



Artists' Responses to the Consequences of the Bengal Famine of 1943

Yasha Shrivastava

Dr. Harisingh Gour Central University Sagar M.P.

ABSTRACT-

The Bengal famine of 1943 killed nearly three million people; and rooted in this human tragedy of death and hunger, evolved a distinct oeuvre of art in modern India that went on to create a legacy of politically charged art and artists. This paper explored an overt emphasis on drawing and anatomy as the skeleton of pictorial representation.

The Famine stirred among these artist of Bengal a grave desire to explore a new art language, one that would justly express the social cataclysm of the time. This tumultuous event is what gave rise to the significant modern art group, the Calcutta Group, in 1943. They worked towards a language that was reflective of the impending change in the country. I'll talk about some of the renowned artists' works that have brought attention to the 1943 famine's effects, particularly in rural areas, through their artwork. These works enabled thousands of Bengalis to recognize the plight of the poor and the underprivileged. This paper deals with the question of artists reacting to the social and political conditions of their times through the drawings, sketches, Photography and notes of the famine, and tries to examine these visual records in a larger continuum of protest and struggle- against the ruling colonial state and moreover the class of bourgeoisie.

Key Words - Bengal Famine of 194, Artists, Anatomy, Hunger, Indian art

The Bengal famine of 1943 was a major [famine](#) in the [Bengal province](#) of [British India](#) during [World War II](#). An estimated 2.1–3 million, out of a population of 60.3 million, died of [starvation](#), [malaria](#), or other diseases aggravated by [malnutrition](#), [population displacement](#), unsanitary conditions and lack of health care. Millions were impoverished as the crisis overwhelmed large segments of the economy and social fabric. Eventually, families disintegrated; men sold their small farms and left home to look for work or to join the army, and women and children became homeless migrants, often travelling to Calcutta or another large city in search of organised relief. Historians have frequently characterised the famine as "man-made", asserting that wartime [colonial](#) policies created and then exacerbated the crisis. A minority view holds that the famine arose from natural causes.

In his seminal work "Poverty and Famines" (1981) [Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen](#) showed that a root cause of the Bengal famine was the economic boom in cities. This caused food prices to soar, taking a toll on the rural population.

The Bengal famine of 1943 killed nearly three million people; and rooted in this human tragedy of death and hunger, evolved a distinct oeuvre of art in modern India that went on to create a legacy of politically charged art and artists. The massacre of the famine was archived in the works of a group of realist painters from Bengal with direct social affiliations and activist agendas. We may call the oeuvre- "critical realism", a pictorial style in which academic realism becomes the tool of socialist critique on the plight of the famine-stricken and the role of the oppressive state. For artists- Chittoprasad Bhattacharya Zainul Abedin, and Somnath Hore, the art of rebellion was not restricted only to its aesthetic realm like many of their peers and senior contemporaries, but called for political action through painted posters and graphic prints.

The Famine had a strong impact on the public memory of Bengal and on the aesthetic spheres of literature, theatre and film. The horrific memories of it still survive through the art of these young Bengali artists with a strong Marxist slant and films such as *Ashani Sanket* by Satyajit Roy

based on the novel by Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyay.



This paper deals with the question of artists reacting to the social and political conditions of their times through the drawings, sketches, Photography and notes of the famine, and tries to examine these visual records in a larger continuum of protest and struggle- against the ruling colonial state and moreover the class of bourgeoisie. The oeuvre derives its legacy from the Die Brücke German expressionists like Kathe Kollwitz, underground drawings of Henry Moore, Soviet Socialist Realism and is significant for the urge to remain critically active to contemporary times leaving a lasting effect on the visual culture of political activist art

Artists display sketches of Bengal famine

In an exhibition titled "Three Masters", three master artists have showcased their works highlighting the tragic Bengal famine (1943), rural and pastoral Bengal and political turbulence of the bygone era.

