



RESEARCH ARTICLE

From fascism to famine: Complicity, conscience, and the narrative of ‘peasant passivity’ in Bengal, 1941–1945

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Abstract

Between 1941 and 1945, the Second World War changed the physical and moral geographies of Bengal, an important base for the British government. In 1943, a man-made famine resulted in the death of about four million peasants. The Bengal Famine has been the subject of intense scrutiny in terms of establishing the moral culpability of the colonial government and its provincial collaborators. This article revisits the wartime period and the famine as a moment of historical and social transformation. By examining the Anti-Fascist Writers’ and Artists’ Association’s engagement with fascism, I argue that a new form of Bengali subjectivity emerged, one that recognized itself as part of a global collective, premised on its being forced to participate in the Second World War. I explore how this predicament led to reflection on the intellectual legacies of colonialism, including the promises of Enlightenment and the fraught universality of literature itself. By analysing selected works, I show how the Bengal Famine represented a moment of moral collapse that implicated both the imperial centres of power and the local colonial bourgeois class. A left-leaning intelligentsia had to struggle to find a language through which to express the inexpressible realities, local and global, of this genocide. What emerged was a tortured literature of complicity and conscience that decentred the peasantry. I argue that the historiographical problem of ‘peasant passivity’ is intrinsically tied to the literary and cultural production of the time, which made the peasant a symbol of social disintegration and moral transformation for the bourgeois middle class.

Keywords: Second World War; Bengal Famine of 1943; literature; anti-fascism

In search of famine

The year is 1980. Mrinal Sen directs a film about a crew from Calcutta that has arrived in the village of Hatui to make a film about the Second World War and the Bengal Famine of 1943, which, in 37 years, has become a distant memory. In 1943, grains were restricted in order to support the ailing British empire during the war and raids destroyed boats around Bengal’s coastal region in the wake of a terrible cyclone. Meanwhile, a starving rural population had migrated to the city of Calcutta, a city

that had itself been transformed by Japan's bombing. The film crew aspires to capture this historical event, engaging a young cast of actors born after its occurrence. The crew rents a large house in the village and begins shooting in the countryside, the villagers initially welcoming them out of curiosity and excitement. As the films progress—both Sen's film and the film within it—the viewer realizes that the Bengal Famine is an elusive historical event, which, while remaining a part of living memory in the rural Bengali countryside, is marked by a form of complicity so deep that it has been wilfully forgotten. In Sen's film, the famine is shown as a history that is both forgotten and yet ubiquitous, embedded in the structural inequities of class and caste that exist in the Bengali village. Hunger, hoarding, and avarice persist as realities of the post-colonial state, as does India's urban-rural divide. The film, fittingly, is named *Ākāler Sandhāne* (*In Search of Famine*).¹

Sen's clever, metacinematic approach underscores the crucial problem of the Second World War, specifically, the Famine of 1943 in modern South Asian history and the history of the war. It highlights both what became the famine's mundane unexceptionalism as time passed, as well as the shameful sense of bourgeois complicity that marred any straightforward moral understanding of the famine as an event. In 1982, the economist Amartya Sen presented his famous 'entitlement' thesis, arguing against prevailing theories focusing on food availability decline, and conclusively proved that the wartime policies of food distribution in Bengal had created a situation in which food was available, but not for Bengalis to purchase or exchange.² Following Sen, several historians sketched out the exact contours of the political economy of war and the failures of the provincial governments and political actors during the 'stormy decade' of the 1940s. Famine, in this reading, was a decisive and long drawn-out process that had a direct impact on the communal and nationalist politics of the 1940s, playing a decisive role in communal riots and the final displacement of partition in 1947.³

¹Mrinal Sen (dir.), *Ākāler Sandhāne*, 1982. Book-length works on Sen's films include John W. Hood, *Chasing the Truth: The Films of Mrinal Sen* (Calcutta: Seagull, 1993); Sumita S. Chakravarty (ed.), *The Enemy Within: The Films of Mrinal Sen* (Trowbridge, Wiltshire: Flicks Books, 2000); and, more recently, Dipankar Mukhopadhyay, *Mrinal Sen: 60 Years in Search of Cinema* (New Delhi: HarperCollins India, 2009). See also Rochona Majumdar, 'Anger and After: Mrinal Sen's Calcutta Trilogy', in *Art Cinema and India's Forgotten Futures: Film and History in the Postcolony* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), pp. 154–188.

²See Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981). See also Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, *Hunger and Public Action* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

³The study of the political economy and the unstable electoral politics of 1940s Bengal is characterized by the uneasy alliances of the Muslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha, the murky politics of food shortage and distribution, and negotiations leading to independence and partition. These important revisionist studies have firmly established the global politics of empire and the local politics of nationalism, communalism, and, finally, the victimhood of the millions who died. The first spate of works giving historical attention to the Bengal Famine includes Paul R. Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943–1944* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Sugata Bose, 'Starvation amidst Plenty: The Making of Famine in Bengal, Honan and Tonkin, 1942–45', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 24, no. 4 (1990), pp. 699–727; and David Arnold, *Famine: Social Crisis and Historical Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988). Recent work includes Madhusree Mukerjee, *Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India during World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2010); Janam Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal: War, Famine and the End of Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Benjamin Siegel, *Hungry Nation: Food, Famine, and the Making of Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); and Abhijit Sarkar, 'Fed by Famine: The Hindu Mahasabha's Politics of Religion, Caste, and Relief in Response to the Great Bengal Famine, 1943–1944', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 54, no. 6, 2020, pp. 2022–2086.

Studying cultural production in the wake of the famine and the aesthetic modes in which its effects were documented and disseminated, one witnesses the unexpected blurring of several oppositions—global and local, perpetrator and victim, urban and rural. Work on famine art and literary production has highlighted the moral crisis that materialized in the absence of food, the emergence of complex aesthetic modes that documented or represented the event, and the ethics of famine documentation.⁴ In this article, I make two arguments with respect to the humanistic response to the Second World War and the ensuing 1943 Famine, in which approximately four million people, belonging primarily to the rural peasantry, died.

First, I argue that a sector of the Bengali intelligentsia recognized that the Second World War had, for the first time, made the provincial Bengali sitting at home into an actor in world history. Even without necessarily being aware of it, ordinary people found themselves imbricated in global processes, including worldwide curfews, air raids, blackouts, and, ultimately, an unacknowledged genocide. The predicament of being a world-historical subject was by no means a happy one, since the recognition was accompanied by a sense of civilizational collapse. The supposedly teleological unfolding of European world history had exposed the emptiness of appeals to civilizational virtue, leaving instead a moral vacuum. In these circumstances, Bengali intellectuals were left struggling to understand if and how humanist enquiry and cultural production could exist and thrive under conditions of fascism. With the advent of the famine, however, these concerns became secondary.

Second, by examining a corpus of understudied famine literature, I explore ideas of peasant passivity and bourgeois complicity. Many of these literary representations were written by writers associated with the Anti-Fascist Writers' and Artists' Association, which grew out of the political murder of Somen Chanda in Dhaka in 1942.⁵ These left-leaning intellectuals—constituting a new vanguard—had the burden of representing the famine, to capture its full reality in a way that could nearly—but not entirely—aspire to realism.⁶ Literature had to recover a semblance of moral life in

⁴See Ranu Roychoudhuri, 'Documentary Photography, Decolonization, and the Making of "Secular Icons": Reading Sunil Janah's Photographs from the 1940s through the 1950s', *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2017, pp. 46–80; Tanushree Ghosh, 'Witnessing Famine: The Testimonial Work of Famine Photographs and Anti-Colonial Spectatorship', *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2019, pp. 327–357; Sanjukta Sunderason, 'Shadow-Lines: Zainul Abedin and the Afterlives of the Bengal Famine of 1943', *Third Text*, vol. 31, no. 2–3, April 2017, pp. 239–259; Sanjukta Sunderason, *Partisan Aesthetics: Modern Art and India's Long Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020); Amlan Dasgupta, 'The Economy of Hunger: Representing the Bengal Famine of 1943', in *A Cultural History of Famine: Food Security and the Environment in India and Britain*, (ed.) Ayesha Mukherjee (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 163–184; Sourit Bhattacharya, 'The Question of Literary Form: Realism in the Poetry and Theater of the 1943 Bengal Famine', in *The Aesthetics and Politics of Global Hunger*, (eds) Anastasia Ulanowicz and Manisha Basu (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 57–88; Srimanjari, 'War, Famine and Popular Perceptions in Bengali Literature, 1939–1945', in *Issues in Modern Indian History: Essays for Sumit Sarkar*, (ed.) Biswamoy Pati (Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 2000), pp. 258–290.

⁵Sudhi Pradhan discusses this event in the introduction to his edited collection of documents pertaining to the Marxist literary and cultural movements of the time. See Sudhi Pradhan, *Marxist Cultural Movement in India* (Calcutta: Santi Pradhan, distributed by National Book Agency, 1960), p. xii.

⁶Sanjukta Sunderason marks out the famine as the first major event leading to the development of a 'partisan aesthetics' in the era of decolonization. In a chapter on the Famine of 1943, she discusses 'the artists committed to the CPI [Communist Party of India] during war, famine, and popular resistance

the midst of an overwhelming, pervasive sense of complicity in this disastrous event. The divide between metropolis and village dissolved in the mass migration of peasant-cultivators to Calcutta from the end of 1942 and yet, overwhelmingly, the literature of famine never quite attempted to portray peasant consciousness. What it concerned itself with instead, I argue, was a tortured bourgeois urban subjectivity that recognized and benefitted from the deterministic forces of world history and the treachery of liberal empire. The Second World War and the Bengal Famine of 1943 thus no longer remained the genocide of the most vulnerable and dispossessed subjects of the British empire; instead, in its most powerful literary documents, it became an occasion for a Bengali colonial/post-colonial middle-class to rethink the very concept of 'political consciousness' in a period of decolonization. I argue therefore that a powerful trope of peasant submissiveness and passivity emerged not despite Marxist cultural and political activity, but because of it.

From fascism to famine: Literature and the revolutionary intellectual

In 1941–1942, the Second World War loomed large over a colonial population in Bengal that was simultaneously engaged in debating questions of national sovereignty and negotiating communal politics in the wake of the call for Pakistan. Meanwhile, notwithstanding the turmoil of locally situated anticolonial politics, the Second World War presented itself to a Bengali intelligentsia as an overwhelming moral crisis through the spectre of fascism, both at home and the world. Much of the subsequent historiographical angst surrounding the Famine of 1943 had to do with the moral economy of the peasantry: why did Bengali peasants not revolt, riot, and claim for themselves the food that was still available in abundance?⁷ The thesis of peasant passivity stands in startling contrast to the literary and cultural output of the Bengali bourgeois class during the war and famine years.⁸

in the 1940s, and the *active authorship* of socialist visual reportage that they pioneered'. She goes on to write: 'As artist-cadres of the party like Chittaprosad and Somnath Hore visually documented the Bengal Famine, peasant movements, and party conferences through the 1940s, the party developed a complex and contradictory cultural policy: it deployed its artist-cadres as collectors of raw material, while seeking to assimilate artists outside the party fold within an expanding scope of socialist realist art. This process arrested not only the formation of a politically committed avant-garde within midcentury Indian modernism, but also the modernist potential of subversive partisan iconographies of party artists like Chittaprosad.' See Sunderason, *Partisan Aesthetics*, p. 31.

⁷In an important study of the 1943 Bengal Famine, Paul Greenough analysed the purported 'passive, fatalistic attitude' of the peasants who did not resort to food rioting despite seeing 'bulging food shops', noting how Bengali peasants did not appeal to some pre-existing quasi-legal notions of subsistence rights and fair prices. See Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal*.

⁸By the 'Bengali bourgeois class' I am referring to a social group known in South Asian historiography as the '*bhadralok*'. This was a colonial elite—mostly dominant caste Hindu—formed by changes in land revenue settlement and tenure in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. J. H. Broomfield defined this new social group as one that made a fundamental distinction between land ownership and land cultivation, looking down upon physical labour. This social group, moreover, embraced Western education and thus also formed the basis of the professional middle class. For more on the *bhadralok*, see J. H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth Century Bengal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968); John McGuire, *The Making of a Colonial Mind: A Quantitative Study of the Bhadrakol in Calcutta, 1857–1885* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1983); Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered: Perceptions of*

Bourgeois-leftist intellectuals, I argue, shifted from thinking about themselves as world-historical subjects fighting the combined forces of German, Italian, and Japanese fascism to confronting the bitter truth that the man-made famine generated by the British empire exemplified how the colonized would be forever left out of the full purview of world history. Moreover, there is a fundamental tension embedded in the project of understanding the impact of the Second World War in Bengal: the experiential reality of the peasant subject can never be fully captured by a bourgeois interlocutor. Yet the bourgeois intellectual felt compelled to document the effects of the war on the peasantry. In this section, I argue that the eventual representation of the Bengal Famine in the vast literary output of these Bengali bourgeois-leftist intellectuals was foreshadowed by a debate over the moral functions of literature and the role of revolutionary intellectuals under the conditions of fascism at the outbreak of the Second World War. Therefore, I address changes in this debate over the moral functions of literature in the later writings of Tagore that are crucial for understanding the fraught role of conscience and complicity in this literary output.

