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*Fed by Famine: The Hindu Mahasabha's politics of religion, caste, and relief in response to the Great Bengal Famine, 1943–1944**

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Abstract

This article demonstrates how the Great Bengal Famine of 1943–1944 and relief activism during it fed the politics of the Hindu right, a development that has not previously received much scholarly attention. Using hitherto unused primary sources, the article introduces a novel site to the study of communal politics, namely, the propagation of Hindu communalism through food distribution during a humanitarian crisis. It examines the caste and class bias in private relief and provides the first in-depth study of the multifaceted process whereby the Hindu Mahasabha used the famine for political purposes. The party portrayed Muslim food officials as 'saboteurs' in the food administration, alleged that the Muslim League government was 'creating' a new group of Muslim grain traders undermining the established Hindu traders, and publicized the government's failure to avert the famine to prove the economic 'unviability' of creating Pakistan. This article also explores counter-narratives, for example, that Hindu political leaders were deliberately impeding the food supply in the hope that starvation would compel Bengali Muslims to surrender their demand for Pakistan. The politics of religious conversion played out blatantly in famine-relief when the

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Mahasabha accused Muslim volunteers of converting starving Hindus to Islam in exchange for food, and demanded that Hindu and Muslim famine orphans should remain in Hindu and Muslim orphanages respectively. Finally, by dwelling on beef consumption by the army at the time of an acute shortage of dairy milk during the famine, the Mahasabha fanned communal tensions surrounding the orthodox Hindu taboo on cow slaughter.

Introduction: to broaden the horizons

The period of the Second World War in Asia can also be identified as a time of 'boom famines' (famines occurring concurrently with the wartime boom). Almost contemporaneous famines ravaged the provinces of Henan in China in 1942–1943, Bengal in India in 1943–1944, and Tonkin in Vietnam in 1944–1945. These were all colossal famines: the death toll ranged from approximately three to five million people in each of them.

The causation and victimization of these famines are crowded themes by now.[1] In contrast, relief arrangements during these disasters are

[1] Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999; first published 1981. For an intense debate on Sen's conclusions, see Peter Bowbrick, 'The Causes of Famine: A Refutation of Professor Sen's Theory', *Food Policy*, 11, 2, May 1986. Amartya Sen, 'The Causes of Famine: A Reply', *Food Policy*, 11, 2, May 1986. Peter Bowbrick, 'Rejoinder: An Untenable Hypothesis on the Causes of Famine', *Food Policy*, 12, 1, February 1987. Amartya Sen, 'Reply: Famine and Mr Bowbrick', *Food Policy*, 12, 1, February 1987. George Allen, 'Famines: The Bowbrick-Sen Dispute and Some Related Issues', *Food Policy*, 11, 3, August 1986. Peter Nolan, 'The Causation and Prevention of Famines: A Critique of A. K. Sen', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 21, 1, October 1993. Amartya Sen, 'The Causation and Prevention of Famines: A Reply', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 21, 1, October 1993. For further critiques of Sen's theory and conclusions, see Omkar Goswami, 'The Bengal Famine of 1943: Re-examining the Data', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 27, 4, 1990. Mark B. Tauger, 'Entitlement, Shortage and the 1943 Bengal Famine: Another Look', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 31, 1, 2003. M. Mufakharul Islam, 'The Great Bengal Famine and the Question of FAD Yet Again', *Modern Asian Studies*, 41, 2, March 2007. For other works on the Bengal famine, see Paul R. Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943–44*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1982. Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, Social Structure and Politics, 1919–1947*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. Parama Roy, 'Women, Hunger, and Famine: Bengal, 1350/1943', in Bharati Ray (ed.), *Women of India: Colonial and Post-Colonial Periods*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005. Bikramjit De, 'Imperial Governance and the Challenges of War: Management of Food Supplies in Bengal, 1943–44', *Studies in History*, 22, 1, 2006. Debarshi Das, 'A Relook at the Bengal

remarkably less-studied in the historiography. The keen interest in the causation and victimization of these famines and simultaneous disinterest in studying relief can be explained by the relative usefulness of these topics in the exploration of exploitative and oppressive structures, namely, the British colonial state in India, the French colonial state and Japanese military occupation in Vietnam, and Japanese invasion as well as domestic feudalism and warlordism in China. In contrast to the causes of the wartime Asian famines, relief measures do not have any direct use in exemplifying the evils of colonialism and feudalism in Asia. For instance, the causes of the Bengal famine received close attention in the contemporary press as well as in later scholarly histories because, as Indivar Kamtekar has pointed out, 'Here was conclusive proof of the evils of imperialism.'[2] Very recently, Benjamin Siegel's study has explored the use of the famine in nationalist discourse and politics.[3] Sanjoy Bhattacharya's work on propaganda and information in eastern India during the

Famine', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 43, 31, August 2008. Cormac Ó Gráda, ''Sufficiency and Sufficiency and Sufficiency': Revisiting the Bengal Famine of 1943–44', Working Paper Series, WP10/21, University College Dublin, Centre for Economic Research, June 2010. 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*, London: Hurst and Company, 2015. For literature on the Henan famine, see Anthony Garnaut, 'A Quantitative Description of the Henan Famine of 1942', *Modern Asian Studies*, 47, 6, November 2013. Micah S. Muscolino, *The Ecology of War in China: Henan Province, the Yellow River, and Beyond, 1938–1950*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley, 'Saving the Nation, Starving the People? The Henan Famine of 1942–43', in Joseph Esherick and Matthew Combs (eds), *1943: China at the Crossroads*, New York: Cornell East Asia Series, 2015. For literature on the Tonkin famine, see Bùi Minh Dũng, 'Japan's Role in the Vietnamese Starvation of 1944–45', *Modern Asian Studies*, 29, 3, July 1995. Nguyên Thê Anh, 'Japanese Food Policies and the 1945 Great Famine in Indochina', in Paul H. Kratoska (ed.), *Food Supplies and the Japanese Occupation in South-East Asia*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998. Geoffrey C. Gunn, *Rice Wars in Colonial Vietnam: The Great Famine and the Viet Minh Road to Power*, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2014. Gregg Huff, 'Causes and Consequences of the Great Vietnam Famine, 1944–5', *The Economic History Review*, 72, 1, February 2019.

[2] Indivar Kamtekar, 'A Different War Dance: State and Class in India, 1939–1945', *Past and Present*, 176, 1, August 2002, p. 217.

[3] Benjamin Robert Siegel, *Hungry Nation: Food, Famine, and the Making of Modern India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, Chapter 1 'The Bengal Famine and the Nationalist Case for Food', pp. 21–49.

Second World War fleetingly discusses what he calls 'nationalist propaganda' vis-à-vis the Bengal famine.[4]

Martin Pinnell, the son of British civil servant Leonard George Pinnell (1896–1979), argued that 'in the aftermath of the Congress Party's "Quit India" campaign, some people used the famine as a stick with which to beat the British administration'.[5] However, to put things into perspective, his father served as the director of civil supplies in Bengal from August 1942 until April 1943, and before that oversaw the implementation of the Bengal government's notorious 'Denial Policy' in 1942 whereby food stocks were shifted from coastal Bengal and bicycles —and, more importantly, boats (indispensable for transporting grains in the coastal region)—were destroyed to deny the Japanese soldiers access to readily available sustenance and transport should a Japanese invasion of India take place.[6]

[4] Sanjoy Bhattacharya, *Propaganda and Information in Eastern India, 1939–45: A Necessary Weapon of War*, Richmond: Curzon Press, 2001, pp. 30–32.

[5] M. C. Pinnell's preface to the chapter 'The Bengal Famine, 1942–43', in L. G. Pinnell's transcribed memoir, *With the Sanction of Government: The Memoirs of L.G. Pinnell, I.C.S. (1896–1979)*, place of publication not mentioned, published privately by M. C. Pinnell, 2002, in L. G. Pinnell papers, Centre of South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge, p. 93.

[6] L. G. Pinnell, in his capacity as the additional commissioner of all the coastal divisions of Bengal, supervised the execution of the 'Denial Policy'. The destruction of boats had a devastating impact on the grain trade in eastern Bengal as the region has numerous rivers, canals, tidal estuaries, bayous, and backwaters, and therefore country boats were often the only means of transporting grain in the region. For Pinnell's version of the implementation of the 'Denial Policy', see Pinnell, *With the Sanction of Government*, pp. 89–93. His son M. C. Pinnell wrote in his preface to the chapter 'The Bengal Famine, 1942–43': 'I have written this preface in 1990, because to my clear knowledge, the accusations made in 1943 and 1944 laid a burden on my father's mind for the rest of his life: when dictating the following text 35 years later, he was still asking himself whether there was anything more that he could have done to avert the tragedy.' Ibid., p. 94. For a vivid personal account of the execution of the policy by an on-the-ground Indian civil servant, see Asok Mitra, *Towards Independence, 1940–1947: Memoirs of an Indian Civil Servant*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1991, pp. 104–107. See also Asok Mitra, 'Famine of 1943 in Vikrampur Dacca', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 4 February 1989, Special Article, pp. 253–255. For contemporary criticisms of the 'Denial Policy', see Kali Charan Ghosh, *Famines in Bengal, 1770–1943*, Calcutta: Indian Associated Publishing Co. Ld., 1944, pp. 52–55. See also K. Santhanam, *The Cry of Distress: A First-Hand Description and an Objective Study of the Indian Famine of 1943*, New Delhi: Hindustan Times Press, December 1943, 1st edition, Chapter XIII 'Denial Policy in Midnapore', pp. 52–54. For recent scholarly studies of the implementation of the policy, see Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal*, Chapter 2 'Denial', pp. 55–83, and Mukerjee, *Churchill's Secret War*, Chapter 3