The works of veteran artists Chittoprasad Bhattacharya, Haren Das and Somenath Hore - who come from the celebrated Bengal School, an influential art movement and a style of Indian painting that originated in Bengal in the early 20th century - chronicle their urge for experimentation with early art forms.

Caricatures and sketches of the poor dying in the Bengal famine, woodcuts, engravings and lithographs - all are on display representing many facets of Bengal.

Chittoprasad Bhattacharya (1915- 1978),

Chittoprasad Bhattacharya, a political artist and active supporter of the Communist Party of India, vividly captured the human cost of the famine. In November 1943, through his ink drawings and detailed annotations, he kept a log of his travels through famine-struck Midnapur, a district in India's present-day state of West Bengal.

In his sketches, the political artist targeted British colonial rule and global capitalism, which he identified as the main culprits of the deadly food crisis.

Chittoprasad's caricatures and cartoons from the mid-1930s onwards made biting remarks at the colonialist and feudal authorities. He can also be credited to have mobilized the medium of printmaking as means of fluid dissemination of socialist ideas in the sub-continent. Printmaking in Europe has played significant revolutionary roles in the Reformation against the Catholic Church, in the Romantic artists' rejection of Neoclassical standards and most importantly the German Expressionists' response to the Nazi atrocities in the most recent times. In Soviet Russia and China, realism was in the popular visual culture as a statement supporting the laborious struggle of the proletariat. Chittoprasad's most seminal contribution to the archivization of the Bengal Famine was his publication *Hungry Bengal*, comprising of sketches and copious notes as he travelled by bus, boat and on foot across the famine-stricken landscape, reporting and drawing pictures of hunger, illness, forced prostitution, abandoned villages, and uncaring corrupt officials. For the provocative attack through his distinct oeuvre of *critical realism*, the authorities banned the book soon after its publication, burning huge numbers of it. The copious notes often in the back leaf of the drawing, identification of the people in rural areas and their living conditions, make his famine sketches make it possible to access alternative narratives of the Famine in great detail which otherwise would have been lost in the vagueness of official records.

Chittoprasad's work goes beyond his sharp social critique. His black-and-white ink drawings, prints and watercolors were unlike anything that was coming out of India at the time. His works remind viewers more of contemporary graphic novels than of the Soviet-style propaganda they echo. The carved faces, barren trees and lined rib cages of his illustrations tell a story of inescapable scarcity and deprivation through simple black strokes.

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An undated sketch by Chittoprasad that shows a starving man.



Chittaprasad, "Untitled" (1947) pen and ink and graphite on paper



Chittaprasad, *Stop Killing People*, 1952, ink and brush on paper



Chittaprosad, "Untitled" (1952) brush and ink on paper



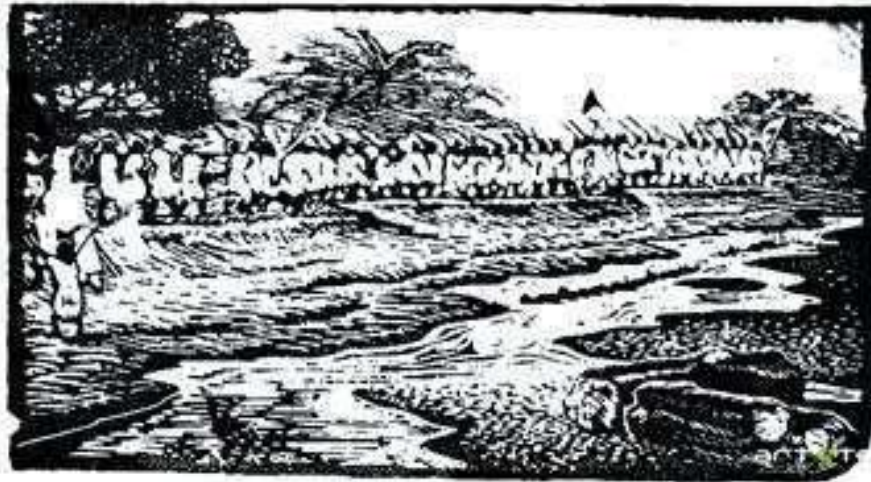
Chittaprosad, "Children of Upendra Rishi Das, Rancho, Bikrampur," (1944)