The relationship of art and the ethical life became a concern in interwar Europe with the rise of fascism.⁹ The moral and political functions of literature, indeed, had become a global, transnational conversation. Rabindranath Tagore—India's most visible and prominent representative intellectual on the world stage—embodied the complexities of the colonial understanding of fascism.¹⁰ From visiting Mussolini's Italy in 1925, to writing his last testament documenting the betrayal of imperial liberalism (the birthday address, *Sabhyatār Saṃkaṭ* [*Crisis in Civilisation*], of 1941), Tagore's intellectual legacy was crucial in the Second World War period.¹¹

A generation of Indian intellectuals, primarily belonging to the Progressive Writers' Movement, were cognisant of the rising threat of fascism in a new world order. The writers Saratchandra Chatterjee, Munshi Premchand, Prafulla Chandra Roy, Pramatho Chowdhury, Ramananda Chatterjee, Nandalal Bose, and Tagore, signed a manifesto

the West in Nineteenth-Century Bengal (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988); and Tithi Bhattacharya, 'In the Name of Culture', *South Asia Research*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2001, pp. 161–187.

⁹For a discussion of the intellectuals who mounted an anti-fascist resistance in Europe during the Second World War, see James D. Wilkinson, *The Intellectual Resistance in Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

¹⁰Not that Tagore was the only cultural icon exemplifying a complex relationship with fascism. There has been considerable historical scholarship on the Bengali nationalist Subhas Chandra Bose, whose wartime alliance with the Axis powers remains a great point of controversy. In recent work on Bose, Isabel Huacuja Alonso looks at Bose's cultural outreach through radio in Berlin, exploring Bose's own ambivalences towards Nazi Germany while cultivating anticolonial sentiments in the heart of war-torn Europe. See Isabel Huacuja Alonso, 'Netaji's Quisling Radio', in *Radio for the Millions: Hindi-Urdu Broadcasting and Politics of Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023).

¹¹Tagore initially admired Mussolini but recanted when he understood the situation better. For a full account of his travels to and views on Italy, see Kalyan Kundu, *Meeting with Mussolini: Tagore's Tours in Italy, 1925 and 1926* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015); and Giuseppe Flora, 'Tagore and Italy: Facing History and Politics', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, vol. 77, no. 4, 2008, pp. 1025–1057. For a larger discussion on the concept of *sabhyatā* in Bengal, and evaluations of Tagore's *Crisis in Civilisation*, see Rochona Majumdar, 'From Civilizational Heroism to an Ethic of Universal Humanity', in *Civilizing Emotions: Concepts in Nineteenth Century Asia and Europe*, (eds) Margrit Pernau and Helge Jordheim (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 207–230; and Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *Talking Back: The Idea of Civilization in the India Nationalist Discourse* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011).

that was sent to the peace conference convened by Romain Rolland in Brussels on 3 September 1936. It declared: 'Today the spectre of a world war haunts the world. Fascist dictatorship has revealed its militarist essence by its offer of gun instead of butter and the lust of empire-building in place of cultural opportunities.'¹² Tagore also wrote against the Italian invasion of Ethiopia and was shocked by Japan's invasion of China, but what dismayed him further was the complicity of intellectuals in the rise of fascism, surrendering their moral convictions to imperialist dominance and war. Such concerns, for instance, are visible in his correspondence with Japanese fascist poet Yonejiro Noguchi. In a letter to Noguchi, Tagore wrote,

I cannot accept such separation between an artist's function and his moral conscience. The luxury of enjoying special favouritism by virtue of identity with a government which is engaged in demolition, in its neighbourhood, of all salient bases of life, and of escaping, at the same time, from any direct responsibility by a philosophy of escapism, seems to me to be another authentic symptom of the modern intellectual's betrayal of humanity.¹³

By 1939, however, Tagore was a relic of an older political and literary time.

Shortly before his death, an ailing and disenchanting Tagore reflected in *Sabhyatār Saṃkaṭ* on what the Second World War meant for the idea of civilization.¹⁴ While Tagore's larger point in this final piece of writing was concerned with the ultimate betrayal of the form of liberal humanism that the British empire had once promised its enslaved subjects, *Sabhyatār Saṃkaṭ* highlights not only the foundational duality embedded within the conceptual premise of civilization itself—the moral in tension with the material—but also the project of literature. What good can literature do in a broken, divided, and unequal world? The crisis of civilization was also a crisis of literature; a question taken up by the bourgeois writers who wrote about the Bengal Famine.

In *Sabhyatār Saṃkaṭ*, Tagore argues that civilization, which cannot be easily translated as *sabhyatā*, is a European neologism inextricably connected to the rule of law.¹⁵ In this article, I introduce *Sabhyatār Saṃkaṭ* (written in April 1941) as an important backdrop for the literature of famine composed later between 1942–1944. For one, Tagore's profound intellectual and literary influence outlasted his death, since he was reinvented and embraced immediately after his demise by his own critics. An editorial note in the Communist Party mouthpiece *Janayuddha* reprinted part of his letter to Noguchi, highlighting his role as a vocal critic of fascism.¹⁶ Thus, he continued to be viewed as a moral force and a revolutionary intellectual who spoke truth to power.

¹²Sarojmoḥan Mitra, 'Progressive Cultural Movement in Bengal', *Social Scientist*, vol. 8, no. 5/6, 1979, pp. 115–120.

¹³The letters are reproduced in Shakti Dasgupta, *Tagore's Asian Outlook* (Calcutta: Nava Bharati, 1961); quote on p. 143.

¹⁴For larger discussion on the concept of *sabhyatā* in Bengal, and evaluations of Tagore's *Crisis in Civilisation*, see Rochona Majumdar, 'From Civilizational Heroism to an Ethic of Universal Humanity', in *Civilizing Emotions*, (eds) Pernau and Jordheim, pp. 207–230; and Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *Talking Back: The Idea of Civilization in the India Nationalist Discourse* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹⁵Rabindranath Tagore, *Sabhyatār Saṃkaṭ* (Calcutta: Visva Bharati Press, 1944), p. 6.

¹⁶Unsigned editorial note, *Janayuddha*, 7 June 1942, pp. 3–4.

There is a more important claim in *Sabhyatār Saṃkaṭ* that has escaped scholarly attention, namely Tagore's bitter reflection on how liberal humanism, valorising the claims of a universal and shared human experience, is incommensurable with empire. The personal, reminiscent tone of the birthday lecture also evokes how he effectively saw two distinct centuries of liberal imperial expansion. The nineteenth century gave the British empire, according to Tagore, the 'gift of literature' through Burke, Macaulay, Shakespeare, and Byron. It represented 'the victory of universal man'.¹⁷ The twentieth century undid the promise of Enlightenment universalism.

Tagore's understanding of civilization displays two facets, material and moral, which both contrasted with and supported each other, the former power-based and coercive (*śaktirūp*), the latter humanist and emancipatory (*muktirūp*).¹⁸ It was in the former (*śaktirūp*) facet of civilization, premised on greed and exploitation, that the humanist ideal and the question of moral character lay diminished and lost. At the moment of decolonization, Tagore expressed profound anxiety over the alienated, 'hungry' polity left behind by the British.¹⁹ For him, civilization (*sabhyatā*) represented a philosophy of collective morality that privileged the interconnectedness of individual human life.²⁰ The day he stepped beyond the wall separating the rest of the world from 'the cloister containing the aesthetic arsenal of literature', Tagore was faced with the heartrending vision of the desperate poverty of the general population.²¹

I want to suggest that Tagore, in this last piece of writing, was critiquing his own life-long faith in the universality of literature and emphasizing the insularity of bourgeois cultural production. With the horrors of the Second World War unequally felt across a world divided into the powerful and the powerless, Tagore no longer had faith in a universal world-historical subject. The war, for him, was an insult to the soul of humanity (*mānabātmā*) that had reached even the colonized: 'We feel it in our unfortunate, helpless and insular insignificance.'²² His final hope was that a new sun of human 'pristine self-expression' would one day rise, and that vanquished peoples would progress towards retrieving their dignity.²³ This imagined future stood in stark contrast to the present 'now' in which Tagore wrote, one tainted by the malaise of violence spread by Western civilization. 'Now' signified both the time of his physical death as well as the hour of the tormented self-questioning of the dissonant legacy of humanism.

¹⁷Tagore, *Sabhyatār Saṃkaṭ*, p. 1.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 7. In this explanation, there is a similarity with Fernand Braudel's conceptualization of civilization as a collective entity in history that justifies its existence on grounds both material and moral. In Braudel's analysis, civilization comprises both economy and society. The economic aspect of civilization results in human injustice and oppression, such as slavery and mechanization; the social aspect of civilization reveals the 'habits of the mind' of a collective people. Braudel's *muktirūp* is *longue durée*, the elusive 'something' that 'a group of people have conserved and passed on as their most precious heritage from generation to generation, throughout and despite the storms and tumults of history'. See Ferdinand Braudel, *A History of Civilizations*, (trans) Richard Mayne (New York: Allen Lane/The Penguin Press, 1994), pp. 9–36.

¹⁹Tagore, *Sabhyatār Saṃkaṭ*, p. 8.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 7.

²¹*Ibid.*

²²*Ibid.*, p. 8.

²³*Ibid.*

Tagore's argument in *Crisis in Civilisation* emphasized that, in the moment of crisis (*saṃkaṭ*), this interminably long 'now', a certain historicist consciousness and its attendant idea of progress had come to a standstill. In his reading, colonized people who lacked equal sovereignty suddenly and irreversibly became part of a global experiential reality. However, the threat of fascism fashioned another universal subject of world history by a different intellectual creed altogether: communism. A new wave of united and revolutionary Marxist cultural production was emerging in Bengal.

It was spearheaded by the Chātra (Student) Federation, the student wing of the Communist Party of India. Their Saṃskṛti Bāhini (cultural army) began performing plays and songs in several districts, spreading anti-Japanese sentiments. The murder of the writer and trade union leader Somen Chanda in Dhaka on 8 March was met with unanimous condemnation, leading to the establishment of the Anti-Fascist Writers' and Artists' Association on 28 March 1942, under the chairmanship of Atulchandra Gupta, Bishnu De, and Subhash Mukhopadhyay. The second conference of the association took place in December 1942 with the participation of Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, Habibullah Bahar Choudhury, Abu Sayeed Ayyub, and others.²⁴ The central role played by the Communist Party of India in mobilizing popular opinion towards the British war effort may be attributed to its legalization in July 1942.²⁵ The Communist Party mouthpiece *Janayuddha* (and its English-language equivalent *People's War*) was instrumental in explaining the global threat of fascism to a mass audience.²⁶

The optimistic internationalism of the anti-fascist Left is evident in early manifestos penned by Marxist intellectuals of this period. Many of these short pieces were reprinted in a special commemorative volume published by the journal *Paricay* in 1975, which I use as an under-studied primary source in this article.²⁷ In these bulletins, fascism was an immediate terror in light of the Japanese air raids that had come to the Bengali doorstep. In the poet Golam Kuddus's words, 'Science has felicitously made the connection between various countries an intimate one...this

²⁴See Chinmohan Sehanavis, 'Saṃskṛti Āndolaner Nūtan Parba' ('A New Chapter in the Cultural Movement'), *Paricay: Fascistbirodhī saṃkhyā*, vol. 44, issue 10–12, May–July 1975, pp. 301–306.

²⁵For the sudden surge of popularity of the Communist Party of India in this period, see Irfan Habib, 'The Left and the National Movement', *Social Scientist*, vol. 26, no. 5/6, 1998, pp. 3–33.

²⁶*Janayuddha* also published several opinion pieces in its early issues explaining the global threat of fascism to a mass audience, for instance, an article by Abdul Halim, 'Fascistder āsol cehārā' ('The Real Form of Fascists'), *Janayuddha*, 5 August 1942, p. 8. In general, until the onset of the famine, the newspaper focused on the 'global' threat and covered world events, as well as Soviet policy and culture. It also covered several contemporary workers' movements, including the successful tram-workers' strikes. See Siddhartha Guha Ray, 'Protest and Politics: Story of Calcutta Tram Workers 1940–1947', in *Calcutta: The Stormy Decades*, (eds) Tanika Sarkar and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2015), pp. 151–176.