In December 1943, during his internment in Ahmadnagar fort in Maharashtra, Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964), one of the most prominent Indian nationalist leaders who later became the first prime minister of independent India, noted in his prison diary his disappointment at the lack of widespread popular protest against British rule during the famine: 'It is the Bengal famine, I think, and the British attitude to it that has embittered me most … Why are we such miserable weaklings as to put up with this—to die like sheep with hardly a protest?'[7] Roughly two years later, during an election campaign in the United Provinces, he explicitly called for revolt against the British government in the event of any further famine. In a speech at Bahraich on 8 February 1946, he urged:

> I ask the people to revolt against the Government, if there is a famine in the provinces. The people must refuse to accept the fate which overtook Bengal two years ago, resulting in 35,00,000 deaths. Our countrymen must not die like flies—submitting calmly to death. Let the Government be prepared to face a rebellion.[8]

On the campaign trail at Varanasi six days later, his speech was more aggressive: 'If people die of hunger, their deaths will be avenged.'[9] However, famous nutritionist Wallace Ruddell Aykroyd (1899–1979), who was the director of the Government of India's Nutrition Research Laboratories in Coonoor between 1935 and 1945, and a member of the Famine Inquiry Commission appointed by the government in July 1944, later pointed out that 'Indian political critics of the British in their penultimate days in India, who would have liked to lay the entire blame for the Bengal famine on their shoulders, could not ignore the selfish

'Scorched', particularly pp. 63–67. The method of creating obstructions for the enemy by self-induced devastation in the form of destroying boats in Bengal had its equivalent in the deliberate inundation of the Yellow River by the Kuomintang (Nationalist) government in Henan in China to pre-empt Japanese invasion. For the deliberate flooding of the Yellow River by the Chinese Nationalists, see Garnaut, 'A Quantitative Description of the Henan Famine', p. 2009. See also Rana Mitter, *China's War with Japan, 1937–1945: The Struggle for Survival*, London: Penguin Books, 2014, p. 264.

[7] Prison diary, entry on 17 December 1943, Jawaharlal Nehru, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1981 (hereafter *Selected Works*), Vol. 13, p. 313.

[8] Nehru, speech at Bahraich, 8 February 1946, 'based on reports from *National Herald*, 10 February and *Hindustan Standard*, 11 February 1946', *Selected Works*, Vol. 14, p. 238.

[9] Nehru, speech at Varanasi, 14 February 1946, from *National Herald*, 16 February 1946, *Selected Works*, Vol. 14, p. 247.

greed of their fellow countrymen.'[10] David Arnold's study reminds us that famine was:

> not only part of the critique of colonial rule, a stick with which to beat the British for their exploitation and cruelty. It also had the effect of forcing nationalists like Gandhi and Nehru to think about an alternative political order and about economic strategies that could provide an enduring freedom from want.[11]

Notably, the use of Indian famines in nationalist critiques of colonial rule started long before the Second World War. The earliest examples of nationalist histories of famines in colonial India emerged at the dawn of the twentieth century when Dadabhai Naoroji (1825–1917), a founding member of the Indian National Congress and the first Indian member of the British parliament, published his *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* in 1901, and the Indian civil servant turned nationalist politician and economic historian Romesh Chunder Dutt (1848–1909) published his *Indian Famines, Their Causes and Prevention* in the same year, and the more famous *Economic History of India* in the next. Six decades later, in independent India, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting of the federal Indian government run by the Congress Party under the prime ministership of Nehru published Indian editions of the first and third of these works.[12]

The year 2018 marked the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Bengal famine. In its run-up, 'the public life' of the famine's history took off,[13] particularly with regard to the extent of Britain's wartime prime

[10] W. R. Aykroyd, *The Conquest of Famine*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1974, pp. 79–80.

[11] David Arnold, *Famine: Social Crisis and Historical Change*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988, p. 118.

[12] Dadabhai Naoroji, *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India*, London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1901; first Indian edition, Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1962. Romesh Chunder Dutt, *Indian Famines, Their Causes and Prevention*, London: publisher unspecified, 1901. Romesh Chunder Dutt, *The Economic History of India, Vol. I: Under Early British Rule: From the Rise of the British Power in 1757 to the Accession of Queen Victoria in 1837*, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co., 1902; first Indian edition, with a critical introduction by Prof. D. R. Gadgil, Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1960. Romesh Chunder Dutt, *The Economic History of India, Vol. II: In the Victorian Age: From the Accession of Queen Victoria in 1837 to the Commencement of the Twentieth Century*, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co., 1904; first Indian edition, with a critical introduction by Prof. D. R. Gadgil, Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1960.

[13] I have borrowed the expression 'the public life of history' from Dipesh Chakrabarty. For a sophisticated exploration of the concept of 'the public life of history' (albeit in

minister Winston Churchill's personal culpability in causing the famine.[14] Over the past decade or so, there has been considerable popular interest in the famine as part of a worldwide critical rethinking of the global empires. Numerous polemical opinion pieces, blogs, and documentaries on the famine have sprung up in the public domain.[15] These works are primarily driven by a desire to stress a causal relationship between wartime colonialism and the catastrophe in Bengal and thereby uphold the nationalist case against British colonialism. The premise of this genre runs counter to Indivar Kamtekar's incisive pronouncements about starvation in India during the Second World War:

> Some people starved; other people ate more than they had ever done. Among regions, as among social classes, the war produced both victims and beneficiaries. It is fairly accurate to claim that 'Punjab prospered; Bengal suffered' … There is ample evidence for the wartime prosperity of Punjab … but little reflection on it. Why has it been neglected? Perhaps

different contexts), see D. Chakrabarty, 'The Public Life of History: An Argument out of India', *Postcolonial Studies*, 11, 2, September 2008, pp. 169–190. Chakrabarty's article was published earlier in Claudio Lomnitz, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Bain Attwood (guest eds), *Public Culture*, 20, 1, February 2008, special issue: 'The Public Life of History'. See also Janaki Nair, 'Textbook Controversies and the Demand for a Past: Public Lives of Indian History', *History Workshop Journal*, 82, 1, October 2016.

[14] Undoubtedly the most influential study exploring Churchill's personal culpability in causing the famine has been Mukerjee, *Churchill's Secret War*. Nowadays, there is hardly any polemical work on the Bengal famine that does not cite extensively from Mukerjee's book.

[15] For a few examples of this rapidly growing corpus of popular pieces, see Joseph Lazzaro, 'Bengal Famine of 1943—A Man-Made Holocaust', *International Business Times*, 22 February 2013, https://www.ibtimes.com/bengal-famine-1943-man-made-holocaust-1100525, [accessed 27 November 2019]. Rakesh Krishnan Simha, 'Remembering India's Forgotten Holocaust', *Tahelka*, 13 June 2014, http://old.tehelka.com/remembering-indias-forgotten-holocaust/, [accessed 27 November 2019]. Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, 'Past Continuous: The Deep Impact of the Bengal Famine on the Indian Psyche', *The Wire*, 17 April 2018, https://thewire.in/history/past-continuous-the-bengal-famine, [accessed 27 November 2019]. Martand Jha, '75 Years On: Remembering Bengal Famine', *DNA*, 23 September, 2018, https://www.dnaindia.com/analysis/column-75-years-on-remembering-bengal-famine-2666536, [accessed 27 November 2019]. Rakhi Chakrabarty, 'The Bengal Famine: How the British Engineered the Worst Genocide in Human History for Profit', *Your Story*, 15 August 2014, https://yourstory.com/2014/08/bengal-famine-genocide, [accessed 23 December 2019]. For documentaries on the Bengal famine, see *Bengal Shadows*, dir. Joy Banerjee and Partho Bhattacharya, produced by Petite-Terre, 2018, film. *Bengal Famine: Remembering WW2's Forgotten Disaster*, dir. not mentioned, produced by Farhana Haider of BBC's Witness series, 2015, film.

because there was awareness of the Bengal famine, and behaviour was modulated accordingly—the prosperity in Punjab being quietly enjoyed, rather than brazenly announced … By contrast, the tragedy of the Bengal Famine was publicized. Here was conclusive proof of the evils of imperialism. While the starvation of Bengal validated the messages of Indian nationalism, the prosperity of Punjab was, in a nationalist context, an inconvenience to be overlooked.[16]

Despite the revival of popular as well as scholarly interest in the Bengal famine, discussions about it are, understandably, still confined within the framework of causation and victimization. Against this backdrop, this article attempts to broaden the horizons of the historiography by offering a granular and nuanced understanding of the deep-rooted religious and caste prejudices within the Bengali society that shaped the political response to the famine of a Hindu right-wing party, which in turn marred private relief operations. This is the first work to have thoroughly studied the Hindu Mahasabha's papers, as well as the private papers of its foremost leader in Bengal, Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee, in connection with the famine. Studying Mookerjee's relief-politics is particularly important because, to this day, they shape the relief-politics of the Hindu right: it was he who, in 1951, formed a splinter party named the Bhartiya Jana Sangha (Indian People's Party), the precursor of the present-day Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).[17]

[16] Kamtekar, 'A Different War Dance', pp. 216–217. I have discussed elsewhere how the conflict between the interests of the farmers and grain traders in a food-surplus province like Punjab, on the one hand, and the interests of the starving consumers in the food-deficit provinces, on the other, as well as the actions of the elected government of Punjab headed by the Unionist Party, worsened the wartime food situation in India. See Abhijit Sarkar, 'Beyond Famines: Wartime State, Society, and Politicization of Food in Colonial India, 1939–1945', PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 2017, sub-chapter 'The Punjab Predicament', particularly pp. 81–92.