Zainul Abedi (1914 -1976)

Zaunul Abedi was a painter and a political activist involved in the development and advocacy of fine arts in his country from the end of the British colonial era through the turbulence of Bangladesh's independence and infancy. His best-known works majorly include his sketches in Chinese ink made on simple packing paper that portrays the horrors of the great Bengal famine of 1943.

The famine had such an effect on the romantically inclined Abedin that he left his job as a teacher at the Government College of Art and Crafts Kolkata to pick up the brush to record the wide-spread devastation struck by the man-made famine. Abedin has joined the college as a student in 1933 completing his five-years diploma in the Western style of academic painting. Disillusioned with the orientalist national style of the Bengal school and knowing the

limitations of academic realism, he was in search of a language which surfaced through the gripping famine sketches done in ink with rapid strokes and an expressionist fervour.



Abedin's exhibition of sketches and drawings based on the Bengal Famine in 1944 brought him critical acclaim and recognition as a painter of the downtrodden. He burnt charcoal to prepare his own ink and used it on cheap and ordinary packing paper to depict the starving people on the road side, a story of miserable suffering with strong human emotions. The drawings like those of the expressionist German artist Kathe Kollwitz's have become iconic images of human suffering during the famine. The uncompromising reality in his ink drawings intensified the sense of pathos and critically framed the skeletal figures in a state of desperate hunger. The "bare" style devoid of any colour has a latent aggression in the deployment of brush strokes, in the harshness of the edges; in showing the human beings at par with street dogs and crows scavenging for food or perhaps trying to lick off the remnants of the last morsel of food. In another sketch, a crow pecks at the head of a dead woman almost reduced to a skeleton.

The street and pavement dwellers at the wake of the Famine in the stark black and white sketches, are nameless living ghosts, self-engrossed in suffering who dares not confront us with a gaze. Without any embellishment or adornment, Abedin thus sketches the victims of the famine with brutal honesty and truth, exposing dark facets of colonial history and mass suffering in calligraphic brushstrokes, radically subverting the style of Jamini Roy, a major influence on his works.



Somnath Hore(1921- 2006),

The youngest of the trio to be actively engaged in the socialist struggle of the Bengal Famine, derived inspiration from the former two, his seniors, learning “drawing” from them. Around twenty years old during the Famine, his family was badly struck, his father died with the mother left to take care of the hungry brothers and sisters. This personal struggle and suffering ingrained in his memory and sensibility enabled him to touch and feel the wounds of the society from beneath the skin and the skeletal appearance. Though he started his documentation of the Bengal Famine through notes and sketches in 1943 for publication in *Janajuddha*, he soon joined the Government College of Art in Calcutta to academically train himself as an artist, learning various techniques of print-making which proved vital for his subsequent coming to age. In 1946-'47 while still a second-year student at the Art College, his sketches and notes in the diary of the *Tebhaga Movement* spear-headed the visual propaganda for the Peasant’s Uprising in Northern Bengal. The images in these diaries, unlike the Famine sketches which focus on victimization, are more affirmative in nature, marking the political aspirations and conviction of the oppressed in the struggle for his sharecropper’s right. Sketches of the meetings of the *Krishak Sabha*, later converted to wood-cut prints become important documents telling about the internal organizational aspect of the revolt. The realism of light in these wood-cuts can be read as a testimony to the firm belief of the peasants against the unjust feudal lords, a visual counterpart to their slogans. In the *Tebhaga* works we see the partisan Somnath, whose later works take to a more subjective and personal internalization of the pathos.