²⁷The journal *Paricay* was founded by the poet Sudhindranath Dutta in 1931. It was initially conceived as a vehicle for literary modernism, with a wide range of contributors whose political positions varied from liberal to radical. It took an increasingly leftist turn, and in 1944, the Anti-Fascist Writers' and Artists' Association took over editorial control. For more on the literary modernism of the *Paricay* group until the end of the 1930s, see Supriya Chaudhuri, 'Modernist Literary Communities in 1930s Calcutta: The Politics of *Paricay*', in *Modernist Communities Across Cultures and Media*, (eds) Caroline Pollentier and Sarah Wilson (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2019), pp. 177–194.

worldwide upheaval necessitates that the literature of this age be a universal one.’²⁸ Subhash Mukhopadhyay wrote another important anti-fascist memo in April 1942, wherein he mentioned the mass struggle launched by the Spaniards against Franco, the worldwide struggles against Hitler, Mussolini, and Tojo, and, finally, the Soviet call to armed struggle. That fight had reached India, and its slogan would be “‘Ekti bullet, ekti fascist” (‘A Bullet for a Fascist’)—the wall of resistance is being erected in India’.²⁹ Kuddus pointed out that European *littérateurs* had had to grapple with fascism from the moment of its emergence on their own political horizon, rather than as an external threat, but Indians had only come to understand the urgency of the fascist threat with the Japanese invasion. In such times of fear and uncertainty, the artist can have no choice but to be political: ‘Foreign invasion, bombing and fascist rule have made one thing clear, it is not safe to remain inert and neutral.’³⁰

Marxist intellectuals such as Kuddus and Mukhopadhyay indicated that a moment of crisis had arrived. For them, colonial subjects perceived themselves differently because fascism and the war were part of an immediate global reality in which both colonizer and colonized were equal participants. In these conditions, the revolutionary intellectual had two responsibilities. One was to situate themselves within world history as an equal subject, because war and fascism were global. The other was to intentionally create political art.³¹ This line of argument is more immediately evident in Buddhadev Bose’s ‘Sabhyatā O Fascism’ (‘Civilisation and Fascism’), which emerged as an early document of the Anti-Fascist movement.³²

I choose ‘Sabhyatā O Fascism’ over other programmatic manifestos not because Buddhadev Bose was a textbook Marxist intellectual, but because in this long essay he consciously chose to separate the domains of the political and the aesthetic, and fashioned himself standing at a distance, removed from other cultural workers affiliated with the Communist Party of India.³³ Despite their generational and ideological

²⁸Golam Kuddus, ‘Kabir Pratyay’ (‘The Poet’s Conviction’) [December 1942], *Paricay: Fascistbirodhi samkhyā*, vol. 44, issue 10–12, May–July 1975, pp. 361–363.

²⁹Subhash Mukhopadhyay, ‘Ekti bullet, ekti fascist’ (‘A Bullet [for] a Fascist’) [1942], *Paricay: Fascistbirodhi samkhyā*, vol. 44, issue 10–12, May–July 1975, pp. 358–360.

³⁰Kuddus, ‘Kabir Pratyay’, p. 363.

³¹In an obituary read out at the Anti-Fascist Writers’ and Artists’ Association meet commemorating the death of Somen Chanda, Satishchandra Pakrashi (a revolutionary belonging to Dhaka Anushilan Samiti), mentions how inspired Chanda was by the journalist Ralph Winston Fox who lost his life in the Spanish civil war. Pakrashi recounts a conversation in which Chanda professed to hate violence, and was convinced by Pakrashi that perhaps he could then turn to writing a revolutionary people’s literature. Young writers, like Chanda, were thus inspired by the internationalist intellectual leftism of the 1930s. Satishchandra Pakrashi, ‘Somen Chanda’, *Paricay*, vol. 12 (part 2), issue 4, May 1943, pp. 722–728.

³²At this time, the Anti-Fascist Writers’ and Artists’ Association advertised five books pertaining to their appraisal of the global political situation. These included Pratibha Bose’s *Fascism O Nārī*, Bijon Ray’s *Jāpāni śāsaner āsal rūp*, Bishnu De’s *Bāiśe June*, Rahul Sanskrityayan’s *Fascist o Nazi śāsan*, and a collection of songs, *Janayuddher Gān*. They were all priced at 2 annas and published by Fascistbirodhi Lekhok o Shilpi Sangha of 46 Dharmatala Street, Kolkata. *Janayuddha* advertisement, 1942.

³³Buddhadev Bose had fashioned himself as the leader of the ‘Kallol’ group in the 1920s whose literary modernism directly challenged Tagore’s predominance in Bengali literature. While not avowedly Marxist, by 1942 he had certainly taken some lead in organizing anti-fascist resistance. A lecture delivered to the Nikhilibanga Fascistbirodhi Sammelan on 19–20 December 1942 was reprinted in *Paricay* with the title

differences, reading Tagore and Bose together gives us interesting parallels in thinking about the political role that literature had to play at the time. Bose's 'Sabhyatā O Fascism' begins by drawing a dichotomy between politics and aesthetics. Bose describes himself as a man of literature, one who finds politics to be full of 'deception, crudeness, opportunism and transient self-interest...an ignominy of true ideals'.³⁴ He proclaims that, since his childhood, he had never been swayed by nationalist politics and anticolonial sentiment, being interested only in sitting in his corner and writing good literature. The world of colonial politics, he argues, was performative and shallow: 'The debates in the Legislative Assemblies, the lectures of our ministers, all of these seem merely ceremonial; there seems to be no power in them, and at times this insubstantiality becomes almost unbearable.'³⁵

Bose posited a modern world divided by two civilizational ideals—on the one hand, European and Japanese fascism, driven by avaricious capitalism, and, on the other, Soviet communism that restored human dignity to people. Europe, driven by greed and power, annihilated not only its colonized peoples in the path to 'progress' but even its own citizens. All those who believed in equality and friendship were sacrificed in the process as well. In contrast to this stood an idealized vision of Russia, in which Bose heard 'the heartbeat of the deprived, oppressed, hungry universal man'.³⁶ Bose portrayed the poet as a prophetic figure, a universal bard writing across space and time in the name of human equality and amity, a figure who rejects all ugliness and pursues only beauty: 'The message of freedom, the message of equality—this is the poet's message, over the ages this message has blazed forth in the words of many poets; it is located in no particular time nor place, it is the eternal music of universal humanity.'³⁷

Yet, this is what Bose calls *bṛhattara rājñīti* (world politics). How would a colonial Bengali be affected by this, having been relegated to being a reluctant bystander to world historical events? European civilization was heading towards its own imminent end, one that was perhaps still redeemable by the promise of communist equality, but what of the people consigned for an interminably long time to what Dipesh Chakrabarty has called the 'imaginary waiting room of history'?³⁸

The solution, for Bose, was the 'politics' for which he had once felt so much distrust: 'I understood that politics is ...the way in which we each live our lives, personal joys and

'Fyāsibād, Śilpa o Bīśvamānab' ('Fascism, Art and Universal Man'). Buddhadev Bose, 'Fyāsibād, Śilpa o Bīśvamānab', *Paricay*, vol. 12 (part 2), issue 4, April 1943, pp. 462–464.

³⁴Buddhadev Bose, 'Sabhyatā O Fascism' ('Civilisation and Fascism') [1942], *Paricay: Fascistbirodhi samkhyā*, vol. 44, issue 10–12, May–July 1975, pp. 307–318; quote on p. 307.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid., p. 311.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸I take this phrase from Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe*, where he speaks of the 'first in Europe, then elsewhere' structure of global, historical time: 'That was what historicist consciousness was: a recommendation to the colonized to wait. Acquiring a historical consciousness, acquiring the public spirit that Mill thought absolutely necessary for the art of self-government, was also to learn this art of waiting. This waiting was the realization of the "not yet" of historicism.' Again, the colonized nationalist, in Chakrabarty's reading, would oppose the 'not yet' with the demand for the 'now'. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 8.

sorrows are contingent upon politics. Each of us *must* discuss politics.³⁹ It is fascism, and not freedom or national sovereignty, that makes the colonized world subjects of political modernity:

Then the war began. The last facade hiding barbarism slipped off, the hypocrisy of decency no longer remained anywhere. Slaughter became willful on water and land and in the skies, not just that of soldiers but also women and children. The collective annihilation of people as well as that of truth, beauty and idealism. This wave of slaughter has now reached the shores of India. Cruelly, one now has to realise that the foamy whirlpool of world politics is connected to my extremely insignificant self and my very trivial joys and sorrows, hopes and desires. I am an extremely simple person and do not involve myself in anything, want to sit in a corner of my lonely house and study and write a few poems, yet who allows me to live in peace...It is evident that my right to do my work in my own house, the right that is a birthright for humanity like light and wind, this too is tied in the intricate knots of world politics.⁴⁰

The Second World War had introduced a decisive 'now' (*ājker din*) that marked a historical moment in which there emerged a form of state power that could take away a human being's right to live. Again, Bose points out, this burden of wilful slaughter across civilizations was borne primarily by the worker who, throughout the ages, carried the weight of agriculture.⁴¹ Reading 'Sabhyatā O Fascism' together with Tagore's *Sabhyatār Saṃkaṭ*, we see two common themes emerging. First, the Second World War and fascism mark a moment of urgent crisis: the colonial world acts as the proxy playing fields of imperial powers, while itself at the crossroads of imminent decolonization. How do we explain this 'now' that the Second World War brought to the colony—and why do Tagore and Bose make an attempt to reconcile aesthetic production with politics, when other Marxist writers saw no incompatibility between the two? If Chakrabarty reads the national movement as a struggle to catch up with global, historical time on one's own terms, answering the 'not yet' of liberal empire with the 'now' of nationalism, I argue that there is a different sense of 'now' at the advent of the Second World War. Both Tagore and Bose recognize that a certain conception of historicism and progress has failed for the non-Western subject in the 'now' of global geo-politics. There is, however, a certain political modernity of the colonized premised on equal victimhood, if not on equal sovereignty and rights.

Second, there is a divide between those who have been the beneficiaries of imperial liberalism and the (timeless, abstract) peasant or agricultural worker who, through their labour, bears the burden of civilizations. If, for Tagore, the intellectual must cognise the discordance of the humanist legacy in a fragmented world torn apart by war, poverty, and aggressive nationalism, Bose is concerned that fascism is not merely an economic or political creed, but individual moral failure. Fascism, according to Bose, is

³⁹Bose, 'Sabhyatā O Fascism', p. 313.

⁴⁰Ibid., pp. 313–314.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 314.

a *manobhāb* (a mental state) to which anyone could succumb.⁴² Hence, the intellectual must protest, must speak up, must be political.⁴³

Thus, before the actual advent of the Bengal Famine of 1943, the Anti-Fascist Writers' and Artists' Association drew attention to the urgent need to be politically engaged with a larger global collective of anti-fascist resistance, and aligned themselves with the British war effort. They did this as a conscious vanguard of intellectuals who saw themselves as part of a larger world history and of an international left. The distance between the vanguard and the peasants grew with the inequities brought by war, food scarcity, hoarding, and starvation. Tagore's *Sabhyatār Saṅkaṭ* was prophetic inasmuch as it predicted that imperial greed would surpass any moral virtues that liberal empire espoused. It also foreshadowed the familiar question found in famine literature: can we claim at all that there is a universal and shared humanity?

In 1944, while famine still raged in Bengal, the writer Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay proclaimed that a new idiom of literature was being developed to tackle the social crisis at hand.⁴⁴

Even in the midst of the great calamity that has befallen the world today, a calamity which has no equal in history, Bengali literature has not lost its firmness; it has firmly embraced and experienced the cruelty, the sorrows, the ghastliness, the terror of this cataclysm. This experience has led to crafting a language for the beacon of an urgent life-force.⁴⁵

In Tarashankar's analysis, an entirely new language and mode of writing were required to address the gaping abyss of death and hunger that the Bengal Famine had engendered. For this, one required a new mode of existential thought (*jībanbhābanā*). Tarashankar's brand of realism advocated a reckoning with the 'cruel reality' through a new literature drenched in grief and trauma, one that would lay bare the 'naked reality' of inequality—a famine that was man-made.⁴⁶ This new realism itself required a kind of moral courage, a heroic effort to resist and deny world history's imposition of an unacceptable victimhood. However, the real victims of the Bengal Famine—the rural peasant-cultivators—did not control the narrative of the famine. Instead, they became the subject of the historical and cultural question of 'peasant passivity'. Therefore, in

⁴²Ibid., p. 315.

⁴³Bose points out how embracing fascism in the march towards progress could lead to a complete loss of a critical self. It could potentially give rise to a Bengal wherein even Tagore would no longer be part of a Bengali's cultural lifeworld, much as Germany had driven its own intellectuals into exile and oblivion. Ibid., p. 318.

⁴⁴Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay (1898–1971) was a seminal novelist whose novels, set in rural Bengal, had peripheral social groups as their main protagonists. By focusing on caste-oppressed subaltern characters, Tarashankar inaugurated a new social realism in Bengali literature, along with writers such as Manik Bandyopadhyay, Satinath Bhaduri, Adwaita Mallabarman, and others. For critical appraisals in English, see the introduction by Ben Baer in Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, *The Tale of Hasuli Turn*, (trans.) Ben Conisbee Baer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); Mahasweta Devi, 'Tarashankar's World of Changes and the New Order', *Indian Literature*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1969, pp. 71–79.

⁴⁵Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, 'Nūtan Sāhityer Bhūmikā' ('The Role of the New Literature'), *Janayuddha*, 1 May 1944, p. 13.