[17] For a history of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, see Bruce Graham, *Hindu Nationalism and Indian Politics: The Origins and Development of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. For analyses of the BJP's rise in Indian politics, see Thomas Blom Hansen and Christophe Jaffrelot (eds), *The BJP and the Compulsions of Politics in India*, Oxford and Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001, 2nd revised edition. Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999. Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics, 1925 to the 1990s: Strategies of Identity-Building, Implantation and Mobilisation*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1999.

Bengal in comparative perspective

Of the political impact of the Henan famine, Anthony Garnaut's recent study has noted that:

> The perception that the Nationalist government had neglected its duty to its citizens by providing insufficient relief to its starving citizens undermined the legitimacy of the Nationalist government, both internationally and within Henan itself. The famine formed an important social context for the pro-Japanese uprisings that accompanied the effective annexation of the province by Japanese forces in 1944, and helped the Chinese Communist Party to consolidate its position as a broad-based mass movement in the late years of the war.[18]

Likewise, quoting Arthur Nichols Young (1890–1984), the American economist who was the financial adviser to the Chinese Nationalist government and also the chairman of the government's Commission on Relief and Rehabilitation, Rana Mitter's study too points out that 'the sight of speculation and hoarding caused "local people to have an adverse attitude to the National Government. Thus, it helped to soften up the country for the communists."'[19] Analogous political development has been observed in the case of the Tonkin famine. Sugata Bose's study has noted how the famine was linked with political organization by Việt Minh activists in Tonkin.[20] The Bengal famine had a ripple effect of a comparable nature on Indian politics. The neglect of civil hunger by the British colonial state, and inadequate state-relief later in the famine, permanently dented the hegemony of the colonial state. Further, as this article will demonstrate, the famine assisted the Hindu Mahasabha (lit. 'the great assembly of the Hindus') in calling into question the sincerity of the provincial Muslim League government and expanding its own mass base in the province.

Relief arrangements in Bengal, Henan, and Tonkin exhibit important differences. For instance, in Bengal the provincial government did open relief kitchens, although they proved utterly inadequate. In Henan, both the occupying Japanese authority as well as the Chinese Kuomintang government simply withdrew from the famine-affected region to try to force the responsibility of relief onto the shoulders of their adversary,

[18] Garnaut, 'A Quantitative Description of the Henan Famine', pp. 2007–2008.

[19] As presented in Mitter, *China's War with Japan*, p. 275.

[20] Sugata Bose, 'Starvation amidst Plenty: The Making of Famine in Bengal, Honan and Tonkin, 1942–45', *Modern Asian Studies*, 24, 4, October 1990, p. 726.

ultimately making Henan 'a no man's land between the Chinese government and the Japanese invaders', leaving a void where between three and four million civilians died of starvation.[21] The situation additionally forced three million Henan residents to flee from the famine-land and become refugees in the Nationalist-controlled territories to the south and west of Henan, and in the Japanese- and communist-controlled zones to its north and east.[22] In late 1942, when the Kuomintang government finally accepted responsibility for providing relief, it disbursed paper currencies (which were largely useless) instead of food.[23] In fact, the Nationalist government's main form of famine-relief seems to have been facilitating the flight of refugees from the province.[24] This is in fact the striking difference between relief as well as coping mechanisms in Henan and Bengal. In the case of the latter, examples of such widespread, outward famine-migration from the province are so far non-existent in the historiography. Arup Maharatna's study of the demography of the Bengal famine highlights the fact that information about famine-induced movement of populations, even between the districts of Bengal (as distinct from migration from the districts to Calcutta), is extremely rare.[25] The lack of migration within and from famine-stricken Bengal is yet to be explained by historians.

Another difference between the Bengal and Henan famines is that between 1943 and 1945, the British colonial state in India did ask the War Cabinet in Britain for food imports to the Indian colony, whereas the Kuomintang government in China did not actively seek food imports—it craved munitions from abroad, not food.[26] However, with

[21] For a succinct expression of this development, see Liu Zhenyun, 'Memory, Loss', *The New York Times*, 30 November 2012.

[22] Stephen Morgan, 'The Henan Famine, 1942–43: Dearth and Death in North-Central China during the World War Two', paper presented at the World Economic History Congress, Utrecht, 2009, as cited in Garnaut, 'A Quantitative Description of the Henan Famine', pp. 2007, 2041.

[23] Bose, 'Starvation amidst Plenty', pp. 719–720.

[24] Garnaut, 'A Quantitative Description of the Henan Famine', p. 2044.

[25] Arup Maharatna, *The Demography of Famines: An Indian Historical Perspective*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 209.

[26] Bose, 'Starvation amidst Plenty', p. 720. Through an extensive study of a large number of communications between Delhi and London between late 1942 and mid-1944, I have examined elsewhere how the issue of food imports to India led to serious contentions between the Government of India, the India Office in London, and the British War Cabinet. See Sarkar, 'Beyond Famines', pp. 213–237. The issue of the

regard to the deficiency of relief by the Nationalist government in Henan, Rana Mitter's study has pointed out that 'unlike the administration of British India, Chiang [Kai-shek] did not have the resources of a global empire behind him, or a subcontinent under his control and out of the line of fire'.[27] Mitter highlights that 'Unlike Nationalist China, British India was not under intense active assault (there were serious air raids over Calcutta, but nothing like the destruction wrecked on Chongqing).'[28]

In the case of the Tonkin famine too, Sugata Bose's study shows that under the French colonial regime 'Famine relief by the state was virtually non-existent.'[29] Against this backdrop of meagre or non-existent state-relief across the Asian famines during the Second World War, this current study of non-government famine-relief assumes particular importance. Tusharkanti Ghosh (1898–1994), known as the 'grand old man of Indian journalism', was the editor of the widely read, Congress-leaning, Indian-owned English daily *Amrita Bazar Patrika* during this time. In his 1944 account of the Bengal famine, Ghosh claimed that 'Despite the tall talk in which Minister Mr. Sahabuddin[30] indulged in new Delhi the other day about the far larger number of people being fed in Government gruel kitchens, it is private charity that has been doing the major part of the work of relief.'[31] Kali Charan Ghosh (1895–1984), a Bengali nationalist and curator of the Commercial Museum of the Corporation of Calcutta, made the same claim in his chronicle of famines in Bengal, published in 1944:

> Compared with the service rendered by voluntary organisations, the Governmental measures look rather very small; it can be said without any fear of contradiction that but for non-official help, both organisational and

lack of state-relief in the Chinese famine resurfaced again during the Great Famine of 1958–1961 in communist China in which approximately 30 million people perished. In this case too, citing reports from *The New York Times* in February 1961, Cormac Ó Gráda argues that the Chinese leadership 'denied the very existence of famine, ruling out the option of foreign aid'. See Cormac Ó Gráda, 'The Ripple that Drowns? Twentieth-Century Famines in China and India as Economic History', *The Economic History Review*, new series, 61, S1, August 2008, p. 9.

[27] Mitter, *China's War with Japan*, p. 274.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Bose, 'Starvation amidst Plenty', p. 720.

[30] Ghosh was referring to Khwaja Shahabuddin (1898–1977), the younger brother of Bengal's premier Khawaja Nazimuddin, who served as the minister of commerce, labour and industry in Nazimuddin's government from 1943 to 1945.

[31] Tusharkanti Ghosh, *The Bengal Tragedy*, Lahore: Hero Publications, 1944, p. 49.

individual, the disaster would have assumed a much larger proportion than it actually did.[32]

In addition, the quantity of the dole given at the few government kitchens was not sufficient to provide minimum levels of sustenance. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit (1900–1990), Jawaharlal Nehru's sister and an eminent Congress politician and later diplomat, visited Bengal in October–November 1943 as the president of the All-India Women's Conference, an organization active in relief works in Bengal.[33] Pandit pointed out during her visit to famine-stricken Midnapore district that 'The Government-subsidised kitchens are not only few in number but the dole given is so little that one begins to wonder why it is served at all. The gruel itself was in some district kitchens quite black.'[34] Syed Badrudduja, the mayor of Calcutta, said in a press statement that 'the quantity of food per head supplied in the gruel kitchens was far too insufficient for a single meal a day'.[35] During a debate in the Central Legislative Assembly on 9 November 1943, Kshitish Chandra Neogy (1888–1970), a Congress politician from Bengal who later became independent India's first cabinet minister of relief and rehabilitation, asked Sir Jwala Prasad Srivastava (1889–1954), an industrialist and Hindu Mahasabha leader from the United Provinces and the food member in the viceroy's Executive Council, if Srivastava 'had tried some gruel on himself since he (Neogy) had been told by experts that "the allowances of gruel given to destitutes are not supposed to be sufficient to keep a fair-sized rat alive"'.[36]

Even if we make allowances for the possibility of deliberate belittling of government relief by nationalist editors, chroniclers, and politicians, its inadequacy remains indubitable. Among the few studies of relief arrangements during the Bengal famine, works by Lance Brennan and Bikramjit De have discussed government relief, more precisely its utter inadequacy and the bungling surrounding it.[37]

[32] See the note titled 'Non-Official Relief', in Ghosh, *Famines in Bengal*, p. 204.

