship itself.

#### *'Pyeter jwala': food and fire in Bibhutibhushan's Ashani Sanket*

The exchange of Indian wartime letters on the famine provides us with glimpses into an almost unbearable proximity to the physical depletion generated by starvation on the individual body and the community. It is, however, with the Bengali novel that such intimate connections between the reader and the characters enduring hunger are investigated in considerable more depth. Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's *Ashani Sanket* is technically an incomplete novel. It was published serially in the Bengali magazine *Matribhumi* between January 1944 and 1946, but when the magazine folded in January 1946, Bibhutibhushan never took up the novel again. If the letter extracts can be seen as an example of serial

writing that produce the censorship reports, the novel too here appears to take on a serial prose form. Again, both letters and novel underscore how hunger may be imagined as a new form of connection between sufferer and witness/reader, but also in their untimely termination, draw attention to its unimaginable nature. We are left to question whether experiencing hunger can ever truly be communicated.

*Ashani Sanket* opens with the scene of two women bathing in the river in Notungan village. One of them is Ananga-bou, the Brahmin wife much loved in the *Kapali* or farming community; the other an elderly neighbour called Puntir Ma, who warns Ananga-bou of approaching danger – ‘Sister, you should get out of the water. A crocodile has come to the river’ (59). The crocodile never makes its appearance, but Ananga-bou hears of its presence. A little later in the novel, rumours of a far-flung war reach her schoolteacher husband Gangacharan’s ears, along with the news of a sudden spike in the price of rice (80). The proleptic image of the predatory crocodile thus establishes a key theme of the novel. *Ashani Sanket* is as much about the Notungan villagers themselves *becoming* food as it is about the encroaching lack of food they experience. How then – through surges in rice prices, or bodily sensations like the repeatedly endured ‘*pyeter jwala*’ (‘the burning of the stomach’) – is famine registered in the lives of these villagers? The Bengal Famine is shown to dismantle the traditional structures of their world, but what effect has it on the characters’ interiority, memory and desire?

Bibhutibhushan himself was not directly affected by the famine. His biographer Rushti Sen notes that by 1943, he was a recognised author who spent the year travelling across Bengal, having finally achieved a degree of financial stability. However, from his very childhood Bibhutibhushan had been no stranger to poverty and hardship (Sen 1995: 33), and had also cultivated a deep and intimate knowledge of the Bengali countryside and its village people, which the novel reflects. Like most villagers in Notungan, the geopolitical contours of a world at war on an industrial scale are beyond the local imaginings of Ananga-bou and her husband Gangacharan, the protagonists in the novel, whose knowledge of place is formed only by journeying by foot or bullock cart across the villages of Bengal. The novel portrays their itinerant life through glimpses into the past, woven through with everyday realities of poverty and hardship – falling out with Gangacharan’s extended family in Hariharpur, leaky roofs in unsuitable village huts, and barely sustaining themselves and two sons on meagre earnings from school teaching. However, their life in Notungan, with which the novel begins, seems to bring about a reversal of fortune.

Bibhutibhushan reveals here how food becomes a structuring device for representing a harmonious relationship with the natural world as well as determining the nature of interpersonal connections on which Bengali village life operates. Gangacharan and Ananga-bou’s access to food in Notungan village is assured since they are Brahmins, Gangacharan shrewdly choosing to make his home in a place where no other Brahmins live. They are held in great respect here – Gangacharan has become the village schoolmaster and local physician, and is even believed to be the repository of mystical powers because of his Brahminical learning that can keep deadly diseases like cholera at bay. Performing such Brahminism reaps great benefits for Ananga-bou and himself, as the villagers gladly

give them gifts of food in exchange for their presence in the village, and the couple finally starts believing that their time of want is over.