⁴⁶Ibid.

subsequent sections, I analyse key works of famine literature to demonstrate how a literary vanguard contributed to the discourse of the passive peasantry through works focusing on questions of victimhood, survival, human dignity, and moral conscience.

The peasant in famine literature

The bourgeois realist writer was faced with a difficult question: how could someone write an account of the famine without portraying the peasant as entirely a victim of world history? Contemporary ethnographies, such as Tarakchandra Das's anthropological report, noted several stories of famine victims on the streets of Calcutta, who displayed a complete breakdown of familiar kinship structures, rummaging in litter bins and eating medical waste in a desperate bid to survive.⁴⁷ Since reality fell short, fiction had to return moral agency and humanity to the victims of the famine. Such agency can be seen, for instance, in Bijan Bhattacharyya's celebrated play *Nabānna*. Extensively studied as a breakthrough moment in modern Indian theatre, *Nabānna* toured many districts and beyond, stunning audiences and gathering sympathy for famine victims.⁴⁸ The ending of *Nabānna*, despite the many misfortunes of the peasantry, is hopeful. Bhattacharyya's protagonists deny the mantle of victimhood imposed upon them by returning to the land which provides them with their identity, that of farmer and cultivator of land, demonstrating renewed moral purpose.⁴⁹ This triumphalist ending might have furthered the cause of raising awareness and money across large audiences in Bengal and India, while also depicting repressive measures like the scorched earth policy undertaken by the British government. The tragedy of the actual famine for the peasantry, across class and caste divides, remained an almost insurmountable question: what is victimhood, what indeed is survival—and on whose terms?

I discuss two writers' attempts to construct a narrative of famine in which its victims reclaimed moral agency and understanding. The two writers in question, Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay and Manik Bandyopadhyay, were both male, dominant caste intellectuals whose dominant choice of setting was rural Bengal.⁵⁰

⁴⁷See Tarakchandra Das, *Bengal Famine (1943): As Revealed in A Survey of the Destitutes of Calcutta* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1949), pp. 8–10.

⁴⁸See a discussion in Mandira Ray, *Bijan Bhattacharyer Nātyakarma O Samakālin Prekṣita* (Calcutta: Pustak Bipani, 1992), pp. 20–25.

⁴⁹The protagonist Pradhan Samaddar loses everything, his cry 'āmār antar jvale geche' ('my insides are burnt') a reference not only to hunger, but also to the scorched earth policy that forced peasants to burn their own crops. His crops burnt and his land seized, Pradhan moves his family to Calcutta, where new disasters befall them. When the family finally returns to the village of Aminpur in the final act, the message is hopeful. Hindu and Muslim farmers discuss, in the spirit of Soviet socialist realist camaraderie, the ways in which they can rightfully claim their newly harvested paddy without relying on the beneficence of the zamindar and moneylenders. Bijan Bhattacharya, *Bijan Bhattacharya Racanāsamagra*, vol. 1, (eds) Nabarun Bhattacharya and Samik Bandyopadhyay (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 2008).

⁵⁰Both Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay and Manik Bandyopadhyay were two of the best-known prose writers of the post-Tagore generation. Bibhutibhushan studied at Ripon College, Calcutta, thereafter relocating to teach in rural and semi-rural regions of Bengal. He was known for a searing and tender social realism that described village Bengal, its social structures as well as its natural beauty. Manik, on the other hand, studied at Presidency College in Calcutta and was politically active from his student days. His writing was influenced by both Marxism and Freudian psychoanalysis, and class and caste critique were the

While Bibhutibhushan's corpus of novels often featured the penurious and itinerant Brahman—such as the character of Apu in *Pather Pāñcālī* (*The Song of the Road*, 1929) and *Aparājita* (*Unvanquished*, 1932), both later immortalized in Satyajit Ray's film trilogy—Manik, an active member of the Communist Party of India, was more interested in caste-oppressed subaltern groups in novels such as *Padmā Nadīr Mājhi* (*The Boatmen of the River Padma*, 1936) and *Putul Nācer Itikathā* (*The Marionette's Tale*, 1939). Bibhutibhushan's *Āsani Saṃket* (1944) and Manik Bandyopadhyay's short story 'Chiniye Khāy ni Keno' ('Why Didn't They Snatch and Eat?') featured subaltern characters coming to terms with the famine that plunged earlier known social worlds into complete disarray.⁵¹ These fictional representations also underscore how the burden of the famine is displaced onto caste-oppressed figures in the narrative, who suffer and die in order to facilitate the journeys of dominant caste characters on their paths of historical realization.

Āsani Saṃket was composed and published serially in 1943–1945 in the journal *Māṭṛbhūmi*. It was published posthumously with a foreword by the author's wife.⁵² The novel features the story of an opportunistic Brahman, Gangacharan Chakrabarty, moving from village to village to gain employment as a schoolteacher and priest, along with his wife Ananga and their two children. They finally settle in Natun Ga ('new village'), where the family experience their first respite from penury and poverty, since the caste-oppressed villagers seem to be delighted to have Brahmans among them. Along with his salary, Gangacharan demands food and household items from the villagers. As Gangacharan and Ananga hoodwink but also befriend a cast of different characters, we observe a microcosm of the calamity that the Second World War brought to a peripheral world. In essence, *Āsani Saṃket* is a novel about hunger but also about friendship. It is about Brahmanical exploitation and itinerancy, but also mutual dependencies that cut through rigid caste hierarchies and religious boundaries. As a novel, it dramatizes the importance of food not just as a form of basic sustenance and survival, but also as a symbol of personal fulfilment and social relations. It presents to the reader a world in which both the dominant and caste-oppressed characters of rural Bengal cannot begin to consider themselves as part of a global reality. With the onset of air raids and inflation, a group of worried villagers congregate at the home of their village leader Biswas *maśāi* and discuss the increase in the price of rice:

Old Nabadwip Ghoshal asked, 'Bishwas *maśāi*, when will all this *hungama* end? Heard that the Germans have taken some *pur*.' Biswas *maśāi* replied, 'Yes, Singapore.' Nabadwip replied, 'Which district is that? Is it in our Jessore or Khulna? Near Mamudpur?' Biswas *maśāi* laughed, 'Neither Jessore nor Khulna. It

key themes of his novels. Both writers died young. For a short appraisal of Manik's life and oeuvre, see Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee, 'Manik Bandyopadhyay: A Centenary Tribute', *Indian Literature*, vol. 52, no. 6 (248), 2008, pp. 8–16.

⁵¹These two works have been read together by Amlan Das Gupta, though my reading is considerably different from his. For instance, I find the caste element in the two representations of extraordinary significance. See Amlan Das Gupta, 'The Economy of Hunger: Representing the Bengal Famine of 1943', in *A Cultural History of Famine: Food Security and the Environment in India and Britain*, (ed.) Ayesha Mukherjee (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 167–184.

⁵²From 'Bhūmikā' (prefatory note) by the author's wife Rama Bandyopadhyay in the first edition of the novel. See Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, *Āsani Saṃket* [1944] (Calcutta: Amar Sahitya Prakashan, 1964).

is near the sea. Maybe near Puri, in Midnapore district. Isn't that so, *paṇḍitmasāī*?' Gangacharan did not know the answer, but it was hardly logical to profess ignorance in front of these people. Hence, he replied, 'Yes, it's far. In the west. Not exactly near.' Nabadwip said, 'Oh, near Puri? My mother once went to Puri, Sakkhigopal, Bhubaneshwar. Is that in Midnapore district?' Biswas *masāī* responded, 'Yes.' After this discussion on geography, everyone went home.⁵³

Bibhutibhushan's tender irony at this juncture elicits an infinite sadness on the part of the reader; village Bengal, with all its hierarchies, had little idea about the 'world' that prefixed the 'World War' and little conception of the contours of Europe and Asia. The rising price of rice is chronicled by Bibhutibhushan in gradual detail, and there is a moment when town life comes as a shocking reminder of bureaucratic complicity in a scene where Gangacharan attempts to obtain food at the government supply office.⁵⁴ Gangacharan's understanding of himself as a subject of world history is gradual, and he is set apart from other characters in this personal journey of historical self-realization. Despite his selfishness and caste-driven desire for personal survival and fulfilment, Gangacharan is often moved by the plights of others, but the novel also gradually depicts the breakdown of his ability to feel empathy.

Moreover, Gangacharan is constructed as an antithesis of the unworldly Apu of Bibhutibhushan's celebrated first novel, *Pather Pāñcālī* (*The Song of the Road*). Whereas the poetic and detached Apu portrayed a Brahmanical class that had to reinvent itself as it moved from village to city in conditions of poverty, Gangacharan represented a greedy and manipulative Brahman class that capitalized on centuries of caste exploitation. Gangacharan is a priest who takes money from desperate villagers to dispel cholera, who has no idea where Singapore is and yet teaches boys from several villages, and who flourishes in this role because he is able to flaunt his status as the sole Brahman in villages comprising caste-oppressed characters who accept his superiority.⁵⁵ He sees a mirror image of himself in the penurious older Brahman, Durga *paṇḍit*, who descends upon Gangacharan periodically to ask for help and advice, much to the latter's chagrin. Towards the end of the novel, Durga *paṇḍit* and Gangacharan have a conversation in which Durga *paṇḍit* explains to Ananga and Gangacharan (on whom he has now foisted his entire family) that the Brahman's means of livelihood is beggary. By this time Gangacharan has realized that:

He who does not have land in this market is destined to starve. It will no longer do to eat the produce of others and not till the land. Our [i.e. the Brahmins'] terrible situation has arisen from the fact that the peasant holds the yoke and works on the land, while we lord it above him and sit and eat.⁵⁶

⁵³Ibid., p. 27. The novel was severely truncated in scope in Satyajit Ray's 1973 film adaptation. *Aśani Samket* stands apart as a rare famine novel that exclusively chronicled villagers' lives without bringing in an urban perspective. Another novel not discussed here is Abul Ishaque's *Sūryaḍīghala Ēarī* (*The Ill-Omened House*, 1955). Along with Bijan Bhattacharya's celebrated play *Nabānna* (*New Harvest*, 1944), these works attempted to give voice to the rural peasantry.

⁵⁴Ibid., pp. 80–81.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 27.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 89.

Gangacharan's realization stems from the fact that the farmers on whom he depended for sustenance, even as he claimed superiority over them by virtue of his rudimentary Sanskrit, no longer have anything to offer him.

Aśani Saṃket offers us two visions of kinship. The first is class and caste solidarity, in which Brahmins help feed other Brahmins. Early on, Ananga pities and feeds Durga paṇḍit, whom Gangacharan desperately wishes to drive away ('Ananga bou was very happy to see Durga paṇḍit eating. It is bliss to feed the human being who eats well').⁵⁷ Much later in the novel, when Gangacharan has traversed several miles looking unsuccessfully for rice and is refused by the trader Nibaran Ghosh, who still has some and is keeping it for his own family, the trader's widowed daughter Khyantamani offers him some to take home. A grateful Gangacharan's eyes well up with tears with the realization that 'Women...alone distribute food freely in this hungry life.'⁵⁸ By the time Gangacharan realizes helplessly that the parasitic Durga paṇḍit will forever be a fixture in his house, we hear Durga paṇḍit relay a conversation when he proudly proclaims that Gangacharan is not his kin by blood, but by caste ('No, no, he is of my fellow caste, a Brahmin').⁵⁹

The second vision of kinship in *Aśani Saṃket* depicts women's resourcefulness and solidarities in a way that destabilizes gender and caste relations. As food becomes increasingly scarce over time, the novel highlights female resilience, vulnerability, and labour, both domestically and in the fields of the average Bengali village. In the process, a larger unspoken truth is revealed about the failed paternalism of state practices and the gendered division of labour. Contrasted with the helplessness of the men when there is no rice to buy or harvest, desperate women look for food in the most unlikely of places.⁶⁰ Ananga's bid for survival is facilitated by her friends, the caste-oppressed Kapali bou and Moti Muchini (notably, their caste identity is embedded in their names). Both these female characters are shown to be strong women with a greater capacity for self-making and survival than their Brahmin counterparts. Yet both of them—by virtue of caste—are relegated to the status of secondary characters in the novel and serve as a foil to Ananga.

Bibhutibhushan presents two counterparts to the naive and long-suffering Ananga who, through physical labour on the fields, struggles to extricate herself from her Brahmin subjectivity. The first of these characters, Kapali bou, the young second wife of a farmer, is shown to be sexually promiscuous and endowed with a wicked sense of humour but, despite her perceived lack of womanly virtue, is devoted to Ananga's well-being. At the end of the novel, Kapali bou is so hungry that she sells herself to Jadu pora, a lecherous character with a burnt face who works as a contractor at a mill, in exchange for rice. As in earlier instances, she saves a portion of the rice she has procured for her

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 30.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 77.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 87.

