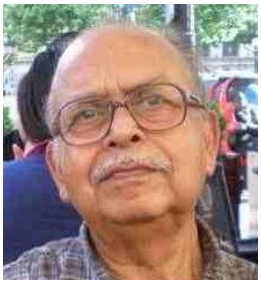
Averting the Horrors of the1943 Bengal Famine



Tapas Sen was born in Kolkata (1934), and brought up in what now constitutes Bangladesh. He migrated to India in 1948, and joined the National Defence Academy in January 1950. He was commissioned as a fighter pilot into the Indian Air Force on 1 April 1953, from where he retired in 1986 in the rank of an Air Commodore. He now leads an active life, travelling widely and writing occasionally.

Tapas Kumar Sen

Editor's note: This article originally appeared on Air Commodore Sen's blog TKS' Tales. *It is reproduced here with the author's permission. For the family backgrounds, see Early Days: Jessore 1930s.*

Planting our crops

We had just moved into our new and half-finished house at Himaitpur. It was early 1943.

The riversides of Himaitpur were full of Jute growing to its full height. The flood plains along the river were a very fertile tract. The land was of course sandy and loamy; not quite fit for the cultivation of fine varieties of rice. However, the farmers had the choice of sowing jute, sugarcane, or the *aus* variety of rice. Some of them also experimented with maize at times. These flood plains, known as char-land were fit only for single or double cropping while the land further inland regularly produced three crops a year.

Baba had just started investing in agricultural land. We were in the process of re-learning the art of Zamindari; choosing the right crop, employing the correct share-cropper, buying the correct seeds, applying the correct fertilizers and so on.

The agricultural economy of North Bengal was well set and the traditional life style seemed safe if some-what staid. One did not expect violent gyrations of the grains market.

The war on the Burma front was almost over. The entire country was under Japanese occupation. The islands of Andaman and Nicobar had also been occupied by the Japanese. Most of the middle income Indians working in Burma had trekked back in to India by about October 1942.

Price of food grains and vegetable were increasing gradually but that was ascribed to the war. A basketful of brinjal or ridge gourds could still be had for one paisa (1 rupee = 64 paisa). The early variety of local mango coming into the market sold easily for four annas a hundred (1 rupee = 16 annas). Price of rice however had doubled. Rice that was available for three and half rupees a maund (= 40 seers, 1 seer = 0.9 kg) in 1939-40 had started costing Rupees eight or more by 1941-42.

One evening Baba and Ma had gone into the Ashram for the usual evening gathering. (Baba had come back from Jessore for a short visit. He did these short trips quite regularly!) We, the four kids, and *Thakuma* (father's mother) had stayed back home. Baba and Ma came back home that evening in a state of excitement.

It seemed that there was a vigorous discussion in the Ashram about horticulture. The whole thing had started by a directive from Sri Sri Thakur that one needs to be prepared for a shortage of food in the near future. He had asked everyone in the Ashram to put every square inch of land available to productive use. Grow anything and everything that can be used as food, he had said.

The land around our new house was in an unprepared state. Bricks and rubble lay strewn around. The bamboo fencing of the land stood bare. The three front rooms, which were built only up to the plinth level, were also filled with rubble. All this had to be cleaned up.

Next morning, Baba sent for Mansoor Ali, the mason cum contractor who had built our house in the first place. We needed the courtyard cleaned up. Mansoor Ali took stock of the task in hand and disappeared. He re-appeared after a couple of hours with a *Kisan* driving a pair of bullocks, with a plough on his shoulder. He was followed by a couple of day labourers.

The Kisan got to work without delay. In short order, he had the whole ground ploughed up. All the bricks and rubble that the plough had picked up were collected by the two labourers, and put in one corner. Later in the evening, a couple of bullock carts brought fresh soil. This soil was used to top up the plinths of the unfinished rooms and the surrounding verandah. Baba came out, and under his direction, the land was neatly divided up in to various plots. Just in one active day, the whole look of the house changed.