With such food negotiations interwoven into the first section of the novel, Gangacharan's increasing financial stability, the growth of his small school, and Ananga-bou's network of relationships in the village they had previously lived in – Bhatchala – are established. If, as Maud Ellmann (1993: 112) argues, 'food is the prototype of all exchanges with the other, be they verbal, financial, or erotic', *Ashani Sanket* highlights this in both social milieus and intimate spaces of encounter between husband and wife. Social bonds are sealed through the preparation and offering of food, locating maternal nurture within the gendered role of the housewife – the suffix '*bou*', meaning 'wife', hardly ever leaves Ananga-bou's name in the novel. Again, erotic intimacy is suggested through the partaking of food from a single dish:

[Ananga-bou] sat beside her husband and tossed a handful of *ghee*-covered puffed rice from Gangacharan's bowl into her mouth [...] Her laughter and the seduction in her eyes showed that she had not left her youth behind, she had not lost the power to steal away a man's heart. Gangacharan continued to stare at his wife, entranced (85).

Different kinds of appetite, then – maternal, sexual and prandial – are enmeshed in these encounters with food.

Such interactions with food are then sharply contrasted with the 'unnatural' conditions of being priced out of food in a fertile Bengal – the focus of the later section of the novel. As Amartya Sen (1981: 1) argues in *Poverty and Famines*: 'Starvation is the characteristic of some people not *having* enough to eat. It is not the characteristic of there not being enough to eat. While the latter can be the cause of the former, it is but one of many possible causes.' Bibhutibhushan's literary investment in the language of bounty and dearth in *Ashani Sanket* in the 1940s seems to anticipate Sen's economic insight of 1981. The language of bounty is highlighted in early scenes where the author's cinematic eye affectionately lingers on a verdant rural Bengali landscape that becomes an intrinsic part of the characters themselves. This is seen, for instance, when Ananga-bou and her two boys take a trip to Bhatchala in their wealthy landowning neighbour Mr. Biswas's bullock cart, and stop by the riverside for a rest:

Ananga said to her sons: "Come and sit in this shade and eat some puffed rice. We don't know when we will reach Bhatchala."

Her eldest boy replied: "Oh, just look at how many mangoes are budding on those trees! This season there will be plenty of mangoes, won't there, mother?"

[...]

In the silent spring afternoon, swaying along the earthen road, the bullock cart passed under the shade of mango tree clusters, along with star-apple,

banyan, bamboo and silk cotton trees. Sitting inside the cart, Ananga-bou started becoming drowsy. The elder boy said: "Mother, you're dozing – do sit up!"

Embarrassed, Ananga replied: "I should have splashed my eyes with some water. I'm feeling sleepy" (72–73).

The puffed rice, budding mangoes and regional varieties of trees recreate the image of a gentle, beautiful Bengal, bearing the promise of food to come – a Bengali spring rather than an English autumn that anticipates mellow fruitfulness, with the Keatsian possibility of filling 'all fruit with ripeness to the core' (Barnard 1977: 434). The trundling motion of the bullock cart that makes Ananga-bou drift off evokes the sleepy rhythm of such rural life, a slowness of time and pace out of joint with the military aeroplanes Gangacharan sometimes sees, perhaps both literally and metaphorically, 'flying over his head' (82).

Direct mentions of war in the novel, of which there only a few, forge further links with food. An early verbal exchange between Gangacharan and Durga Pandit, another Brahmin teacher from the village of Kamdevpur, highlights that Allied losses in Southeast Asia relate also to losses in food supplies:

"Have the Japanese taken over Singapore? What news of the war?"

"Why only Singapore, they've taken over Burma too. Didn't you know that piece of news?"

"No – um – hadn't really heard it. Burma? That's – "

"From where Rangoon rice comes from, brother..."

Now this was a new bit of news. [...] Although to Gangacharan all this was still rather hazy. He didn't really know exactly which direction Rangoon or Burma was in. East or south, and which region? Was it very far away? (87–88)

Ananga-bou's visit to the neighbouring village of Bhatchala takes place after such connections between food and war have been established, but before rising food prices directly affect the couple. It is this journey that becomes highly significant in the novel, indicating its turn to interiority, memory and desire.