⁶⁰The descriptions of the kind of food that villagers ate out of desperation in the absence of rice is another exceptional documentary function of *Aśani Saṃket*. Bibhutibhushan's keen knowledge of rural and natural life in Bengal comes to the fore. In *Aśani Saṃket*, women are depicted collecting different kinds of greens, wild potatoes, and yams, as well as snails and clams from the ponds. In one scene, Ananga and her friends, Kapali bou and Moti Muchini, go to a deserted field overgrown with weeds and shrubbery to retrieve wild potatoes. A man attacks Ananga and is about to rape her when Moti intervenes and saves her.

friend Ananga. The latter finds herself in a moral dilemma. She does not want to refuse the gift, but how can she accept food that Kapali bou has exchanged for sex? In a tearful exchange Kapali bou pays homage to the 'pure' Brahman: 'We will rot in hell. Leave us aside, you are *satīlakṣmī* (the goddess Lakshmi), give me the dust of your feet. So that even after going to hell, I can get some morsels to eat.'⁶¹ Ananga's purported superiority to Kapali bou is circumstantial and, ultimately, circumspect. Ananga requests Kapali bou to preserve her honour and reject the mill contractor's offer to take her to the relief kitchens of Calcutta, even if the alternative is to starve in the village. Kapali bou accepts Ananga's wish even though at this juncture, it is a question of life and death. The caste-oppressed woman's physical survival and resourcefulness, which she exhibits throughout the novel, is undercut by the Brahman's vision of moral survival, even at the cost of losing one's life.⁶²

The novel's realist framework offers an intimation of the lives and loves of the rural poor which includes a range of characters from different castes. *Āsani Saṃket* leaves impending death as mere intimation (*saṃket*); what we see instead are rich life-worlds. The sole, final death is of a landless and caste-oppressed woman, Moti Muchini, who was Ananga's friend from an earlier phase of her life in the village of Bhatchala, where Gangacharan and Ananga lived before attaining a life of comparative plenitude in Natun Ga. Ananga's happiest memories in the novel are of times spent with Moti Muchini, hustling in the fields and ponds for food. As the famine begins, Moti often turns up at Ananga's house and they continue to look for food, with Moti acting as protector for the sheltered, inexperienced Ananga. At the end of the novel, a starving and delirious Moti reappears, but by virtue of her caste she is physically separated from the household that she may not enter. Caste is the ultimate threshold of anguish, one Ananga hesitates to cross, even to be with her friend at the moment of her death.

The intimation of death that famine brings is a shadow that lies at the outer boundaries of the Brahman's house under a mango tree. When Ananga's son Habu brings Moti a paltry amount of food, delirious Moti cannot recognize him. She responds to the boy's questions with enigmatic snatches of rural poetry in her starvation-induced delirium: 'The bird *śālik*, the bird *śālik*/ Lives in the paddy fields...near the pond lies the lotus/and on her nose, Moti's nose ring.'⁶³ All that Moti owned and was, '... she left on the roadside and went on to the afterlife'.⁶⁴ Her death became the occasion for collective understanding of the famine:

After Moti Muchini everyone finally understood that people can die from starvation. Whatever one had so far heard in stories was now finally within the realm of possibility. Nobody gave food to this person who died of starvation! Nobody could save her from the jaws of death. A great terror entered into the minds of all. Anyone could die of starvation.⁶⁵

⁶¹Ibid., p. 73.

⁶²Ibid., pp. 95–96.

⁶³Ibid., p. 92.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 93.

⁶⁵Ibid.

Rather than mourning Moti's life and her passing, the village community is struck by terror that the same fate might befall them, and expresses concern that older structures of community and village organization that might have prevented her death have disintegrated.

Despite the fact that Bibhutibhushan made caste central to the novel, we do not get much insight into Moti's inner life; as readers, we are only given glimpses into the inner lives of the Brahman characters. Gangacharan's tortured self-realization and his inability to provide for his family, his realization that women are more loving and self-sacrificing than men, and his hazy recognition of the larger forces of world history that determine the fate of his small village are accompanied by Ananga's wistful reconstruction of an imagined and idyllic past in Bhatchala. Moreover, only the two dominant caste characters attempt to think beyond the famine. In a strangely intimate moment, Ananga wakes Gangacharan up one morning and proposes the idea that they patronise a village singer. In the midst of great hunger and deprivation, Gangacharan thinks she must be joking, until she asks him wistfully: 'Can the poor not listen to music?'⁶⁶

Ananga voices a yearning for art that is audacious in the context of the widespread hunger and deprivation that famine has engendered in the village. *Āsani Samket* explores the liminal space between moral community and its breakdown, entitlement and its failure, and empathy and indifference. It does so through a central focus on the Brahman's consciousness, who—battered, hungry, devastated—nonetheless finds a kernel of identity outside the metanarrative of famine. In the process, the dominant caste protagonists make piecemeal sense of the world. The Brahmans neither die nor can they save the most vulnerable in their midst. The circumstances of Moti Muchini's death are posed as a collective problem—how could the village allow it to happen? Gangacharan eventually cremates Moti Muchini despite the stigma of the ritual contamination of touch, a moment of redemption for a man whose existence was premised on exploiting Brahmanical privilege.

Bibhutibhushan concluded *Āsani Samket* ambiguously. At the end of the novel, Moti Muchini dies as a symbol of the faceless, nameless peasants who facilitated the development of bourgeois historical and political consciousness. The reader is especially troubled by Moti's passive acceptance of her own death on the roadside, again a familiar trope of Bengali famine literature. It parallels Kapali bou's passive acceptance of remaining in the village at Ananga's insistence.⁶⁷ Rusati Sen has argued that the ending of *Āsani Samket* is enigmatic and could have resulted from the fact that *Mātrbhūmi* magazine stopped publishing from January 1946. Sen compares Ray's film adaptation with the Bibhutibhushan original, and speculates on the reasons behind the abruptness of the original ending. Sen's explanation touches upon two points. First, Kapali bou threatens the moral order of Bibhutibhushan's idealized village, where women, despite their flaws, are repositories of innocence and virtue.⁶⁸ Second, the novel was composed by Bibhutibhushan during an uncharacteristically prosperous period in his literary

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 55.

⁶⁷Amlan Das Gupta notes the 'weak' ethical choice on her part. Das Gupta, 'The Economy of Hunger: Representing the Bengal Famine of 1943', p. 181.

⁶⁸Rusati Sen, *Satyajiter Bibhūtibhūṣaṇ* (Kolkata: Pratikshana Publications, 1994), pp. 115–118.

career. Having known village poverty at a much younger age, he had no real first-hand experience of the Famine of 1943 itself. Could Kapali *bou*'s decision to not leave the village for Calcutta, choosing starvation over sexual exploitation, be explained by Bibhutibhushan's reluctance to hand over autonomy to a village woman? After all, she experiences an inequity so profound that she could potentially overturn the author's lifelong characterization of the feminine character as inherently virtuous and pristine.⁶⁹

Manik Bandyopadhyay's short story 'Chiniye Khāy ni Keno' ('Why Didn't They Snatch and Eat?') directly tackles the question of peasant passivity, not only as historical fact but also as a problem of representation. The first sentence of the story poses the story's central question while also underscoring the hierarchy existing between the first-person narrator's voice and the interlocutor: 'They are dying in droves, yet have not snatched away [food] and eaten. Do you know why, *babu*?'⁷⁰

The reader is then privy to a conversation between the dominant caste narrator and Yogi *ḍākāt*, a bandit and a champion of the poor. Prior to the famine, Yogi *ḍākāt* had been part of a social underclass that undermined the colonial state through a life of crime and, unlike the educated colonial-liberal subject, harbours no illusions about the state's own criminal governmentality. The conversation that ensues between these two subject positions, Yogi's and the narrator's, lays out both economic and epistemic reasons behind the lack of peasant agency during the famine. Yogi *ḍākāt* rehearses—for the reader's benefit—the moral beliefs of the privileged and their opinions as to why the poor did not consider themselves entitled to food. Each time, Yogi invokes the perceptions of the privileged, only to offer a rebuttal. First, Yogi explains, the upper classes view peasants as inherently noble creatures incapable of going against the law. Yogi scoffs: 'Illegal acts! Illegal! He would be fortunate to go to jail. Pimping out and selling his wife and daughter, throttling anyone weaker than him for a handful of grain, what is law to him?'⁷¹ The fear of law, as Yogi points out, is an empty explanation in the face of dissolving kinship and social relations. This fallacious belief is second only in stupidity to the idea of fate or God. Yogi explains the second position: 'Another *babu* said, you know Yogi, they are the illiterate poor, peasants and farmers, they accept the invisible lines of destiny. God has ruled that one has to starve to death; hence they have not tried to survive through robbing and looting.'⁷² The outraged Yogi objects by contending that peasants do, in fact, exercise agency in the face of inevitable disease and natural disaster; after all, he asks, does anyone swallow fate's decree unthinkingly? Wanting to elude the famine, peasants had been selling all their possessions and moving to Calcutta to survive.

The third position makes Yogi *ḍākāt* laugh. A sympathetic *babu* had tearfully declared that peasants were used to famine, that their lot was to struggle and suffer. To this, Yogi responds with what the narrator calls an 'old devastating joke': 'Fine, *babu*, I

⁶⁹Ibid. See also Rushati Sen, *Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay* (Kolkata: Poschimbongo Bangla Academy, 1995), pp. 33–36.

⁷⁰Manik Bandyopadhyay, 'Chiniye Khāy ni Keno' ('Why Didn't They Snatch and Eat?') [first published in the collection *Khatiyān*, 1947], in *Manik Bandyopadhyay Racanāsamagra*, vol. 6 (Calcutta: Paschimbanga Sahitya Academy, 2000), p. 104.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 105.

⁷²Ibid.

understand that they were used to not eating. But was dying also a habit?⁷³ Yogi *dākāt*, who tried to organize victims into political action, talks about how he came to realize why the poor could not organize themselves. He explains that, when the relief kitchens started providing more wholesome food, albeit briefly, new life and urgency came to the hapless victims, and they were eager to revolt. Before they could ‘snatch and eat’ from the relief kitchens, the kitchens had already dispatched their food to the black market. Going back to paltry, watery *khichuri* in the kitchens returned the victims to a state of passive victimhood. The lack of food results in a physical state of debility, a liminal state of being neither fully asleep nor fully awake (*jhimiye thākā*), which translates into a larger political condition. Yogi then launches into the main point of the story—the response to the question ‘Why Didn’t They Snatch and Eat?’ He says:

I understood that day why they were dying *en masse* from starvation, why they didn’t just snatch and eat the plentiful food lying in front of them. Not eating for just one day makes the body wither and also diminishes the urge to fight for survival, by snatching and eating. Just eating for a few days once again restores that urge. Again, starving takes that away. What is so astonishing about this? This is an easy and simple truth. I wonder why nobody understands this. *Babu*, the scriptures say food is the life-force.⁷⁴

Yogi goes on to illustrate this point with a parable about the sage Jaratkāru, who came across his forefathers hanging from the roots of a tree near a gaping hole. The roots were being nibbled by rats, so the ascetic asked them why they were holding on to the dangerous roots, which could break and leave them toppling into the hole. The men informed him that they were his forefathers, that the roots symbolized him and the rats Dharma, and that the hole was a passage to hell. If the ascetic did not give up his meditation and focus on reproduction in order to extend their lineage, their race was doomed. The ascetic did as he was told and married a king’s daughter, but had no progeny. For this, he blamed the woman, who in turn reminded him that his self-induced starvation had caused him to lose his virility. In response, he decided to eat plentifully and had a son, ensuring generational continuity. This myth undercuts the irony playing on the narrator’s mind, who has noticed Yogi’s pregnant wife and, from the calculations of Yogi’s time in prison and his wife’s time in a brothel, knows that the child is not Yogi’s.

One of the moral horrors of the famine was the familiar tale of desperately hungry women turning to prostitution as a way of keeping themselves alive.⁷⁵ Non-normative sexual behaviour became normalized, given the larger collapse of social structures. The narrator says, ‘I realised my calculations were wrong. Yogi was not the sage of the *Mahābhārata*; one doubts whether heaven or hell exist in his imagination, he is not at all

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 109.

⁷⁵It is a motif found not only in Bibhutibhushan’s *Āsani Saṃket*, but also Bhabani Bandyopadhyay’s novel written in English, *So Many Hungers!* [1947], which I do not discuss in this article. See also a collection of stories about real-life famine victims, including women exchanging sex for food: Ela Sen, *Darkening Days: Being a Narrative of Famine-Stricken Bengal* (Calcutta: Sushil Gupta, 1944). The book was illustrated by artist Zainul Abedin.

concerned with the continuity of his line. After getting out of the Englishman's prison, he tracked down his lost wife in the brothel; today he is unwilling to be unhappy only because he is not the father of the child his wife bears.⁷⁶ The unwieldy construction with a double negative emphasizes that the narrator is puzzled: how could Yogi be happy under the circumstances? How could Yogi be undisturbed by the question of generational continuity?