A day later, Mansoor Ali came to the house with a gardener in tow. What all plants did the Saheb want? Baba turned the question around. What all can the Gardener grow in the existing piece of land? A lot of discussion took place. There would be one papaya tree in front of the toilet block, and a large patch of ladies' fingers in the front. The small patch between the front rooms would be ideal for a cluster of bottle gourd creepers. Near the western fence, there could be a similar cluster for sweet pumpkin. Behind the toilet block there would be another cluster for bottle gourd, and by its side a fairly large patch for cucumbers. These creeper patches could be separated by beds for brinjal and *mirchi*.

At this stage, Ma stepped in. There must be adequate space left for flowers! After much haggling, the inner courtyard was spared for flowering plants. A bed for marigold all along the verandah was planned, and a central location for a Black Prince rose bush. The two pillars of the western verandah had a pair of *Aparajita*. Another small patch was snatched in front of the eastern bedroom for more flowering plants. One shrub of *Atasi* was made to stand next to a shrub of *Mallika*, though it had to yield some space next to it for a patch of Ginger and *Haldi*.

Ma was fond of *Champak*. Space was found for a Champak in the rear plot behind the patch for bottle gourd.

For the rest of the ground, the chosen crop was potato. Even on the plinths of the front rooms, row upon row of potato was put down. Along the fence in the south and east, a few hibiscuses were put down. Along the western fence, the neighbouring house already had a huge cluster of Jasmine that shared the aroma with our house. We did not put any aromatic plants there. There was a cluster of *Dhatura* surrounded by a cluster of cacti. We let them be where they were.

The excitement of laying down a garden died down in a week. As the plants germinated and came out of the ground, a new excitement ran through the house. A new job, watering the garden, came into existence. By default, this job devolved on my second sister and me.

She was just twelve plus and I was around eight. The tube well was located in the rear of the house. We needed to fill buckets and carry those buckets (up three steps, through the verandah, through the front door, down three steps) to the front garden. Then we had to water each plant individually by a mug-full drawn from the bucket. It was hard work, it took a long time every day, and it was good fun. In all this activity, we never asked the question why we had put down so much. Very clearly, the amount of cultivation was far in excess of the needs of one family. The question never crossed our mind.

Slowly, the plants grew up and the creepers spread. We learnt how to train the creepers so that we would have easy access to the fruits when they appeared. When the flowering of the creepers began, Ma taught us how to recognize the male flower from the female. We were taught how to fertilize the female flower with the pollen stem of the male flower. We saw for ourselves how the fertilized flower grew into a large

fruit while the ones we missed out often withered. It was practical field training in botany and biology that we never forgot.

The Great Bengal Famine: markets and politics

As days rolled by, the grain market caught fire. In a matter of days, the price of rice rose from eight rupees or so to more than forty rupees to a maund. No one understood why the price was rising. There was utter panic in the countryside.

The Great Bengal Famine had set in. It was, and it remains till today, a most mysterious and horrendous of human tragedies. Let me, for a moment step out from my boyhood memories, and examine the situation as it existed then with the help of knowledge I have gathered later as an adult.

Up to 1940 – 41, India imported a fair amount (close to 2 million tons) of rice from Burma. East Bengal was progressively moving to jute cultivation, and it made economic sense to import rice from Burma for the consumption of the Eastern sector. The percentage share of imported rice from Burma was not high in the total consumption for the whole country. However, this import stopped in 1942 when Burma was occupied by Japan.

The war in Europe and Africa demanded food for the soldiers; a lot of it was exported from India even when the country as a whole was dependent on import of food. As recorded in the Wikipedia, 'on the 16th October 1942 the whole east coast of Bengal and Orissa was hit by a cyclone. A huge area of rice cultivation up to forty miles inland was flooded, causing the autumn crop in these areas to fail'.

In 1941, the central government had passed a rule that the movement of food grains across provincial boundaries would be controlled by the respective provincial governments. In 1942, when the shortage of rice was first felt, it was most acute in Bengal as it was the largest and most populous rice-eating province. Other provinces were not required by the central government to help Bengal. Inter-provincial movement of rice was impeded by the lack of cooperation from other provinces.

At that time, there was no system of public procurement or distribution of food grains. When Burma fell to the Japanese, it seemed that the onward march of the Japanese could very well continue into Eastern Bengal. The government took two precautionary measures.

First, it bought up all surplus grain from the eastern border districts of Bengal bordering Burma. Whether this grain was used for the war effort or was just destroyed cannot be established. However, availability of grains in these parts decreased.