As night falls, Ananga-bou sits on a mat on the threshold of her former home in Bhatchala, facing the moonlit lotus pond outside. Two of her dearest female companions – Moti-Muchini and the widow Kali – remain with her. Memories of food weave themselves into Ananga-bou's happiness:

Ananga-bou's heart was rejoicing today. After so many days she had come back to her old home, and had met her old friends. So much time had gone by since she had seen such a moonlit night over the lotus pond! Although when she actually lived here, she was only able to eat sometimes and not at

others. This same Moti-Muchini had plucked so many ripe mangoes for her, had even stolen ripe jackfruit from other people's trees to feed her. This female cowherd Kali had surreptitiously, under the noses of her brothers and their wives, brought Ananga-bou flattened rice or *chire*, made from new grain (74).

The intimate space of female companionship created by the three women bears the history of food being given, gladly and generously, to Ananga-bou during times of duress, by those who do not enjoy her caste privileges but love her nonetheless. By recalling these moments of past nurture, Ananga-bou is then able to articulate her deepest desire for the future: 'What I really wanted was to build a little home right by the bank of the lotus pond [...] Wouldn't that be rather nice?' (75)

The narrative moves on from this yearning for home in a gentle, nurturing Bengal to the month of *shravan* (the monsoon season), when even the optimistic Ananga-bou starts fearing for the future in the seemingly endless struggle to obtain food. 'All the rice had suddenly disappeared from the land, just like camphor! Even the large market at Gobindapur did not have any rice' (108). The simile is telling – extraordinary forces at play in '*juddher bajar*' ('the war market') (105) make both the plentiful quantities of agricultural and natural produce, and their ready availability for Gangacharan and Ananga-bou as Brahmins, suddenly disappear. This strange vanishing reflects the lived realities of the 1940s – as Madhusree Mukerjee (2011: 130) notes: 'Between January and July of 1943, even as famine set in, India exported 71,000 tons of rice, an unknown fraction of it through Calcutta's port.' The situation was further aggravated by black market profiteering and hoarding practices, most of which went unchecked, a rationing system introduced far too late only when the famine was well underway, and permission to import food grains consistently being denied by the British government in London (Sen 1981: 75–83; Srimanjari 2009: 147; Mukherjee 2015: 141–142).

War and famine, then, register in the novel not as an event but as everyday violence, through this extraordinary rise in food prices. Gangacharan and Ananga-bou's socio-economic identity can no longer simply be that of a poor Bengali Brahmin couple, living off school teaching and practising domestic frugality: they are inexorably connected to the devastating effects of a global war they know and care so little about. On first hearing of price surges in the marketplace, Gangacharan and Ananga-bou reflect on this very connection:

"You know, I heard that the price of rice will keep increasing, everyone is saying this."

"It will go up more than six rupees? What on earth?"

"That's what everyone is saying. Apparently it's because of the war that this is happening –"

"Who is doing all this warring?!"

“That you won’t understand. Our King has started fighting with Germany and Japan – apparently everything will now cost more.” (83)

Linguistic resonances further connect the characters’ experiences of famine, with the novel being shot through with metaphors of fire. While the title of the novel itself, *Ashani Sanket* or *Intimations of Thunder* evokes a distant thunderous fire, we are also informed of a literal fire in Notungan’s past that defaced a villager – his body was burnt when he was a boy and the scars have never faded (127). This character, nicknamed ‘Jodu-pora’ or ‘burnt Jodu’ by the villagers, is not a sympathetic portrayal of a disfigured man living in rural Bengal; rather, his burnt body becomes a physical realisation for the rapaciousness of war. A well-paid employee at the local brick-kiln, Jodu-pora gains access to hoarded rice, which he agrees to sell to a young woman in Notungan village, Kapali-bou – a close friend of Ananga-bou – in return for sexual favours when she is starving. Here, a metaphoric use of Bengali language is shown to turn literal. Ananga-bou often affectionately uses the adjective ‘*porarmukhi*’ (74), which she calls younger female companions like Moti-Muchini when their last remark to her has been especially pert – ‘*porarmukhi*’ means ‘the girl with the burnt or accursed mouth’. But with the introduction of Jodu-pora in the novel, the word ‘*pora*’ transforms instead into the horrifying predatory reality of his burnt body.