The epistemic gap between narrator and bandit is again reflective of a profound caste and class difference. Yogi's knowledge that happiness and fulfilment arise out of a love that does not depend on concerns about legitimacy and purity is not shared by the narrator, who cannot let go of bourgeois morality. The *śāstric* parable of Jaratkāru means entirely different things to the two characters; the narrator glosses the story as one about lineage, while to Yogi, the story illustrates a political and moral truth. Food is the basis of life itself, both in terms of reproduction as well as in the perpetuation of all that is generative and life-affirming, including politics.

Taken together, *Aśani Saṃket* and 'Chiniye Khāy ni Keno' provide an important insight into the question of peasant passivity and of bourgeois morality. In the first section, I discussed a Bengali intelligentsia shaken by the geopolitical realities of fascism. The global concerns of repression and large-scale violence gradually gave way to a reformulated realist narrative that instead focused on local subaltern worlds. In these small life-worlds, existing social formations dictated the scale and extent of victimhood. Moti Muchini and Yogi Dākāt occupy two distinct imaginations of peasant subjectivity. Moti is passive and accepts the terrible death that comes her way. Yogi accepts the hand that fate has dealt, but the possibility of subaltern political action simmers within him. Both characters become an occasion for dominant caste interlocutors to understand and be transformed by the realities of famine.

Complicity and the bourgeois conscience

In the previous section, I discussed how famine fiction that directly addressed the question of the peasantry depicted the gradual disintegration of moral structures of kinship and community in Bengal. Faced with this crumbling of familiar, familial structures, a politically engaged middle class realized that the documentation it undertook was flawed, powerless, and ineffectual. Who, after all, would be the interlocutors of this literature? This tortured self-consciousness gave rise to a form of realist narrative that sought to represent the famine in two ways. First, the Famine of 1943 needed to be recorded as an empirical reality, given that the colonial state censored all news and facts. Second, beyond the realm of facticity was the question of whether the famine as an event could actually transform historical consciousness. This led to a form of narrative which, on the one hand, enacted a documentary-like realism in recording historical detail but, on the other, also captured the inner life and consciousness of a transformed bourgeois class. This final section therefore explores the moral conundrum at the heart of a bourgeois realist representation of the famine. This dilemma is not only the artistic problem of representing the unrepresentable—a genocide—but also the socioeconomic complicity of the urban subject.

⁷⁶Bandyopadhyay, 'Chiniye Khāy ni Keno', p. 109.

The three literary sources discussed here have seldom featured in analyses of famine literature. They include Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay's novel *Manvantar* (*End of the Epoch*), Nurul Momen's play *Nemesis*, and Gopal Haldar's monumental trilogy *Pañcāser Upānta* (*Thirteen Forty-Nine*), *Pañcāser Path* (*Toward Thirty Fifty*), and *Teraśa Pañcās* (*Thirteen Fifty*). As mentioned previously, Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay was a key organizer in the Anti-Fascist Writers' and Artists' Association, as was Gopal Haldar, whose works are less often studied. In fact, Haldar was better known as a philologist and linguist, who began writing novels in the 1930s with *Ekadā* (written in 1933 and published in 1939).⁷⁷ Nurul Momen was a practising lawyer at the Calcutta High Court who joined the Law Faculty of Dhaka in 1945. His first play, *Nemesis*, published by the Calcutta periodical *Shonibarar Cithi* in 1945, was responsible for cementing his position as a notable playwright. All three works have as protagonists an elite, Western-educated bourgeois subject, and they expose the predicament of an urban subjectivity that is both aware of participating in world history as well as cognisant of its own powerlessness to change its course.

Rather than discussing the whole of Gopal Haldar's monumental trilogy, I will focus on the introductory notes he wrote to each novel. Written between 1942 and 1944, the novels chronicle the politics of famine relief and the mechanics of survival, displaying a diverse cast of characters. The central protagonist of these novels, Binoykumar Majumdar, is a doctor who flees Burma with the Japanese takeover, returning to his homestead in Bengal. His time and efforts are divided between his ancestral village, Sonapur, and Calcutta. Binoy's life is shown by the author to be an extended attempt to serve as an engaged witness of this fractured period and its multiple contradictions. The juxtaposition of the village and the city shows the networks of exchange and aid, but also the fragility of the middle-class urban Bengali, who, despite progressive 'politics', struggles to be relevant in the face of the famine. Binoy's questioning of the urban party workers, their lengthy and stirring speeches, and his resultant state of disquiet are accompanied by Haldar's detailed documentation of the political leaders of the time belonging to Congress and the Muslim League. The famine economy itself had given rise to a new class of people capitalizing on the famine, such as contractors.⁷⁸ Moreover, the question of organizing and delivering famine relief depended on local pools of volunteers. In these divisions of power, labour, and responsibility, the central figure of Binoy is shown to have a tortured inner life as he negotiates these multiple

⁷⁷Gopal Haldar was born in Dhaka and studied at Scottish Church College and Calcutta University. He practised law before commencing research work in linguistics under the tutelage of Sunitikumar Chattopadhyay. As a student, he was a member of the revolutionary Yugāntar group before joining the Indian National Congress in 1921, which he quit in 1940. He then joined the Communist Party of India in 1941, organizing peasant unions. As an editor, he worked on several notable journals including *Paricay*, *Prabāsī*, *Modern Review*, and *Hindustan Standard*. He spent time in prison in the 1930s, which is also where he started writing fiction. He wrote extensively on Bengali linguistics and literary history. For a bibliographical survey of his works, see 'Gopal Haldar', in Amaresh Dutta (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature*, vol. 2 (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1988), p. 1534.

⁷⁸Haldar gives us a picture of the military contractors in Sonapur through the figures of Jashoda Choudhury, Pramod Choudhury, and Idris Miyan. In a conversation between a local political worker, Pramatha, and Binoy, we understand the mechanics of hoarding in villages and small towns, including intentional wrongdoing in kerosene distribution by local supply posts. Gopal Haldar, *Teraśa Pañcās* (Calcutta: Puthighar, 1945), p. 20.

axes of power, the locus of which resides in Calcutta. As a result, he often questions his own relevance in his ancestral village, where he shifts to help with famine relief:

Work, work, work? Did Binoy fear work? Binoy was indefatigable in that respect. Sudha and Amit would finally understand this from the telegram sent by Suhrid Ray and Pramatha. Binoy was no longer angry with Pramatha. With inner satisfaction, he asked, 'Would you have managed without me?' 'Yes, we would have managed because we have to manage, but truly, we need you. You and Zaheduddin *sāheb* are the secretaries of the People's Protection Committee, it is hard to get hold of Zahed *sāheb*, how would we make do without you?'⁷⁹

The tension between the tumultuous inner life of the bourgeois witness and the events of the famine is explained by Haldar in the introduction to *Pañcāśer Path*, in which he divides the famine into three phases corresponding to the three novels: April to August 1942, August to December 1943, and, finally, January 1943 to April 1944.⁸⁰ Haldar observes that he wished to write a historical novel as a crucial moment of global history unfolded in Bengal. He further notes that a person's social life does not always correspond to their particular inner life, and that this disconnect—between event and feeling—undergirds subjective experiences of the famine. Haldar explains how the form of the novel helps to overcome the tension between an objective rendering of historical facts and genuine moral insight or understanding. Events such as the famine highlighted the role of literature in exploring the distance between those who, Haldar memorably writes, swim across the tides of history, those who find a shore, and those who are swept away.⁸¹

Further, Haldar spells out another function of his novels—that of demonstrating his status as a witness to history and his subjective understanding of moral crises, which may or may not have been shared by others who lived through that time. He asks us to think about two generic requirements of the novel—event and character. A historical novel must explore the tension between the two. In Haldar's understanding, while events themselves occupy centre stage, their importance also resides in their way of moulding human choice and action. In the way that large historical and political events influence the people of a given time and contribute to their inner lives and moral choices, events within a historical novel turn human protagonists into full-fledged 'characters'.⁸² 'I looked for,' Haldar writes, 'people who did not come into contact with the opinions of the educated Bengalis, [also] average Bengalis—who do not like politics, who despite being educated meet people from all classes of life—how did they see the famine? And what would be the consequences of these blows and counter-blows?'⁸³

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 13.

⁸⁰Gopal Haldar, *Pañcāśer Path* (Calcutta: Puthighar, 1944), p. 3.

⁸¹Ibid., pp. 3–4.

⁸²Ibid., p. 5. If we think of the Bengali word used for it, *caritra*, which, from the Sanskrit, meant 'deeds' there is indeed an interesting understanding of 'character' itself. This usage of *carit* as deeds continued well into the nineteenth century. So, in that sense, character itself is tied to the idea of human action and response.

⁸³Ibid.

Again, in the preface to *Teraśa Pañcās*, he observes that the novel documents how the insidious practices of the state insinuate themselves into the lives of all classes of people, including the ordinary middle class that prefers literature that is not overtly political.⁸⁴ Binoy, the rootless hero of the trilogy, similarly feels a deep ambivalence towards the impassioned politics of famine and leftist organization in Calcutta, while also bearing witness to the inequities of war-torn rural Bengal. In the novels, he often reflects on his frenzied flight to Indian land from Burma. Witnessing the exodus of Indians from Japanese-occupied Burma made him realize that the imperial centres of world history looked for ‘human sacrifice’ in the most unlikely, peripheral of spaces.

Haldar ventriloquizes a certain political position through the main character’s point of view: Binoy, a man who, at one point, had said with misguided confidence ‘I do not want politics’ is forced to admit, as a witness to the Second World War and the famine, that ‘when people walk together.... it is politics’.⁸⁵ Yet Binoy also finds it difficult to accept politics as ideology, unlike the political workers he befriends in Calcutta. Haldar foregrounds the difficulty of establishing moral clarity in this time of utter turmoil, not only by highlighting real-life instances of politicians and political workers who turned a blind eye to or even profited from the situation, but also by choosing a hero who, despite being moved by the suffering of the poor and oppressed, cannot fully embrace his own moral stance.

The question of bourgeois complicity and hypocrisy is the central problem of the experimental one-act play *Nemesis*, Nurul Momen’s debut.⁸⁶ *Nemesis* is constructed as a monologue and unfolds during a winter night of 1943. Its protagonist, Surajit Nandy, has made a fortune as a famine contractor and is struggling with the anguish brought by his newfound wealth. The play’s conceit is that Surajit’s interlocutors are never seen or heard onstage; whatever we come to know about him is through soliloquies or through telephone conversations with characters who remain silent and invisible. Yet it is these invisible interlocutors who, through their conversations with him, allow the audience to know his backstory. These figures include his former teacher ‘*māstārmaśāi*’, his manager Asim, his friend Yakub, his one-time colleague Jatin, and Amal, an organizer of ‘the Socialist Party’, along with some strangers, who become reluctant interlocutors due to the phone operator’s mistakes. The play begins with Surajit rehearsing a speech to be read out at a gathering of the Socialist Party, where he must speak on the famine. He reads out what seems to be an impassioned speech on the present conditions of famine, beginning with a rhetoric of abstractions—‘progress’, ‘human spirit’, ‘the West’:

I cannot find a language to curse the people who deprive human beings of their birthright, their right to live. Progressive human aspirations run ahead, in this moment of adversity, who can stop them? The ignominy of the human mind, gathered over centuries, floods our country today, mingling with blood, flowing through the trenches of this War. The human spirit gasps in helplessness. The

⁸⁴Haldar, *Teraśa Pañcās*, pp. 5–6.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 41–42.

⁸⁶After the partition of 1947, Momen became an acclaimed playwright in East Pakistan with works such as *Rupāntar*, *Yadi Eman Hoto*, *Nayā Khāndān*, and *At the Altar of the Law*, among others. I am grateful to the late Abul Hasnat who sent me a copy of *Nemesis* during the pandemic.

bloodlust of the West bares its fangs like a serpent and releases toxic breath that wilts the East, especially Bengal.⁸⁷

Surajit, however, moves on to the real culprit: the bourgeois capitalist class in Bengal who, seeking business opportunities in conditions of famine, wilfully deprive their countrymen of food. He asks whether they deserve any clemency or redemption: 'Nemesis, the goddess of vengeance, will she not turn her gaze on them.... they will not escape; the sins of the father are visited upon the children in the seventh generation.'⁸⁸ This particular sentence makes Surajit uneasy, and he makes his first phone call to the organizer, asking that it be omitted. During the second phone call, we understand that he is part of the very class that he seeks to condemn. His manager Asim tells him that 20,000 *maunds* of rice must be smuggled away at the dead of night between the hours of 11 and dawn. 'Who knew,' asks Surajit, 'that God would make us nocturnal creatures of the darkness?,'⁸⁹ adding, in a spirit of self-conscious irony, 'Your voice has cast a spell on me like a siren.'⁹⁰

Through fragmentary soliloquies and conversations, we reconstruct the background of this overnight millionaire who battles with his conscience while raking in a fortune that he despises. We know that Surajit Nandy was a humble teacher. While instructing Sulata, the daughter of a rich industrialist, Nripen Bose, Surajit fell in love and married her. However, his father-in-law's condition for the consummation of this marriage was that Surajit had to become a rich man in three months. Having established this condition, Bose separated the newly married couple and facilitated his son-in-law's malpractices, including smuggling, hoarding, and selling rice on the black market. In a conversation with his old teacher, Surajit laments: 'Yes, I know, sir, teachers never hate their students, but Faustus sold his soul to Satan only once, and I have sold my soul to Nripen Bose and Asim in instalments. The misery of it.'⁹¹ Surajit's moral ambivalence becomes clearer when he chats with his neighbour Yakub: 'Yakub, you may think I am inhuman, I am killing people by selling in the black market. Yet I feel great peace when I think that I can spit on the face of those who despised me when I was poor—look, I am becoming sentimental.'⁹²

Caught between these competing impulses, Surajit Nandy represents the figure of an ordinary man swept up in an extraordinary time. A self-defeating consciousness characterizes the class that he belongs to: how can one's inner life find harmony in a time of global deceit? Surajit finds himself answering a blackmarketeer's call: 'No sir, I am not the police; just another of your kind. I have however, kept up outer appearances. I give long speeches against blackmarketing. The outside has no commensurability with the inside. This is the *zeitgeist*.'⁹³ The torment of his inner life is brought into

⁸⁷Nurul Momen, *Nemesis* [1945] (Dhaka: Chirakal Prakashan, 2008), p. 10.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 12. By using a common simile, Nurul Momen makes a reference to both the alarm preceding an air raid and also the Greek myth that stands behind its etymology—the island creatures who sang songs on their island to waylay sailors and caused their death as, for instance, we encounter them in Homer's *Odyssey*.