Second, the government confiscated and destroyed a very large number of country boats in the riverine part of the province. This action robbed the lively hood of a large number of fishermen and it impeded the local commerce of food in the area where country boats were the primary mode of transportation.

Food prices went up. Marginal farmers lost their market. These people and the fisher folk lost their means of livelihood. Due to the war, a lot of money had been pumped into the local economy. The businessmen were flush with funds, and the middle class were comfortable in their homes. The market forces precipitated a hoarding spree for grains amongst the businessmen and the affluent population alike.

The misfortune of Bengal in 1943 was compounded by the political melodrama being enacted in the provincial legislative assembly for the previous five years. A K Fazlul Haq's KPP (Krishak Praja Party) had formed a government in Bengal with the Muslim League because the Indian National Congress would not support KPP. The Governor would not allow KPP to induct its ministers of choice; many of the elected on KPP ticket were known socialists. This made the KPP dependent on the League for its survival.

This dependence on the League led to defections from KPP in multiple waves as Haq had to compromise his socialist agenda. The defections brought the government down. Fazlul Haq cobbled together another coalition with the Hindu Mahasabha, the Forward Block, a section of the Congress and independents. The

Governor then engineered a situation with the help of the nominated European members where the ministry had to resign once again, even though the ministry had survived two no confidence motions in March 1943.

The Governor installed a ministry under Khwaja Nazimuddin of the Muslim League in April 1943, just about the time when the food crisis in the province was getting critical. (From August 1942, the Congress was considered politically hostile and the Muslim League as politically supportive by the British Government). In the new ministry, the food and civil supplies portfolio was held by HS Suhrawardy, a very ambition politician whose constituency lay entirely in the city of Calcutta. Suhrawardy appointed his close friend and business magnet Ispahani as the sole procurement agent for food grains for the provincial government. Government machinery was used to help procurement by the agent through dehoarding drives in the countryside. The city was provided with enough food. Ispahani made a lot of money.

Though the actual shortfall of grains was small, a very large segment of the rural population had lost its purchasing power. These people started dying of starvation in the villages, or they migrated to Calcutta by the millions, and died in Calcutta by the roadside.

There was no substantive or sustained effort by the government to feed the impoverished poor in the countryside. When the situation in Calcutta became ugly, these destitutes were rounded up, and forcibly removed to camps where they continued to die unseen and unsung. The official reckoning of deaths from this man (mis)managed famine was put at an underestimated three million, a figure perhaps comparable to the number of deaths by Hitler's Final Solution that was about to be enacted in Germany. *(Editor's note: The findings of an official Famine Inquiry Commission set up in 1944 are available here. There has since been considerable discussion about the validity of the Commission's conclusions.)*

Back to memories

Now, let me get back to my childhood memories.

I do not know how Sri Sri Thakur foresaw the coming famine. Certainly, it was not the common perception. It is also surprising that he did not encourage hoarding or induce any panic about the coming crisis. His plan was simple. There was enough land and enough water. With a little bit of effort, enough supplementary food could be produced to avert hunger. The people of the Ashram and all the inhabitants of the three villages of Himaitpur, Kashipur and Chhatna revered him. At his little nudge, the three villages got their act together. So much of vegetables were produced in these villages that throughout 1943 and 1944 no one went hungry.

Access to land was not evenly distributed in the village. Some families, like ours, owned a lot of land, both cultivable and homestead. When every bit of land was put to productive use, some of us grew much more that what we could consume. Sri Sri Thakur then directed that no food must be wasted. It was the responsibility of the producer to ensure that the produced food was put to proper use.

It thus became my duty to distribute the surplus vegetables produced in our garden to ten or fifteen other households nearby who had no land around their little huts and could produce nothing. Throughout these two years, horticulture became a part of our daily life.

As the season changed, the crops were rotated. Ladies' fingers gave way to cauliflower just as broad beans covered our roof. A competition developed as to who could grow more food.

By the summer of 1944, the game developed into food processing. By then, two fresh crops of rice paddy had been harvested and the food crisis had eased off. Our integration with the village economy was complete. By the grace of God and through enlightened guidance, we had skirted the most devastating famine of the century with not a single life lost and not a single soul hungry in our three villages. ❖