[33] Nehru, prison diary, *Selected Works*, Vol. 13, p. 241, note 333 therein.

[34] 'Extracts from a statement of Mrs. Vijayluxmi Pandit on the conditions in the flood and famine affected area in the Midnapore District, dated October 26, 1943', as presented in Ghosh, *Famines in Bengal*, Appendix E, p. 178.

[35] As cited in T. K. Dutt, *Hungry Bengal*, Lahore: Indian Printing Works, 1944, p. 128.

[36] As cited in Mitra, 'Famine of 1943', p. 259.

[37] Lance Brennan, 'Government Famine Relief in Bengal, 1943', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 47, 3, August 1988. De, 'Imperial Governance and the Challenges of War', particularly the section 'Relief and Rehabilitation', pp. 21–29.

In the particular case of the Bengal famine, Paul Greenough's work has demonstrated the disappearance of traditional non-government safety nets during the crisis. When the customary *Rājā-prajā-sambandha* (the patron-client ties between the landlords and their dependents such as the sharecroppers and agricultural wage-labourers) collapsed, the dependents were left to fight the food battle on their own.[38] Similarly, in the case of the Henan famine, Garnaut's study points out that during the Republican era, landlords in North China were becoming increasingly disinclined to waive the debts of their tenants during droughts.[39] However, in the particular case of the Chinese warlords, Pierre Fuller's recent study of 'unsung' native relief during the North China famine of 1920–1921 has revisited the role played by the feuding regional warlord governments during the famine. He argues that they actually undertook far more relief operations than has previously been recognized, and he therefore calls for a 'major scholastic revision' of the historiography of the Republican era.[40]

This article explores the politicization of private famine-relief through a case study of the famine-politics of the right-wing Hindu Mahasabha party, which was an altogether new kind of non-government actor in the provision of relief. A study of political parties active in famine-relief in Henan and Tonkin, along the lines of this article, would be expected to yield interesting and important outcomes. For instance, it would be worth investigating the role of famine-relief in the politics of the Chinese communists, and the fate of the Communist Party's cadres in the famine, particularly whether party membership mitigated their distress. Therefore, the current case study of the Hindu Mahasabha's relief-politics in Bengal may well be treated as a starting point for comparative histories of relief-politics during the wartime Asian famines.[41] The findings of this article are likely to be replicated in the Chinese and Vietnamese cases, after adjusting for the specificities of the

[38] For a detailed discussion on the collapse of the *Rājā-prajā-sambandha* (patron-client ties), see Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery*, pp. 207–215.

[39] Garnaut, 'A Quantitative Description of the Henan Famine', p. 2029.

[40] Pierre Fuller, 'North China Famine Revisited: Unsung Native Relief in the Warlord Era, 1920–1921', *Modern Asian Studies*, 47, 3, May 2013.

[41] Though Fuller's study stresses the hitherto-overlooked contribution to relief by the Buddhist Relief Society operating along monastic networks (in addition to the much more publicized relief activities by the Christian missionaries) during the famine in North China in 1920–21, it does not delve into either the politics of religious relief or the accompanying tensions. Ibid.

hierarchies in local social structures that determined the target beneficiaries of relief. For instance, as this article will demonstrate, in Bengal, caste was a determining factor in the selection of beneficiaries in the relief activism of the Mahasabha. However, as there was no element of caste in Chinese and Vietnamese societies, selecting which people would be helped must have been determined by other social hierarchies, in addition to the obvious one of class.

As stated earlier, in contrast to the studies of government relief by Lance Brennan and Bikramjit De, this article examines private relief. While primarily narrating the bungling in government relief, Paul Greenough's study has also described difficulties in the procurement of rice by private charities, and briefly touches on the preferential treatment that the middle class managed to secure from the providers of private relief.[42] In addition to further establishing the bias in the provision of private relief in favour of the middle class in greater detail from new sources, this article also demonstrates how relief activism became a tool for practising overtly communal politics by the Hindu right. Janam Mukherjee has very briefly touched on this theme to show how the Hindu Mahasabha and the Muslim League accused each other of exclusively providing relief to Muslims and Hindus respectively.[43] Mukherjee has further noted how the national leadership of both the League and Mahasabha communalized relief. Muhammad Ali Jinnah (1876–1948), the League's supreme national leader, sent a cheque to the Muslim Chamber of Commerce's relief fund, explicitly instructing that the donation was for 'Muslim Relief'.[44] In retaliation, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883–1966), the national level leader of the Mahasabha and a Hindutva hardliner, urged Hindu organizations and individuals to send relief only to Hindu victims of the famine.[45]

Against the backdrop of this brief existing engagement with the relationship between communal politics and famine-relief, the article provides the first in-depth, nuanced study of the multifaceted process whereby Hindu communalism shaped relief works. Constraints of space

[42] Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery*, pp. 127–138. Greenough has also identified the recipients of private relief from the Bengal Relief Committee by caste, community, sex, age, marital status, household size, place of residence, and has described the main cause of their food problem and their dissatisfaction with the relief arrangements. Ibid., pp. 183–196, 229–236.

[43] Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal*, pp. 176–177.

[44] As presented in ibid., p. 177.

[45] Ibid.

have obliged me to save the subject of the use of the famine and relief in Muslim communalism for a future study. This work reveals the Hindu Mahasabha's carefully chosen methods of exploiting relief for political purposes—methods that ranged from linking the famine and famine-relief to the demand for Pakistan, to religious conversion, and to labelling Muslim food officials as saboteurs.

The 'Muslim saboteur'

> Syama Prasad Mookerjee: If Bengal is famished, if Bengal is ruined, can the war be won? … Whose fault is it that Burma fell? Whose fault is it that Singapore fell? It was not the fault of Bengal. Why then should the people of Bengal suffer?
>
> Member of the European Group: Why don't you go to Tojo, who is your pal?[46]
>
> Syama Prasad Mookerjee: That is the way in which we are to expect a reply from the European Group. Does my friend seriously suggest that we should look to Tojo for supply of rice and food and not to British Government? Will he advise Mr. Amery to say so publicly in the House of Commons?[47] There could be no more ignoble end of British rule in India than such an abject admission of failure. He says that Tojo is our pal. It has yet to be decided by the verdict of history as to who are our pals. If after 170 years of British association with India, Bengal is going to be starved and famished like this, you are not certainly our pal. That much I can say.[48]

These exchanges between Syama Prasad Mookerjee (1901–1953), the president of the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha, and an unnamed member of the European Group in the Bengal Legislative Assembly took place on 14 July 1943, as the Great Bengal Famine reached its deepest crisis point. Mookerjee's position reveals the significant, novel political opportunities that the famine presented to the Mahasabha. In September 1943, in his once-confidential report to the London-based secretary of state Leopold Amery (1873–1955), Victor Hope Linlithgow (1887–1952), the viceroy of India, wrote:

[46] The European member was referring to Hideki Tojo (1884–1948), the prime minister of Japan during much of the Second World War (from 17 October 1941 until 22 July 1944).

[47] Leopold Amery was the British secretary of state for India and Burma from 13 May 1940 until 26 July 1945.

[48] 'Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee's Speech during the Debate on the Food Situation in Bengal at the Bengal Legislative Assembly on 14th July, 1943', Calcutta, published by Prof. H. C. Ghosh, undated, pp. 21–22, in Syama Prasad Mookerjee papers, 'Speeches/ Writings by Him', S. No. 20, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi (hereafter NMML).

both in the organisation of relief and in the working up of a campaign of protest against the alleged failure of everyone to help Bengal an active political campaign is being waged by the opposite [opposition] sides. Syama Prasad Mookerjee has everything to gain and nothing to lose from making the picture as black as possible.[49]

Notably, Mookerjee himself had been the finance minister of Bengal from December 1941 until November 1942 in the Progressive Coalition Ministry led by Abul Kasem Fazlul Huq (1873–1962), the populist leader of the Krishak Praja Party.[50] However, he resigned on 20 November 1942, ostensibly over police and military atrocities against anti-colonial activists and their families in Bengal during the Quit India Movement, over the 'duplicity' and interference of the British governor of Bengal and the British bureaucrats in the works of the government, and over their neglect of relief works in the aftermath of the cyclone of 16 October 1942 and the accompanying torrential rain and tidal waves that killed anywhere between 11,000–30,000 people (100,000 according to Japanese war propaganda) in the coastal regions in South Bengal, particularly in the Midnapore district.[51] However, while in office as the

[49] 'The Marquess of Linlithgow to Mr Amery (Extract)', marked 'PRIVATE' and 'SECRET', 6 September 1943, MSS. EUR. F. 125/12, compiled in Nicholas Mansergh (ed.), *The Transfer of Power: Constitutional Relations between Britain and India, 1942–7*, London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1973, Vol. IV, document no. 100, p. 212.