⁹¹*Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁹²*Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁹³*Ibid.*, p. 21.

even greater relief when he repeatedly calls his teacher, denying and decrying the circumstances in which he finds himself. He cannot accept moral responsibility for his actions, and seeks redemption by quoting poetry from Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam. Through Surajit's allusive, poetic consciousness, Nurul Momen portrays an educated middle class that has the tools of humanist education to question itself, yet fails decisively. Towards the end of the play, Surajit speaks about his state of unfreedom more clearly; his liberty to act freely is constricted by higher forces, namely, at an immediate level, the local collaborators with whom he has thrown in his lot, Nripen Bose and Asim, and, ultimately, the larger deterministic forces of world history.

Here, we see Surajit understanding his freedom as something constrained by his associates, his circumstances, the war, without believing that it is something that he himself can exercise through his own choices and actions. In fact, he only reflects on his own agency when he suddenly invokes the word *bibek* (conscience), as he opens a package on his desk containing something with the name of 'Professor Gaskell's Magic Mirror'—'It reflects your conscience', the package reads.⁹⁴

Conscience is externalized as the 'magic mirror', a reference to Victorian toys promising optical illusion or the fairy-tale trope of truth-speaking mirrors that show us as we really are. In *Nemesis*, realism itself is no mirror; who, after all, is the real Surajit? The narrative portrays him as both the businessman who capitalizes on the death of millions as well as the schoolteacher who loves poetry. Surajit eventually realizes that he is caught between opposing, dialectical forces. In a phone conversation with manager Asim, he says, 'The mind once imbibed some radiance of knowledge, hence it once desired: light, more light. You have made it turn away. You make it want: darkness, more darkness.'⁹⁵

'Light, more light' is a reference to Goethe's dying words, '*Licht, mehr licht!*'⁹⁶ This allusive, literary-humanist consciousness upholds conscience as an internal attribute, but the narrative complicates its legitimacy by charting its descent into terrains of illegality perpetuated by none other than the liberal-imperial state itself. Since the late nineteenth century, legal debates about justice and equity in England and its empire had foregrounded 'conscience' as a fundamental term of equity jurisprudence, yet legal adjudications had stripped it of moral and spiritual import.⁹⁷ In the context of the empire, there was a shift from natural law to legal positivism from the latter half of the nineteenth century; universal natural law assumptions were seen as principles

⁹⁴Ibid., p. 26.

⁹⁵Ibid., p. 11.

⁹⁶The long cultural fascination with the significance of these (and other) last words has been discussed by Karl Guthke, as emblematic of the mystique accompanying the death of famous people, poised between this world and the next. Given the liminality of the self-consciousness of the protagonist (and the bourgeois class) in *Nemesis*, the idea of being situated between worlds is particularly interesting, as is the literal death of Enlightenment values and what Goethe might have symbolized to a colonial elite literary class. See Karl Guthke, *Last Words: Variations on a Theme in Cultural History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 81–89.

⁹⁷See Simon Petch, 'Law, Equity, and Conscience in Victorian England', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 25, no. 1, 1997, pp. 123–139.

of morality and not law.⁹⁸ 'Equity' was not for colonial peoples.⁹⁹ Abstracted from the empty quasi-legal terminology of 'good conscience', the literature of the famine constructs conscience as a fundamental problem of inner moral life, a crisis of faith that makes one question one's very existence. The 'magic mirror' speaks only when one's conscience is 'full to the brim with self-hatred'.¹⁰⁰ Surajit reiterates: 'The grounds of faith have been destroyed in Bengal...I have no faith in myself—no faith in anyone.'¹⁰¹

This brings us to the question of why Nurul Momen chose to name the play *Nemesis*. True to the principles of Aristotelian tragedy, it ends with a fatal missing of the mark. Caught off-guard (and off-stage) by the devious manager Asim, who stabs him to death (though Surajit manages to stab him back), he realizes the error of his ways and writes a will in which he leaves his ill-begotten wealth to the poor. Even this is an unsatisfactory ending to him and ends in a moment of paradox. As he lies dying, contemplating the destiny that led him to his wife Sulata, he belatedly discovers a telegram from her. She states that she chose him as a husband in order to disown the mercenary class into which she was born, that he must never fall into any traps set by her father. Further, she is pregnant, and she asks him to meet her at the station, so that they can start their new life at the end of the stipulated three-month period. Surajit dies a liminal man—he has no strength to ensure that he rewrites his will to leave his money to his child, nor can he reconcile with his decision to leave it to the starving poor. His final realization is that private property and greed is the nemesis of the time: 'I paid the penalty with my life and saved my generations.'¹⁰² The play unfolds with a single performer in a single setting, and this central mechanism of solitude and stasis becomes a metaphor for the mercenary middlemen who profited during the Bengal Famine.

The impossible paradox at the heart of *Nemesis* is the problem of moral culpability. Nurul Momen's deft interweaving of the dual and irreconcilable aspects of Surajit's life—that of a schoolteacher who quotes from a range of European and Bengali literature, as well as a mercenary capitalist—highlights the tormented consciousness of a specific urban subjectivity. Nurul Momen's choice of last names for the class of main characters is from the Hindu Kayastha caste, which, since the nineteenth century, formed a bulk of the elite middle class or the *bhadralok*.¹⁰³ Unlike the pointed monopoly of Brahmans in rural Bengal that we see in *Aśani Saṃket*, the elite social order of Calcutta had a variety of privileged, dominant caste groups, including the Brahmans,

⁹⁸This is discussed by Partha Chatterjee, 'The Morality of Empire', in *The Black Hole of Empire: History of a Global Practice of Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 176–183.

⁹⁹There has been a great deal of scholarship on the liberal ideology of empire and the apparatus through which colonized people are kept outside the purview of universal natural rights. See Thomas Metcalfe, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire. A Study in Nineteenth-century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Karuna Mantena, *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

¹⁰⁰Momen, *Nemesis*, p. 38.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹⁰³For a discussion of the caste composition of the *bhadralok*, see J. H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth Century Bengal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 'Bengal and the *Bhadralok*', pp. 1–20.

Kayasthas, and Baidyas. That the critique of this dominant caste Hindu demographic is presented by a Bengali Muslim author is in itself interesting. *Nemesis* has slipped through the cracks of literary history since its publication. As a crucial piece of famine literature, its sole documentary function is to highlight the contemptible figure of the famine contractor, emphasizing that a bourgeois class collaborated with the imperial state to annihilate the peasantry. In the process, the word ‘conscience’ (used in English) is stripped of both its moral and legal dimensions.

The tropes of complicity and conscience also occur in Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay’s novel *Manvantar* (*Epoch’s End*), which chronicled conditions in wartime Bengal with an unrelenting realism.¹⁰⁴ Unlike his earlier novels such as *Gaṇadebatā*, *Kāḷindī*, and *Pañcagrām*, Tarashankar chose to set *Manvantar* in Calcutta.¹⁰⁵ It helps contextualize the impending Famine of 1943 as a moral failure on the part of an educated, conscientious middle class that could have done far more in terms of protesting and organizing against anti-peasant imperial war policies. However, this middle class itself went through a major economic and social upheaval—in fact, the Second World War effectively reconstituted the ‘political’ in Bengal, even as a larger number of artists and writers openly pledged their allegiance to socialist ideals. This moment of social transformation is portrayed in *Manvantar*, a novel that unfolds as a dialogue between the contemporary and the historical, most acutely represented in the figure of its central protagonist, Kanai Chakrabarty. Despite being seen as an exemplar of moral virtue by friends and antagonists alike, Kanai believes that he bears the legacy of a generational curse, madness.¹⁰⁶ Kanai’s inner turmoil is a deep-rooted conviction that he, as a descendant of the infamous Chakrabartys, can never enjoy a normal life—not just because of war, but because he bears the toxic legacy of a nineteenth-century colonial capitalist class.

In the opening sections of the novel, Kanai, travelling to work on the tram one Saturday morning, silently observes a military lorry running over a migrant from cyclone-afflicted Midnapore on the streets of Calcutta. The tram rushes ahead and he takes in other sights and sounds, while fellow passengers discuss the end of the world. A shaken Kanai closes his eyes and, vividly remembering the nationalist demonstrations that had taken place at the same site the previous August, mutters lines from Milton: ‘Give me the liberty to know, to utter and to argue freely according to my conscience’.¹⁰⁷ As the novel begins and Kanai moves through university and political meetings, it seems that political spaces facilitating socialist, nationalist dissent and debate exist. In Kanai’s own immediate surroundings, everyday life is radically altered—he is surprised by the sudden, massive queues in front of the ration-stores

¹⁰⁴The novel was first translated as early as 1945 by Hirendranath Mookherjee, who rendered the title as *Epoch’s End*. References are to the original Bengali edition; all translations are mine.

¹⁰⁵This is pointed out by Mookherjee in his prefatory note to the English translation. See Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, *Epoch’s End*, (trans.) Hirendranath Mookherjee (Calcutta: Mitralaya, 1945), pp. iii–iv.

¹⁰⁶The reference to the family madness is a constant trope throughout the book. The novel begins by marking him out as the only ‘normal’ person in the old family mansion. We often find him reflecting on this legacy in a spirit of anger and bitterness, and he is too scared to enter into a romantic relationship with Neela because he believes that the disease may manifest itself at any point. This metaphorical burden is finally resolved when he decides to undergo medical tests to see whether he does, indeed, have this unnamed but debilitating illness.

¹⁰⁷Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, *Manvantar* [1944] (Calcutta: Mitralaya, 1957), p. 14.

and shops, his mother keeps telling him that their supplies of food are quickly running out, and there is a sudden influx of migrants into the city in the aftermath of the terrible cyclone in Midnapore.

As we inch closer to the last few months of 1942, Tarashankar's documentary realism gives a startling picture of the rapid deterioration of Calcutta's urban geography, altered by curfew, air raids, wartime daylight saving, and a great number of white military personnel. Yet Tarashankar impresses upon us that this deterioration is perhaps not so sudden as it may seem. As each character, major and minor, appears in the novel, Tarashankar provides a longer personal history contextualizing their transformation or annihilation during the Second World War. So, for example, we come to see Kanai's own ancestors, a once fabulously wealthy trading family, the Chakrabartys, in a state of near extinction: 'The family's present is even more inert than its past.'¹⁰⁸ Their neighbour Pradyot, beaten up by a moneylender, screams 'This cataclysmic war!', but the story of his poverty, both financial and mental, is explained by the narrator as stretching back several generations.¹⁰⁹ A family that traced its lineage to a great-grandfather who was a learned scholar at Fort William has degenerated to such an extent that Pradyot's father's greatest aspiration is for his son to live a life of brokerage (*dālālī*). Finally, we see Pradyot himself, who, 'wanting to get rid of all his debts in the market, and hoping to grasp any assets available to him, filed for insolvency'.¹¹⁰ The story of extreme personal greed that could not outwit market forces runs through several families, across generations, leading to a final collapse during the war period.