Unlike Chittoprasad, Somnath Hore did not have severe ties with the Communist Party immediately, in fact he went underground with the Party in 1949 unable to complete his art-education till 1957. A major turning point in his career came in 1954 with the invitation of Atul Bose to teach at the Indian College of Art and Draughtsmanship; from when on he shifted to the idea of a broader humanism, images of pain and suffering without referring to any particular immediate crisis. As he shifted initially to Delhi as a lecturer of Graphic Arts, then to Calcutta and finally to Santiniketan, the memory of the emaciated child of the Famine remained alive in his etchings and in his bronzes with uncanny skeletal forms. His innovation of the pulp-paper printing technique led to a series of prints titled *Wounds* where the white textural surface with occasional smears of blood-red, hinted at the unfathomable pain of the suffering with whom the artist passionately empathized.



Wounds 54, variation proof print, paper-pulp print

Haren Das introduced line engraving and etching into the art curriculum and most of the works, especially his woodcuts and engravings, captured rural, pastoral Bengal. Despite using restraint and economy, he has managed to offer a glimpse of a Bengal that no longer exists. Throughout his career Das remained committed to British academic and Victorian ideals that included concepts of perfection and traditionally perceived beauty. Unlike artists such as [Somnath Hore](#), who reacted with brutal directness to the horrors of the 1943 [Bengal Famine](#), Haren Das remained focused upon his vision of a rural ideal. However, his bucolic images paid continuous homage to the hardworking people of India's farms and villages.



Sunil Janah

Black and white photographic images by Sunil Janah, who later on went to work with *Life Magazine's* Margaret Burke-White, capture the objective reality of the catastrophe; Abedin's compositions go a step beyond in delineating the crippled human psyche on the streets of Kolkata.

His photographs of the Bengal Famine were printed in 'People's War', the newspaper of the Communist Party of India at that time. The catastrophe of the Bengal famine that emerged from those photographs, stunned the entire world. That lakhs of people were dying of hunger in Bengal, was not known

in many parts of India, let alone the rest of the world. Newspapers, that were the most important source of information and communication at that time, were under the control of the British government, and used to print on their orders. When 'People's War' published Sunil Janah's photographs and Chittaprasad's drawings, the whole world's attention came on to the famine in Bengal. These photographs and drawings were a story in themselves: a powerful story about reality. These pictures were able to tell those who saw them that the famine was not due to no rain, too much rain or any natural catastrophe; but were the result of the British participation in the Second World War and their imperialist, accumulative and inhuman policies that sacrificed the lives of 3.5 lakh poor Indians, to their imperialist lust. These photographs brought the horrifying truth about the Bengal Famine before the world, and this led to a growing anger against the British both within and without India.

In these photographs of the Bengal famine, one can see lines and lines of emaciated, skeleton-like people. These pictures were used as postcards and sent all over the world so that people come to know of the masses of people, struggling with starvation and help was requested for them.

While these photographs of the Bengal famine made Sunil Janah famous throughout the world, the experience was a tragic one for him. How could a person with leftist ideas feel happy that the photographs of living skeletons and people dying of hunger taken by him had made him famous? In an interview in 1988 he said that it was very difficult for him to photograph those dying of hunger, instead of helping them. He said, I was jealous of those comrades and people who did not think of their past or future, but gave all their energies for the help and relief of the starving masses. I wanted to leave my camera and do the same. However, P.C. Joshi, who had taken me with him to the villages of Bengal and who was my guide, my advisor, my well-wisher, explained to me the significance of documenting the actual condition of the people. With a heavy heart I held up my camera and kept taking photographs.



Sunil Janah Photograph of the Bengal Famine,
1943

Conclusion:

The Famine of Bengal stirred among these artist of Bengal a grave desire to explore a new art language, one that would justly express the social cataclysm of the time. This tumultuous event is what gave rise to the significant modern art group, the Calcutta Group, in 1943. They worked towards a language that was reflective of the impending change in the country.

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