[50] For discussions on the 'Shyama-Huq' ministry, as it came to be called, see Sana Aiyar, 'Fazlul Huq, Region and Religion in Bengal: The Forgotten Alternative of 1940–43', *Modern Asian Studies*, 42, 6, November 2008. Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932–1947*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. Ian Talbot, *Provincial Politics and the Pakistan Movement: The Growth of the Muslim League in North-West and North-East India, 1937–47*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1988. Bikramjit De, 'British Policy in Bengal, 1939–1945', PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 2002.

[51] For an estimation of the loss of life caused by the cyclone and accompanying deadly flood, see Famine Inquiry Commission (hereafter FIC), *Report on Bengal*, Delhi: Government of India Press, 1945, p. 32. See also Michael Brown, *India Need Not Starve!*, with a foreword by Sir Purshotamdas Thakurdas, Bombay: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd., 1944, p. 81. Ian Stephens (1903–1984), the British editor of the British-owned newspaper *The Statesman* published from Calcutta and Delhi (which caused quite a stir during the Bengal famine by publishing a series of distressing photographs of moribund and deformed famine victims) later briefly described the cyclone catastrophe in his memoir. Ian Stephens, *Monsoon Morning*, London: Ernest Benn, 1966, pp. 70–71. For a vivid personal account of the insensitive response of the Bengal government's administration to the havoc wreaked by the cyclone, see again the memoir of civil servant Mitra, *Towards Independence*, pp. 110–113. See also Mitra, 'Famine of 1943', p. 256.

finance minister of Bengal, he could in no way deny his culpability for Bengal's already deteriorating food situation. Therefore, for as long as he remained in post, he preferred to remain silent on the unfolding food crisis; he found his voice on the issue only after resigning from the Ministry. After that he dwelt on the famine to such an extent that the governor of Bengal wrote in his telegram to Viceroy Linlithgow that the response in foreign countries to the tragedy in Bengal was escalating because of Mookerjee's activities—'The Constant attacks on Ministry by Syama Prasad Mukerji and his followers and publicity given to these attacks help to increase the panicky feelings that are abroad.'[52]

A famine as colossal as the Bengal famine, in which approximately three million Indian civilians perished, at the full-grown phase of the British empire in India, was to prove profoundly consequential for the moulding of the politics around Bengal's partition in 1947.[53] The politicization of the famine was particularly brazen as, on the one hand, Bengal had a government led by the Muslim League and, on the other, the Hindu Mahasabha was comparatively stronger in the province than in any other part of eastern India. Food progressively became the site where these two parties took one another on.

Pre-partition Bengal was a Muslim-majority province. Since April 1943, the Muslim League, with the support of the European Group and the Bengal Legislative Scheduled Caste Party, led the Bengal government.[54]

[52] Telegram from the Governor of Bengal, repeated by the Viceroy Marquess of Linlithgow to Mr Amery, 20 September 1943, MSS. EUR. F. 125/25, in Mansergh (ed.), *The Transfer of Power*, Vol. IV, document no. 125, p. 285.

[53] For in-depth discussions of the number of famine-related deaths in Bengal, see Sen, *Poverty and Famines*, Appendix D 'Famine Mortality: A Case Study', pp. 195–216. Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery*, Appendix C 'Famine Mortality, 1943–46', pp. 299–315. Tim Dyson, 'On the Demography of South Asian Famines', Part I, *Population Studies*, 45, 1, March 1991. Tim Dyson, 'On the Demography of South Asian Famines', Part II, *Population Studies*, 45, 2, July 1991. Tim Dyson and Arup Maharatna, 'Excess Mortality during the Bengal Famine: A Re-evaluation', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 28, 3, September 1991. For a further, nuanced debate on excess mortality during the famine, see Maharatna, *The Demography of Famines*, particularly Chapter 4 'The Demography of the Bengal Famine of 1943–1944', pp. 128–177, and Chapter 5 'Regional Variation in the Demographic Impact of the Bengal Famine and Famine Effects Elsewhere', pp. 178–237, and appendices B, C, and E to the book.

[54] For literature on politics in Bengal during the ten years preceding India's partition in 1947, see Talbot, *Provincial Politics and the Pakistan Movement*. Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal, 1905–1947*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991. Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*. Rita Basu, *Dr. Syama Prasad Mookherjee and an Alternative Politics in Bengal*, Kolkata: Progressive Publishers, 2002. De, 'British Policy in Bengal'.

For various reasons extraneous to the concerns of this article, the League supported the British war effort, while the majority of Hindus (except those in the Communist Party of India) were apathetic towards it. The Bengal Provincial Muslim League was divided into two factions, led respectively by Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy (1892–1963) and Sir Khwaja Nazimuddin (1894–1964).[55] The latter succeeded in becoming the premier. Suhrawardy was born into an influential family of Midnapur, a district grievously hit by the famine, and he was known to be something of a leader of the poorer sections among the Muslims of Calcutta and the suburbs. Nazimuddin therefore appointed him to the crucial post of civil supplies minister to harness his personal influence to temper the outrage of the starving people.[56] Subsequently, Suhrawardy looked after food affairs throughout the famine, popularly known in Bengali as 'Panchaser Manvantar' (the famine of the year 1350 in the Bengali calendar).[57]

On 4 June 1943, the Bengal government issued the Bengal Foodgrains Inquiries and Control Order which provided that 'an authorized officer may, together with such persons as he may consider necessary, enter upon any premises where he has reason to believe that foodgrains have been stocked'.[58] Following the order, on 7 June, the government launched a province-wide Food Drive Scheme, aimed at detecting and, if necessary, confiscating hoarded food stocks.[59] A salient stated purpose of the drive was 'to organise distribution of local surpluses as loans or

[55] Joya Chatterji, 'The Making of a Borderline: The Radcliffe Award for Bengal', in Ian Talbot and Gurharpal Singh (eds), *Region and Partition: Bengal, Punjab and the Partition of the Subcontinent*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 180.

[56] Mohammad H. R. Talukdar (ed.), *Memoirs of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy with a Brief Account of His Life and Work*, foreword by Kamal Hossain, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2009, 2nd edition; first published in 1987, p. 1. For a description of Suhrawardy's influential family background, see ibid., pp. 1–7. See also Begum Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah, *Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy: A Biography*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1991; paperback edition 2006, pp. 3–10.

[57] Talukdar (ed.), *Memoirs of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy*, pp. 18–20.

[58] Kali Charan Ghosh, 'Indian Famine Relief Measures: Old and New', *Modern Review*, November 1943, reproduced in Santhanam, *The Cry of Distress*, p. 122. See also the published speech by H. S. Suhrawardy in the Bengal Legislative Assembly, 'Statement on Food Situation in Bengal by the Hon'ble Mr. H. S. Suhrawardy, Minister in charge of Civil Supplies', pp. 2–3, in Syama Prasad Mookerjee papers, installments II–IV, sub. file no. 111, NMML.

[59] Santhanam, *The Cry of Distress*, p. 122. FIC, *Report on Bengal*, p. 91. Suhrawardy, 'Statement on Food Situation', p. 3.

by sales to those who were in need of foodgrains'.[60] To execute the scheme, all the rural and urban areas were split into roughly 3,000 units and further sub-units.[61] 'Each unit was put in charge of a squad consisting of one officer, 4 official subordinates, and 4 non-officials.'[62] Each sub-unit was to have a 'sub-unit committee' consisting of 12 members 'who were elected, as far as possible, by the residents in the sub-unit concerned'.[63] Thus, the Food Drive Scheme paved the way for involving the local public in the government's food distribution machinery.

Cormac Ó Gráda's study of famines in China and India has pointed out that clinging to the line that hoarding was the principal cause of the crisis 'suited the Muslim League, since major "hoarders" were more likely to be members of the mainly Hindu landowning and merchant classes'.[64] Against this backdrop, as I shall demonstrate, the Mahasabha sought to project itself as the protector of Hindu producers and stockists in the countryside from indiscriminate confiscation under the Food Drive Scheme. In a Bengali notice dated 12 June 1943 regarding the Food Drive, which was issued to the branches of the Mahasabha at the district, sub-division, and village levels, Manindranath Mitra, the general secretary of the provincial Mahasabha, warned the branches of 'communal hatred' in the drive, fearing the selective targeting of only well-heeled Hindus, while giving concessions to Muslim producers and stockists.[65] Later, in his speech in the Bengal Legislative Assembly on 14 July 1943 during the debate on the food situation, Syama Prasad Mookerjee alleged that, under the guise of 'controlled' trade, the government was selectively hindering the business of well-established Hindu grain dealers and misusing state powers to 'create' a new body of Muslim grain merchants.[66] Notably, state patronage of Muslims in the grain trade is alleged also in the vivid personal account of the famine by Asok Mitra (1917–1999), an Oxford-educated member of the

[60] As quoted in FIC, *Report on Bengal*, p. 91.

[61] Ibid., p. 56. See also Suhrawardy, 'Statement on Food Situation', p. 3.

[62] FIC, *Report on Bengal*, p. 56.

[63] Ibid. See also Suhrawardy, 'Statement on Food Situation', pp. 3–4.

[64] Ó Gráda, 'The Ripple that Drowns?', p. 25.

[65] 'Bengal Hindu Mahasabha's Notice regarding the Food Drive by the Bengal Government: Number 2', 12 June 1943, issued by Manindranath Mitra, General Secretary of the provincial Mahasabha, p. 3, in Syama Prasad Mookerjee papers, installments II–IV, sub. file no. 111, NMML. Translation mine.