Transgressive sexual appetites are thus also associated with fire, as metaphors of rapacity continue throughout the novel. As the food scarcity worsens, Ananga-bou and her companions Moti-Muchini and Kapali-bou devise new strategies for feeding themselves. They make their way into the forest on the village outskirts, and are rooting amongst thorny bushes to dig out earthen potatoes when a bearded man suddenly emerges from the roadside and makes straight for them. He marches silently and purposefully towards Ananga-bou as she watches in horror, while simultaneously trying to disentangle her hair from brambly bushes that prevent her from fleeing: ‘Her dress was in disarray. In her exertions, her sweating face had become suffused with colour. The man was coming towards her like an insect inexorably drawn towards a burning flame’ (123). Just as this ravisher is about to grab Ananga-bou’s hand, Moti-Muchini intervenes, pushing the man with all her strength. He falls helplessly into the hole the women had dug.

In the novel, then, Bibhutibhushan views forced sexuality as part of the larger net of rapaciousness that he describes closing in on Notungan village, with characters being marked as targets of consumption. As Maud Ellmann (1993: 39) argues, representations of sexuality are often ‘haunted by the imagery of ingestion’, and Ananga-bou’s attacker desires to satiate yet another appetite. The imagery of a consuming fire continues to intensify – if Ananga-bou is ‘a burning flame’ (123) to her would-be ravisher, fire is also associated with the sparse, strange wartime market. Gangacharan goes to the ‘bazaar of war’ (105) to find that ‘the price of items had soared like fire’ (137), while a starving Moti-Muchini comes to Ananga-bou saying ‘*pyet jwalchhe*’ – her stomach is ‘on fire with hunger’ (122). As the fires of thunder, sexual desire, war and hunger intersect with a literal disfiguring fire from the past and with each other, language is shown to register the sensation of burning. This, then, is how the characters experience famine in the novel – through an everyday burn.

As the famine progressively worsens, and hunger dominates the characters' relentless quest for food, we realise that Ananga-bou's home by the lotus pond in Bhatchala will never be built. This forms the novel's undertow of loss. Furthermore, Gangacharan's daydreams, built around his fervent longing to provide for his wife, are built into this narrative of unfulfilled desires too. While Ananga-bou scours the shrubbery near the village for food, Gangacharan walks miles nearly every day to see if there is anyone from whom he can buy rice, or who is willing to gift him rice, since donating food to a Brahmin is seen as a pious act in Hinduism. He hears of Nibaran Ghosh in the village of Shankarpur who is rumoured to possess rice stores. When he reaches Nibaran Ghosh's house, however, the latter is unwilling to sell him any, but offers him a meal instead. The hungry Gangacharan, not having eaten properly in many days, is unable to resist. Yet, though Gangacharan eats on his own, his enjoyment of the food is haunted by memories of Ananga-bou rummaging through thorny brambly woods at home to gather edible leaves. He calculates how many rice balls she would be able to scoop up out of the unfinished rice on his plate, and is determined to bring these remains back home for her: in the mathematics of food deprivation, even discarded, half-consumed rice finds its place as an index of love.

Ultimately, however, Gangacharan is far too embarrassed to request these leftovers from his host's daughter, Khyantamani. But later, in the soaringly expensive wartime marketplace in the nearest town, a luxurious and expensive pair of *sandesh* or sweetmeats transfixes him, and he imagines the joy of presenting these to his wife:

Gangacharan began to gaze repeatedly at the pair of *sandesh*. How beautifully they had been made! The sweet makers were skilled.