As the novel progresses, it explores and resolves Kanai's fear of madness, a metaphor for a blemished civilization moulded by the *bhadralok* class of nineteenth-century Bengal, which both accumulated and dissipated wealth made through landlordism and trade. Tarashankar, like Tagore, presents a deep civilizational crisis in *Manvantar* but he depicts the Second World War, despite its brutality and horror, as a reinvigorating force that purifies a colonial people even as it destroys them. This can be better understood through the intersecting stories of Kanai and of Pradyot's daughter, Gita. Pradyot sells Gita to a pimp, and after her brutal rape, she is discovered by a horrified Kanai who decides to help rehabilitate her and leaves his own house. Abandoning the decrepit old mansion and his family leaves him in a state of both relief and utter disquiet. One day, he decides to go back and confront his great-uncle, the patriarch, reassuring him that he is not in an illegitimate relationship with Gita but, rather, has rescued her from rape and prostitution. He is deeply moved when, instead of the condemnation he expected to receive, his great-uncle gives him his tearful blessings: 'This house has no salvation, its destruction is inevitable. You have done well in leaving; the Chakrabarty family will live on in you.'¹¹¹ Later, as he reflects on what his great-uncle really meant, his heart is overwhelmed with love and he becomes aware of a greater moral force with which, he envisions, larger political life may be rejuvenated in the future: 'One has to love, one has to keep others alive. Despite all its sins, humanity is great. The human being that he saw today in his great-uncle, the human essence

¹⁰⁸Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., p. 21.

¹¹⁰Ibid., p. 24.

¹¹¹Ibid., p. 172.

that made itself manifest through him, exists in all human beings. One must save that humanity.¹¹²

Kanai's realization—'I am a human being in this free world'—is the articulation of an emancipated and emancipatory consciousness that need not feel the burden of the bourgeois nineteenth-century history of wealth accumulation.¹¹³ This self-realization comes after a series of catastrophic events, including Gita's rape. That the novel ends in March 1943, against the backdrop of Gandhi's successful hunger strike, also alludes to an imminent national sovereignty. There is a strange juxtaposition of these two hungers, the voluntary, performative hunger of a political figure and the destructive, involuntary starvation imposed on a populace of peasants. While a reformed bourgeois consciousness, negotiating the contradictions of Indian political life, seems to be the main subject matter of the novel, it is presented against the palpable absence of its 'other', peasant consciousness. One of the rare moments in which we see this latter consciousness, peasant subjectivity, is through a moment of poetry.

Early on in the novel, we are introduced to Kanai's love interest, Neela, whose father Debaprasad is a lawyer of modest means. During much of the novel, he struggles with her financial independence and lack of interest in marriage, while trying to extend full sympathy to the daughter he has chosen to educate and who now has a secure government job that helps sustain their large family. Then one day he finds her at a local theatre, watching a play with two British soldiers. This marks the end of their relationship, and a reconciliation never happens.

At the beginning of the novel, we do not yet know that Debaprasad will reject the political modernity that his daughter embraces. In a poignant moment, instead, we witness a scene in which daughter and father together converse with a physically disabled youth, a wandering minstrel on the streets of Calcutta. This is an unnamed famine victim fallen on hard times, who says: 'No, *babu*. We are not beggars.' Then, he sings a song, making both father and daughter cry in a rare moment of profound connection:

Who knows how big this car is, the car that flies in the sky!
 In the middle of its belly, there's supposed to be a cataclysmic bomb
 The car is the span of forty hands,
 It has three drivers,
 And how many parts it has, nobody knows.
 Again, when the *babu* starts the engine, and fits some binoculars on his eyes
 All the fat householders of Calcutta
 Scared of the bombs, run for their lives,
 But the poor die, alas, they have no food, and no clothes.
 On top of that they have lost their houses, fate wills that they die on the
 streets.
 Then the Japanese come and say, they will kill us before that!¹¹⁴

It is significant that it is the poetic mode within this long and dense novel that gives us an insight into the 'other' form of consciousness, which is peasant consciousness.

¹¹²Ibid., p. 182.

¹¹³Ibid., p. 274.

¹¹⁴Ibid., p. 38.

Manvantar's peasant, abandoning the fields for a life of minstrelsy and starvation on the city streets, brings together two irreconcilable points of view on the political modernity that the Second World War ushers in. Debaprasad is committed to an older social order premised on duty and cannot share Neela's vision of a rights-based political future.¹¹⁵ Outside the realm of this torn middle-class self-consciousness, resided a universal and deep-rooted necessity to articulate the full moral horror of the Second World War. This moral horror, the decimation of peasant life and life-worlds, becomes a backdrop to the novel instead of being its central subject.

The works that I have discussed in this section turned their gaze on the urban and educated *bhadralok* subject in Calcutta, whose faith in liberalism and civilizational ideals was manifested through a humanist consciousness. This humanist consciousness was pulled apart by two related, but contradictory, impulses. The first was the need for a progressive 'politics', and we see this in the writing of Buddhadev Bose, Gopal Haldar, and Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, who were all closely associated with the Anti-Fascist Writers' and Artists' Movement. The second impulse was to both critique, restore, and renew faith in a Tagorean 'universal literature'. Kanai's recognition of the redemptive aspect of humanity, even within his debased, diseased great-uncle, displays the tortured relationship that the new Bengali intelligentsia, despite the cataclysm of the Second World War and the Bengal Famine, had with the complex legacies of the long nineteenth century.

The limit of this project is, however, the actual peasant and their lived reality. In the scheme of self-understanding, social transformation, and a reworked inheritance of liberalism and democracy—crucial in these years because of imminent national sovereignty—the peasant became a symbol. The urban famine novels brought middle-class consciousness to the forefront, and in the process, the peasant became an occasion for the bourgeoisie to rethink their relationship with imperial liberalism. Unlike the literature set in a rural setting, the literature of urban subjectivity and its commitment to 'politics' negotiated the economic and intellectual advantages once enjoyed, and then sacrificed, by the urban subjectivity. Thus, the themes that emerged from bourgeois realist narratives were not peasant unrest and organization, nor the issue of caste and communal difference, but of middle-class urban complicity and conscience.

Conclusion: The problem of moral truth

In this article, I have posed the problem of peasant passivity not merely as a historiographical question that later social historians have asked of the 1940s, but also as a key trope that emerged in the literary production of this period. While historians have raised the question of the absence of peasant resistance and organization, this problem may be rearticulated and historicized as a literary and cultural one—the use of the figure of the peasant as a symbol of social disintegration and moral transformation in the Second World War period.

I have charted a literary history in which a Bengali intelligentsia first faced the Second World War as a global event, wherein it thought itself as an equal actor in world history. Bengali intellectuals therefore initially had to reconcile their anticolonial and

¹¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 215.

communist sympathies by temporarily supporting the cause of global anti-fascism at a moment when the Soviet Union had taken up an alliance with the European capitalist powers against fascist Germany. Yet, as the famine started unfolding, the contradictions of liberal imperialism became stark. The Anti-Fascist Writers' and Artists' Movement, as a vanguard, negotiated these contradictory political forces. Despite its commitment to progressive politics, it remained caught within its inheritance of liberal reason, universal literature, and the tendency to think of realism as an instrument to improve social conditions. If fascism had raised the possibility of the bourgeois, dominant caste Bengali *bhadralok* becoming a world-historical subject, through a shared and global experiential reality of fascism, the Bengal Famine of 1943 negated that possibility. Empire had begotten the famine, and the nameless, faceless peasants who died in this imperial genocide complicated the nature of anti-fascist politics in the colony.

In 1945, the poet Mangalacharan Chattopadhyay, reviewing his friend Samar Sen's recent poetry collection *Tinpuruṣ* (*Three Generations*, 1944), criticized the latter for simultaneously painting the 1943 Famine as an event as 'inexorable and inevitable as Greek tragedy' and for indulging in self-pity (*ātmakarūṇā*) and self-hatred (*ātmaḡlāni*).¹¹⁶ Chattopadhyay seemed irritated by Sen's attempt to make the vortex of middle-class self-consciousness and its inner turmoil into a poetic subject. From the reviewer's point of view, no revolutionary consciousness could emerge unscathed from the reality of what the ruling bourgeois class had done to peasants in this period. Hence, Sen's contribution was, to Chattopadhyay, a disservice to Marxist poetics, displaying what he described as the 'flaw of passivity'.¹¹⁷

In retrospect, this reading of Samar Sen points to the larger problem of 'passivity' in the politics of the Second World War in Bengal. While social historians have mused on the question of peasant passivity during the famine, the literature of the period, by and large, points to a missed opportunity in the early days of Indian Marxist politics, which could have developed an effective revolutionary consciousness that would have outlasted 1943–1944. By effacing questions of peasant agency, caste complicity, and by making *bhadralok* subjectivity the subject and object of famine literature, realist and modernist writers of the time furthered the idea of peasant passivity and embraced their own passivity in the process.

If prose was realist, and poetry, modernist and fragmentary—though the subject of this article has not been the enormous poetic output in the famine years—then prose and poetry had one aspect in common. This was a poetics of hunger that demonstrated the simultaneous presence of the peasant and their erasure from world history. In these poems, the victims of the 1943 Famine remained faceless, its witnesses bereft and bewildered. The poems expressed guilt and complicity, misery and horror, anger and shame, often interspersed with questions to nameless, unspecified interlocutors. Famine poetry was a continuation of realist prose narrative, articulating the failure of liberal civilization and human reason, and yet holding out a hope for redemptive and universal humanity.

¹¹⁶Mangalacharan Chattopadhyay, 'Kābyadīṣṭi o Samar Sener Tinpuruṣ' ('Poetic vision and Samar Sen's *Three Generations*'), *Paricay*, vol. 15, issue 6, Pauṣ 1352/December 1945, pp. 404–412; quote on pp. 408–409.

¹¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 406. That Samar Sen had a dry spell in terms of poetic output in this period and that the war years had seriously affected his thinking on the revolutionary role of poetry in bringing about class consciousness is discussed by Nityapriya Ghosh, *Samar Sen* (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2001), pp. 37–53.

I end with a coda that comprises excerpts from a selection of famine poems. In these, the peasant is a spectral presence.

The spectral peasant

Which is this civilisation that, today, ridicules the very essence of the human?

Which *iblis* throws humans into the labyrinths of death, into ridicule?
Whose hands does a woman hold, to walk as a companion of his lust?
Which civilisation?¹¹⁸

*

The sun set
On the skull-studded canal,
On the doorstep of tombs, the burning rooms of crematoriums,
On the abandoned markets and meadows,
The unmarked, lost dams—
Behind lies the insensate road, and ahead
What future?
What covenant?¹¹⁹

*

Give us rice, give us rice—won't the sheaves of paddy come to life on these crossroads?¹²⁰

*

City of dreams, wrapped in stone
No rice grows here
What do you come here for?¹²¹

*

When will the winner of worlds, Rām, appear with the weight of new clouds
In an explosion of thunder, the destroyer of epochs
Pouring nectar of freedom as monsoon rains!—has the time not yet come?¹²²

*

Do you,¹²³ too, have senescence after youth, smeared in the terror of death
Hiding beauty behind the veil of the ugly?¹²⁴

*

¹¹⁸Farrukh Ahmad, 'Lās' ('Corpse'), in *Phyān Dāo*, (ed.) Taslima Nasrin (Kolkata: Punascha, 1993), p. 57.

¹¹⁹Subhash Mukhopadhyay, 'Barṣāseṣ' ('Year's End'), in *ibid.*, p. 55.

¹²⁰Amiya Chakravarty, 'Anna dāo' ('Give Us Rice') in *ibid.*, p. 14.

¹²¹Amiya Chakravarty, 'Annadātā' ('Giver of Rice'), in *ibid.*, p. 16.

¹²²Buddhadev Bose, 'Śrāvaṇa', in *ibid.*, p. 19.

¹²³It is ambiguous in the poem to whom the 'you' refers, though one can infer that it is to some transcendental force, whether God, Destiny, or Nature.

¹²⁴Jatindramohan Bagchi, 'Sundarer Antardhān' ('The End of Beauty'), in *Phyān Dāo*, p. 27.

Yet, forgetting these desperate streets
 Have we now come to the streets of Calcutta?
 Where is society?¹²⁵

*

Today, I have come to the houses of each one of you
 With a warrant from the courts of this world
 Will you give a response to my question?
 Why was 1350 strewn with corpses?¹²⁶

*

Mansur...
 From the lifeless mind
 And its peaceful stillness, a burst of fire
 Will never come—
 I know, I know that this writ too
 Shall blaze forth as the capitalist's will
 They have always wanted this end
 And yet, and yet, where will I find more truth than this?¹²⁷

*

Do you not know that many epochs are gone? Many emperors dead?
 Many golden sheaves of paddy are withered? Many an unfathomable loss
 Have exhausted us—we have lost the forward, happy step;
 Desires, worries, dreams, grief, future, present—this present, in our hearts,
 Sings this parched song—are we the children of grief?¹²⁸

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Competing interests. None.

¹²⁵Bishnu De, 'Ek Pauṣer śīt' ('The Winter of One Pauṣ'), in *ibid.*, p. 20.

¹²⁶Sukanta Bhattacharya, 'Aitiḥāsik' ('Historical'), in *Sukanta Samagra* (Calcutta: Saraswat Library, 1959), p. 65.

¹²⁷Syed Ali Ahsan, 'Nūtan Sūryer Din' ('The Day of the New Sun'), in *Phyān Dāo*, p. 101.

¹²⁸Jibanananda Das, 'Sindhūsāras', in *Mahāpṛthibi* (Calcutta: Signet Press, 1944), p. 15.

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