[66] 'Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee's Speech during the Debate on the Food Situation', p. 16.

Indian Civil Service who was the sub-divisional officer in the famine-ravaged Vikrampur sub-division in East Bengal from February 1942 until March 1944. Mitra wrote:

> Muslims as a community were inducted into a new trade in a large way, because the food department of Bengal patronised procurement agents and retailers from among this community, which had had little commercial experience to start with. It was unfortunately the lowest of the low who were penalised for the loot that occurred in this learning process.[67]

In the establishment of government grain shops Mookerjee saw a 'way of distributing patronage on communal and political considerations'.[68] In repeating these charges, he was clearly striving to build a sense among the Hindu traders that they were being discriminated against by the Muslim League ministry. However, an explosive allegation was made against the Hindu traders, notably by the Communist Party of India, that they were hoarding paddy and rice not merely for profiteering, but also as a political weapon against the League as food scarcity was sure to discredit the League government.[69] However, in the sources consulted, the Communist Party did not provide any particulars to substantiate this accusation.

A year later, Mookerjee's political assaults on the Bengal government finally culminated in the demand for its outright dismissal. In a press conference in Delhi on 10 July 1944, he formally called for an end to the government. Dismissal of the League government, he argued, was essential for the efficient handling of the food situation.[70] In the press conference, he claimed that, in addition to the entire block of the 'upper' caste Hindu members of the Legislative Assembly (barring 'three renegades'), even the majority of the Scheduled Caste members were against the League ministry.[71] He even claimed that nearly 50 Muslim members, one Indian Christian member, and 'several labour

[67] Mitra, 'Famine of 1943', p. 255.

[68] 'Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee's Speech during the Debate on the Food Situation', p. 16.

[69] 'Our Duty during the Food Crisis (2)', Provincial Letter, Calcutta, 3 October 1943, Bengal Provincial Committee, Communist Party of India, in Suranjan Das and Premansu Kumar Bandyopadhyay (eds), *Food Movement of 1959: Documenting a Turning Point in the History of West Bengal*, Kolkata: K. P. Bagchi and Co., 2004, p. 11. Original in Bengali, translation mine.

[70] 'Dr. S. P. Mookerjee's speech at the press conference in Delhi', 10 July 1944, in Syama Prasad Mookerjee papers, installments II–IV, sub. file no. 119, NMML.

[71] Ibid.

members' now belonged to the opposition.[72] He further went on to claim that 'The Ministry will not remain in office for a minute but for the solid support of 25 Europeans members.'[73] This narrative of an unpopular Muslim party kept in power by the patronage of the colonial rulers perfectly fitted the template of the Mahasabha's Hindu nationalism. To its target Hindu audience, the narrative of an implied 'Islamic rule' in Bengal existing in collaboration with British rule over India seemed to explain why Hindus were starving. This perception was precisely what the Mahasabha had been striving to construct during the 'Bengal vortex'.[74]

An intriguing premise on which the Mahasabha attacked the League government lay in the alleged role of Muslim officers in the government food administration. An undated and unsigned note in Mookerjee's personal papers suggests that this theme was common in the Mahasabha's politics. The note, most likely recorded by Mookerjee himself or someone from his close political circle, was evidently written on the eve of India's partition. It accused Muslim officers and grain traders of undermining Hindu grain merchants and 'sabotaging' rationing arrangements. The note reads:

> The Rationing Department has been created for the last few years stifling the ordinary long-standing trade channels. The Hindu trade and Hindu staffs have practically been groaning under the League Ministry for the last few years. There is hardly any point why the Muslim personnel should be retained under C. R. [Civil Rationing] after the 15th August '47 after the virtual transference of their allegiance and services to East Bengal. It is highly inexpedient that these personnel should be kept on only to sabotage the scheme of rationing in West Bengal for the next 6 months.[75]

[72] Ibid.

[73] Ibid.

[74] The expression 'Bengal vortex' was used by Major General E. Wood, the additional secretary to the Food Department of the central Government of India. See the copy of letter no. D.O. 400/Addl. S (Confidential), New Delhi, 23 April 1943, from Major General E. Wood to L. G. Pinnell, Director of Civil Supplies, Government of Bengal, Calcutta, annexed as Appendix H, pp. 69–70, to H. B. L. Braund, *Memorandum of the Hon'ble Mr. Justice H. B. L. Braund on Events from March 1943 to the end of 1943 in relation to the Food Situation in Bengal*, Calcutta: Government of India Press, 1944, in Sir Manilal B. Nanavati papers, Private Papers Section, National Archives of India, New Delhi (hereafter NAI). (Nanavati was the deputy governor of the Indian Reserve Bank who later became one of the Indian members of the official Famine Inquiry Commission.)

[75] Undated and unsigned note 'Some Comments on the So-Called Stand Still Arrangement Said to Agreed upon by the 2 Ministries', pp. 92–93, in Syama Prasad Mookerjee papers, installments VIII–IX, sub. file no. 4, NMML.

The note made further observations about the alleged conduct of the Muslim staff in the Civil Supplies Department:

> It is already in the air that the Muslim staff has practically suspended work in view of the impending partition of the province and it is being talked about freely that since they have no allegiance to West Bengal after the 15th of August they would be quite at liberty to enjoy the earned leave already accumulated to them during the period of the next 6 months they would be in West Bengal.
>
> It would be idle to ignore the psychological aspect of the Muslim staff to stop work for the next few months when they will be busy setting about to secure jobs in East Bengal and to carry on a nefarious propaganda of hatred and sabotage.[76]

According to this note, the vacancies caused by the migration or dismissal of Muslim staff could be filled by Hindu appointees, and the more senior posts in the rationing administration could be filled 'By promotion of deserving Hindu candidates who hitherto had no chance'.[77] The unspecified author of the note had further interesting propositions for the future of the Government Stores which housed supplies of grains and other foods for distribution through the official rationing system. He suggested that after the impending partition of Bengal, though most of the Government Stores (commonly known as G. S.) in West Bengal should be shut down immediately, a few should be retained in what he termed 'Muslim pocket areas' (in addition to the ration shops run by the authorized private dealers), to be manned jointly by Hindu and Muslim staff:

> It may be argued that if all the Muslim Staff are allowed to go to East Bengal according to their choice and if all the G. S. are all of a sudden abolished how to feed the Muslim pocket areas during fresh communal disturbances as the A. R. S. [Authorized Ration Shops] are likely to be looted and Hindu staff assaulted. The answer to this question is to man these Moslem pocket areas only by maintaining the minimum required number of G. S. which again are to be manned jointly by Hindu and Muslim staff. For this only a few G. S. have to be maintained without any big expenditure.[78]

[76] Ibid., p. 93.
[77] Ibid., p. 94.
[78] Ibid., p. 95.

In South Asia, it is not at all atypical for Hindus and Muslims to cluster and 'predominate' in particular neighbourhoods.[79] As the *para*s, or neighbourhoods, in Calcutta tended to coincide with the demographic concentration of a Hindu or Muslim community, a ration shop run by an authorized dealer in a *para* served the food requirements of mainly one community and was staffed by people from that community. The Famine Inquiry Commission's *Report on Bengal* mentioned that the delay in recruiting rationing staff by the League government 'was accentuated at one stage by an endeavour to maintain communal proportions'.[80] J. R. Symonds (1918–2006), the officer-in-charge of the Friends' Ambulance Unit, an international volunteer organization of the Quaker Christians that was active in famine-relief in Bengal, later observed in his memoir: 'The communal ratio, applied strictly by the Bengal Public Service Commission, had such a crippling effect in holding up recruitment of urgently needed staff that at one point we considered withdrawing our members from working within Government offices.'[81] The ration shops were thus part of the communal landscape of a Hindu or Muslim *para*. Therefore, during communal riots, attacks on the *para* of the 'other' included looting of ration shops as well as enacting physical violence against their staff. In communally segregated Calcutta, an empty ration shop and the consequent prospect of starvation were often used as a weapon by one community against the other. *The Eastern Economist*, an Indian journal which started in the famine year of 1943, later observed in an opinion piece that deliberate destruction of grain stores by 'communal fanatics' caused enormous wastage of food.[82]

Nevertheless, the Mahasabha's apprehension that Hindu staff in the ration shops in Muslim neighbourhoods would be assailed by Muslim mobs seems to have been aimed at stirring anti-Muslim sentiment among Hindus, as it was unlikely that they would find any Hindu rationing staff in Muslim neighbourhoods to assault. In this context, the

[79] Laurent Gayer and Christophe Jaffrelot (eds), *Muslims in Indian Cities: Trajectories of Marginalisation*, London: Hurst and Company, 2012. For a full-scale study of Muslim ghettos in India, see Jeremy Seabrook and Imran Ahmed Siddiqui, *People without History: India's Muslim Ghettos*, London and New York: Pluto Press, 2011.

[80] FIC, *Report on Bengal*, p. 96.

[81] Richard Symonds, *In the Margins of Independence: A Relief Worker in India and Pakistan, 1942–1949*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2001, Appendix 'The Friends Ambulance Unit in the Bengal Famine of 1943', pp. 143–144.