If only he could take them out of the packaging and place them straight into Ananga's hands!

"My love, see what I have brought you..."

"What is it, dear?"

"Such a lovely pair of *sandesh*, have you ever seen anything like it? I bought them just for you."

Never had he been able to put luxurious food into his wife's hands. Where would he get such food from, anyway? Had he ever seen days when money flowed plentifully into their household? And, on top of everything, there was this terrible famine (138).

Through evoking repeatedly the image of Ananga-bou's hands, and evoking his own joy in placing the *sandesh* in them, Gangacharan's imagination transforms food from simply satiating appetite to becoming a symbol of enduring love.

However, Gangacharan's dreams of securing food remain unrealised. They jostle uncomfortably in the novel against the nightmarish spectres that human



beings become. In the monsoon season, just as rice vanishes from the market, human wraiths drift into Notungan, begging endlessly for rice-starch. Half-naked, weary and gaunt, with nude children in tow, they visit Ananga-bou one day as she is busy in the kitchen. Standing at the threshold of the house, they clamour for rice-starch – ‘*phyan khaitam, phyan khaitam*’ – which Ananga-bou rushes to provide them with. ‘What kind of situation have such folk found themselves in, when they have to leave their native village and travel to unknown places with their children, only to beg for a mug of rice-starch?’ she thinks (104–105). And yet, even then, the menace of war seems far from imminent: ‘Everyone [in Notungan] still wondered, do people really die from not having enough to eat? Surely that danger could never befall them’ (105).

Death by starvation comes to Notungan village in the form of Moti-Muchini. At the end of the novel, she is unexpectedly seen near Ananga-bou’s house under a mango tree. Her body, with its swollen hands, feet and face, is almost unrecognisable. Gangacharan, on his way back home in the evening, has to ask her who she is:

Moti spoke with great effort in a croaking voice: “It’s me, sir.”

“Who – Moti? Why are you here? What’s happened to you?”

“I’m suffering from a terrible fever, sir. Haven’t eaten in three days. I want to eat a bit of rice.”

“Oh, I see! Can you get up and come with me?”

Moti had no energy to rise to her feet. Gangacharan would not touch her. Therefore Moti remained lying where she was (145).

Gangacharan, the educated Brahmin, adheres to the strictures of the Hindu caste system in not assisting Moti. As a ‘*muchini*’ or female leather worker, a suffix that forms an inescapable part of her identity throughout the novel, she is considered an ‘untouchable’. Later, when she is discovered to have died in the same location by Kapali-bou, her corpse becomes a village spectacle:

Moti’s dead body remained under the mango tree. So many people came to see it. They gazed on it from afar and left in fear. What had befallen Moti today could easily be their fate too. Her death seemed to open the villagers’ eyes [...] The intimations of thunder brought about by the first death from starvation (149).

Writing in the context of the 1981 Irish hunger strike in Long Kesh prison, Maud Ellmann (1993: 16) notes that ‘the starving body is itself a text, the living dossier of its discontents, for the injustices of power are encoded in the savage hieroglyphics of its sufferings.’ *Ashani Sanket* does not ascribe death to anyone else other than Moti-Muchini: Gangacharan and Ananga-bou, though undergoing severe hardships, remain alive when the novel ends. It is the most vulnerable character

within the highly asymmetrical power structures of colonialism as well as the social and religious hierarchies of Bengali village life – a woman, an ‘untouchable’ – who diverts death from the main characters, much as, earlier in the novel, she had prevented Ananga-bou’s rape by pushing the male assailant away. Moti-Muchini’s body becomes the site in which the villagers read a portent of their own destiny. The subaltern speaks, but only through her own dead body, becoming a symbolic warning for the future and a focus of attention only when she becomes a terrifying object consumed not only by the brutality of war but also indigenous caste and gender hierarchies.