[82] 'Food Wastage', *The Eastern Economist*, 6 June 1947, p. 996.

use of the term 'Moslem pocket' is suggestive. It served as a reminder that Muslims lacked demographic strength in Calcutta, which was located in the overwhelmingly Hindu western part of undivided Bengal. At the same time, the recommendation that Government Stores be kept open in Muslim neighbourhoods reveals the Mahasabha's eagerness to perpetuate the pretence of being a responsible cross-community political organization so as to make itself acceptable within India's broader political spectrum.

As for the ration shops in the Hindu *para*s, there were major political dividends to be derived from shutting them down. As will be discussed later in this article, such closures would have put famine-relief and rationing in the hands of the Mahasabha's famine-relief wing which was rapidly expanding as a means of political mobilization. In contrast, the communally sensitive and risky task of providing rations in Muslim neighbourhoods was envisaged as a task best left to the League government.

Remarkably, another undated and unsigned note in Mookerjee's personal papers regarding the assessment of the financial liabilities of the future Pakistan government after India's partition demanded that the losses incurred due to rotting government food stocks and the cost of rationing-administration, and the storage and transport of food in erstwhile undivided Bengal must be included in the computation of the liability of the Pakistan government. It was mooted that they should be apportioned pro-rata between the newly created provinces of Muslim-majority East Bengal in Pakistan and Hindu-majority West Bengal in India.[83]

Famine and Pakistan

Communalization of food became most overt when Mookerjee drew an explicit link between Bengal's food scarcity and the Muslim League's ongoing national drive to position itself as the sole champion of Indian Muslims in their quest for political autonomy. In a speech at the Calcutta Town Hall on 6 June 1943, about five weeks prior to his speech at the Legislative Assembly, he had presented the failure of the League government to avert the famine as proof of the financial inadequacies in the proposal for a separate country of Pakistan:

[83] Undated and unsigned note 'Some Points regarding Assessment of Assets and Liabilities in the Rationing Department under the Civil Supplies', p. 91, in Syama Prasad Mookerjee papers, installments VIII–IX, sub. file no. 4, NMML.

A ministry pledged to Mr. Jinnah and Pakistan which has already started its Pakistan conference in different parts of Bengal in spite of the grave situation due to food and war has now to run from one province to another, all outside the fancy dreamland of Pakistan. One wonders whether the Moslem League ministry will now realise the economic futility of Pakistan and stop its baneful activities that lead to disunity and disharmony at this grave hour of peril.[84]

Nirmal Chandra Chatterjee (1895–1971), another Hindu Mahasabha leader in Bengal who later served as a judge of the Calcutta High Court and a member of the Indian parliament, echoed the same argument in his presidential address at the second session of the All-India Hindu Students' Conference in Amritsar in Punjab on 28 December 1943: 'The grim realities of famine have demonstrated beyond the shadow of doubt that in order to feed our starving people food-stuff must come from Hindustan. Pakistan would have completely converted Bengal into a Kabaristhan (graveyard).'[85]

In his Town Hall speech of 6 June, Mookerjee raised a specific political spectre as he suggested that the recent Muslim League circular for the formation of League branches at the union level in Bengal would result in the food committees being filled with Muslim members, who would use their powers to disentitle the Hindus from food distribution.[86] In a public notice in Bengali dated 4 June 1943 regarding the house-to-house food drive by the Bengal ministry against hoarding, Manindranath Mitra, the general secretary of the provincial Mahasabha, instructed its members to join the village food committees in large numbers and to file written complaints with the squad masters of the committees if they had an inadequate number of Hindu members.[87] In the other Bengali notice

[84] Dr. S. P. Mookerjee's speech at the Town Hall meeting on 6 June 1943, p.1, in Syama Prasad Mookerjee papers, installments II–IV, sub-file no. 119, NMML.

[85] N. C. Chatterjee, *All-India Hindu Students' Conference, second session, Amritsar, 28th December, 1943: Presidential Address*, Calcutta: published by Monoranjan Chaudhury, 1943, as cited in Dutt, *Hungry Bengal*, p. 3.

[86] Dr. S. P. Mookerjee's speech at the Town Hall meeting on 6 June 1943, p. 2. The Union Boards had geographical jurisdiction over the unions; the Boards were local administrative units representing a group of five to 20 contiguous villages. The unions were replaced in independent India by *gram panchayats* (village assemblies). See C. Ashokvardhan and Ashish Vachhani (eds), *Socio-Economic Profile of Rural India*, series-II, Vol. 4 (Eastern India), New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company Pvt. Ltd., 2011, p. 306.

[87] 'Hindu Mahasabha's Notice regarding the House-to-House Search by the Ministers to Stop Illegal Food Hoarding', 4 June 1943, Calcutta: Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha, 1943, p. 3, in Syama Prasad Mookerjee papers, installments VIII–IX, sub. file no. 4, NMML. Translation mine.

dated 12 June 1943 to the branches of the Mahasabha, Mitra averred that 'there is enough reason to doubt that through the formation of the village Food Committees and related activities, attempts will be made to establish and strengthen the Muslim League everywhere in Bengal'.[88] According to the civil supplies minister, these food committees had approximately one-and-a-half million members.[89] Therefore, they were indeed a massive apparatus of mass contact. Consequently, the Mahasabha's notice instructed its branches to form one non-government committee at every branch to 'monitor' the work of the food committees and government staff.[90]

A month later, in his lengthy speech in the Assembly on 14 July 1943 during the debate on the food situation, Mookerjee again accused Suhrawardy of subordinating Bengal's food requirements to the wider political arithmetic of their potential repercussion on the demand for the establishment of Pakistan. He alleged that Suhrawardy, as a protagonist of the Pakistan movement, had initially hesitated to seek grain supplies in neighbouring Orissa and Bihar, as the two provinces fell outside the proposed Pakistan scheme. Unlike Bengal, which was a Muslim-majority province, Hindus were in the overwhelming majority in both Bihar and Orissa. In the provincial election in 1937, Congress had won a sweeping majority in both the provinces and the League had secured no seats.[91] Although during the war Bihar was a section 93 province (that is, a province without an elected provincial government and directly ruled by the British governor), buying grains in these two provinces, which were to remain part of India after the proposed partition of the country, was sure to raise serious doubts about the self-sufficiency of Bengal in terms of foodgrains and, in turn, about the food sustainability of a future Pakistan, of which Bengal was going to be a part.

Therefore, Mookerjee harped on Suhrawardy's reluctance to buy grains in Hindu-majority provinces: 'Why did Mr. Suhrawardy hesitate first to

[88] 'Bengal Hindu Mahasabha's Notice regarding the Food Drive by the Bengal Government: Number 2', p. 3.

[89] Suhrawardy, 'Statement on Food Situation', p. 4.

[90] 'Bengal Hindu Mahasabha's Notice regarding the Food Drive by the Bengal Government: Number 2', p. 3.

[91] For election results in Bihar, see *Return Showing the Results of Elections in India, 1937, Presented by the Secretary of State for India to Parliament by Command of His Majesty, November, 1937*, London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1937, pp. 82–91. For election results in Orissa, see ibid., pp. 110–113.

go to Orissa and Bihar? Was it because he, a protagonist of the Pakistan Scheme, did not care to ask favours from Orissa and Bihar as they formed part of the future Hindustan?'[92] In his address to the Assembly, Mookerjee seized every opportunity to portray the famine in League-ruled Bengal as proof of the League's ineptitude and the economic unviability of Pakistan. 'Alas,' he declared, 'the economic structure of Pakistan is collapsing and Bengal, the future home of Pakistan, has to be provided for through the generosity of adjoining Hindu provinces.'[93]

Later, in the account of his four-day long tour of the famine-stricken Burdwan and Nadia districts in August 1943, Mookerjee alleged that 'The number of free kitchens opened by Government is astonishingly small in Western Bengal', implying that the League government was deliberately providing less relief in Hindu-majority West Bengal.[94] Further, in his speech at the University Institute in Calcutta on 15 October 1943, he alleged that non-government relief organizations were facing 'well-planned obstruction' by the Bengal government:

> In Contai suffering has been indescribable and rice purchased by us meant for Contai relief has been lying seized by some local officers in Midnapur for more than a week. In Noakhali we offered to purchase from the Collector 2,000 maunds of rice for relief work in that district but now irritating and unnecessary conditions regarding conduct of relief have been imposed and work cannot commence.[95]

Inevitably, there were counter-allegations by the League. Abul Mansur Ahmad (1898–1979), the noted Bengali littérateur, journalist, and lawyer, who was first a politician in the Indian National Congress, then in the Praja Samiti (remodelled in 1936 as the Krishak Praja Party, that is, the party of the farmer tenants), and thereafter became a prominent Muslim League politician, later alleged in his Bengali memoir that when the League government attempted to buy rice from Bihar, the 'Hindu-leaders' of Bengal and other provinces caused hindrances in the hope that starvation would impel the Bengali Muslims to cede their

[92] 'Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee's Speech during the Debate on the Food Situation', p. 11.

[93] Ibid.

[94] Shyma Prasad Mookerjee's account of his tour in parts of the Burdwan and Nadia districts, 24 August 1943, p. 2, in Syama Prasad Mookerjee papers, installments II–IV, sub. file no. 119, NMML.