Ellmann’s provocative and poignant conclusion (1993: 113) to *The Hunger Artists* states: ‘There are many nuances of nothingness: and every hunger artist eats a different absence, speaks a different silence, and leaves a different kind of desolation.’ How is this ‘desolation’ reflected in Bibhutibhushan’s representation of Bengal famine sufferers? If anything, Bibhutibhushan’s characters – not so much hunger artists, perhaps, as hunger victims since they starve not by choice but as the uncontrolled outcome of an imperial war – resist ‘desolation’. After Moti-Muchini’s death, people start escaping to the city, where they hear that the government is doling out food rations. Kapali-bou, deciding to leave with Jodu-pora, comes to say goodbye to Ananga-bou, who, however, will have none of it: ‘Stay with me. If I get to eat, so will you. You’ll stay here with me like my younger sister. If we die from hunger, we’ll both die together [...] Promise me, you won’t go!’ (151) Convinced, Kapali-bou goes to meet Jodu-pora to cancel her travel plans. A thwarted and enraged Jodu-pora tries to persuade her otherwise in the final lines of the novel:

Jodu-pora shouted after her: “Listen to me, I want to say something to you!”

From afar, Kapali-bou looked back at him. She hesitated a little. Then she turned and walked away for good (151).

If the Bengal hunger victims are to succumb to the inescapable lack of food in *Ashani Sanket*, they seek to exercise choice over how their lives end. The novel finishes with Kapali-bou’s final severing of sexually exploitative ties with Jodu-pora. Preventing further capitulation to the economic forces brought into play by the Second World War, she refuses to remain an object of consumption, food for the predator. Her return to the female companionship and sisterly love of Ananga-bou in Notungan reaffirms the novel’s emotional core by echoing Ananga-bou’s evening of camaraderie with Moti-Muchini and the widow Kali in Bhatchala, where Ananga-bou had dreamt of her ideal home by the lotus pond. Kapali-bou’s walking away from Jodu-pora, then, constitutes the novel’s resistance by locating agency within a nurturing female community. We are not told what ultimately happens to her, or to any of the other characters, as Bibhutibhushan never took up the novel again after *Matribhumi* – the magazine that was publishing the story serially – folded in January 1946. The novel is thus technically incomplete but leaves the reader with a final assertion of character agency. If Kapali-bou is to starve, she chooses how, and where.

## Conclusion

The Bengal Famine provides us with a ‘flare of light’ (Kamtekar 2002: 189) that brings into sharp focus features of turbulent life in 1940s India. I have argued that mass death on the streets of Calcutta and in Bengal’s villages have allowed for a fresh critique of imperialism, casteism and global war itself. These socio-political and cultural currents of the time lead us towards a history of contested emotions, which are testified to by Indian soldiers’ letters and then dramatised by literary responses.

Letters sent to and by Indian soldiers foreground the various ways by which the pain of famine is witnessed, imagined and represented. The letters also reveal the creation of new and alternative communities of sharing knowledge and building empathy across differences, including disrupting the role of colonial censorship itself. Again, through its deft interweaving of images, Bibhutibhushan’s novel *Ashani Sanket* highlights the rapacious and all-consuming nature of famine. The Bengali verb ‘*jwala*’ (‘to burn’) returns with varied associations, finally devouring the body of the ‘untouchable’ leather worker Moti-Muchini: the violence of caste is shown to be just as aggressive as that of a colonial war. Food itself is established here as a form of exchange between the self and the other – husband and wife, host and guest, *kapali* villager and Brahmin schoolteacher, and even in times of utmost scarcity, its joyful and loving sharing between women characters gives shape and resilience to the novel’s emotional core. By interrogating the relationship between human subjectivity and literary form, Bibhutibhushan, then, highlights the various kinds of knowing made possible by the Bengali novel.

(Word count: 8,443)

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