[95] 'Syama Prasad Mookerjee's Speech at the University Institute on the 15th October, 1943', p. 1, in Syama Prasad Mookerjee papers, installments II–IV, sub. file no. 119, NMML.

demand for Pakistan.[96] According to Ahmad, some of them openly wanted to teach the Bengal government a lesson for demanding Pakistan.[97] Suhrawardy's cousin-sister Begum Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah (1915–2000), who later became a Pakistani parliamentarian and diplomat, made the same allegation: 'The Hindu Provinces did not want to send rice. Shaheed Bhai (elder brother) tried to persuade the Ministry to appoint one or two Hindu agents for which he earned the enemity (sic) of the Ispahanis.'[98] She further argued that the rice hoarders and blackmarketeers were mostly Hindus, and subsequently blamed the 'Hindu' and Western press for the bad name that the League ministry earned during the famine: 'Then, and afterwards, the Hindu dominated Press of India, and the Western Press have blamed the Muslim League Ministry for the tragedy which was not of its making.'[99] Writing his cousin-brother's biography in 1991, Ikramullah accused historians of the famine of being prejudiced against the League: 'to this day, whoever writes about this disaster always blames the Muslim League Ministry. It surprises me because some of these writers are men of international repute and yet are content to repeat a canard without taking the trouble to sift the facts for themselves.'[100]

More than four decades after the famine, in 1987, Mohammad H. R. Talukdar, the editor of Suhrawardy's unfinished memoir, too alleged that Bihar

[96] Abul Mansur Ahmad, *Amar Dekha Rajnitir Panchash Bachhar* (*Fifty Years of Politics Seen by Me*), Dacca: Khoshroz Kitab Mahal, 1995, 6th edition; reprint 2013, p. 183. Translation mine.

[97] Ibid.

[98] Ikramullah, *Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy*, p. 44. In May 1943, the Civil Supplies Department of the Bengal Government appointed Messrs. Ispahani and Co., a private trading firm, to the lucrative post of sole grain purchasing agent of the government. The owner of the firm was Hassan Ispahani (1902–1981), who was one of the wealthiest Muslim merchants in Bengal and also a Muslim League member of the Bengal Legislative Assembly, the treasurer of the Bengal Provincial Muslim League (from 1936 until 1947), a close confidante of the party's supreme national leader Muhammad Ali Jinnah, and a major funder of the party. For a discussion of the corruption of Ispahani's firm in its capacity as the sole grain purchasing agent of the Bengal government, see FIC, 'Statement Summarising Evidence Related to Messrs. Ispahani Ltd.', in Sir Manilal B. Nanavati papers, NAI. For Syama Prasad Mookerjee's attacks on the corruption of Ispahani's firm and on the nexus between the firm and the Muslim League, see 'Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee's Speech during the Debate on the Food Situation', p. 11–15.

[99] Ikramullah, *Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy*, p. 44.

[100] Ibid.

forcibly unloaded on the platform foodgrain purchased by Bengal government agents. Its refusal was greatly dictated by the fact that it had a Congress government, which did not wish to assist the Muslim League government of Bengal in spite of the deteriorating conditions and deaths due to starvation in that province.[101]

The unfinished memoir itself is mute on the issue, as it starts with Suhrawardy's political career in Pakistan in the 1950s. In the sources consulted, there is no clear-cut evidence for the veracity of these accusations and counter-accusations. Notably, Ahmad, Begum Ikramullah, and Talukdar all allotted scant space to discuss Suhrawardy's actions during the famine. Ahmad spared just two-and-a half pages, and Ikramullah and Talukdar less than two full pages to deliberate on such a colossal famine. This inevitably gives the impression that they sought to bypass this sore issue, which was to become an enormous and everlasting blemish on Suhrawardy's long political career. What their allegations against the Hindu-majority provinces and Hindu historians do convey, though, is the degree to which communal politics had come to focus on the issue of food. In this setting, communal antagonism could no longer be deemed as something occurring at a distance in public squares and bazaars. Focused so firmly on an item of everyday consumption like food, it now became an inextricable component of quotidian domestic existence.

Finally, in connection to the political ruckus about the famine, it is worth noting that for some among the British, the occurrence of such a colossal famine under an elected provincial government proved India's unfitness for self-rule. However, such an interpretation remained marginal. A report on 23 September 1943 in the British-owned newspaper *The Statesman* published in Calcutta rubbished such an interpretation as 'nonsense': 'It is nonsense however to suggest, as some do, that development of famine under an autonomous Provincial Ministry necessarily proves India's unfitness for self-rule.'[102]

[101] Talukdar (ed.), *Memoirs of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy*, p. 20. Analogous to the political hindrances in the grain supply to Bengal from neighbouring Indian provinces like Bihar, in China too the inter-provincial movement of grain to Henan from neighbouring Shensi and Hupeh during the famine was impeded due to the war and political calculations. Bose, 'Starvation amidst Plenty', p. 720.

[102] *The Statesman*, 23 September 1943, as reproduced in Ghosh, *Famines in Bengal*, Appendix H, p. 188.

Relief publicity

Beyond the realm of high politics in the Legislative Assembly, the issue of starvation obviously had tremendous potential in popular realpolitik for mobilizing Bengal's starving citizens. The most important site from which the Mahasabha sought to recruit supporters was its programmes of famine-relief. Through its relief activism, the Mahasabha's Hindu nationalist politics trickled down to the quotidian neighbourhood level.

In his letter dated 26 July 1942 to Sir John Herbert, the governor of Bengal, Mookerjee warned that the issue of soaring prices and deteriorating supplies of foodstuff and cloth was 'assuming a serious turn and will afford a good ground for spreading Congress propaganda'.[103] However, Congress was not in a position to politicize the food crisis among the masses as the party had already been outlawed by the colonial government and its leaders incarcerated after it launched the Quit India Movement in August 1942. Tusharkanti Ghosh, the abovementioned editor of the daily *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, condemned the viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, for not freeing Congress leaders and activists to organize relief, simultaneously alleging that the Muslim League had no interest in providing relief, and in their zealousness for Pakistan they might actually turn Bengal into a *Gorosthan* (graveyard):

> Calcutta could be easy in her conscience could she be assured that Bengal was being taken care of by the Ministry masquerading as Government. The relief agencies, all non-official, in the rest of Bengal, are few. Who will organize social service on the gigantic scale necessary? The Congress has done it in the past and could do it again. The Moslem League has never cared for the suffering even of Moslem humanity. Social service does not figure in its programme. Its one concern is Pakistan and as things look, Bengal may turn out at this rate at no distant date to be something alike, e. g., *Gorosthan* (the grave-yard). Lord Linlithgow will not set the Congress free even at this critical hour when his own Government has been condemned by friends and critics alike for its incompetence.[104]

Bengal's celebrated physicist Professor Meghnad Saha (1893–1956) too noted that 'It is also a pity that the Government has not yet seen its way in releasing, at least on parole, a large number of Congress workers

[103] Syama Prasad Mookerjee, *Leaves from a Diary*, Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1993, Appendix II 'Letter to His Excellency Sir John Herbert, Governor of Bengal', 26 July 1942, p. 187.

[104] Ghosh, *The Bengal Tragedy*, pp. 37–38.

like Mr Satish Chandra Das Gupta and others who have wide experience of relief operations within the last 20 years.'[105] In the absence of large-scale relief activism by the Congress party, the famine presented a golden opportunity to the Mahasabha to expand its political base. The infighting within Congress also helped the Mahasabha to flourish. In the 20 October 1944 entry in his personal diary, Mookerjee admitted that 'The Hindu Sabha was growing into prominence in Bengal amidst these conflicts within the congress.'[106] The Mahasabha achieved such mileage from its relief activism that even regional newspapers in faraway Britain published reports on its activities during the famine. Mookerjee was mentioned on the first page of the 4 October 1943 issue of the daily *Lincolnshire Echo*:

> A plan to end the famine in Bengal was put forward to-day by Dr. Syamaprosad Mookerjee, working president of the All India Hindu Mahasabha, says a Reuter message from Calcutta. All normal activities should be suspended for a week, all forms of transport requisitioned, and the plan put into force with the same zeal as if it were a military operation to save the province from invasion, he said.[107]

On the same day, *The Evening Telegraph*, a much bigger national newspaper, reproduced the same newsfeed from Reuters under the heading 'Indian Leader's Plan to End Famine'.[108]

Back in India, the Communist Party of India noted that Congress's inaction with regard to the food crisis pushed even the Congress-minded Hindu middle class into the open arms of the Mahasabha.[109] By the time Congress realized this, the Mahasabha's already swollen popularity achieved through famine-relief made Congress politically apprehensive of hindering its activities.[110] As for the Bengali communists themselves, the provincial committee of the Communist Party of India admitted that even though the party had successfully organized relief in certain pockets in Rangpur, Faridpur, and Chittagong district, and in Krishnanagar city, its overall failure to

[105] 'Prof. Meghnad Saha's Appeal: Public Co-Operation for Relief Work', as produced in Santhanam, *The Cry of Distress*, Appendix II, pp. 144–146.

[106] Mookerjee, *Leaves from a Diary*, p. 31.

[107] 'Bengal Famine', *Lincolnshire Echo*, Monday 4 October 1943, p. 1.

[108] 'Indian Leader's Plan to End Famine', *The Evening Telegraph*, Monday 4 October 1943, p. 4.

[109] Communist Party of India, 'Our Duty during the Food Crisis (2)', in Das and Bandyopadhyay (eds), *Food Movement of 1959*, pp. 12–13.

[110] Ibid., p. 13.

become more active during the famine ceded control over private relief to Mookerjee.[111]

In its public communications about relief, the Mahasabha's rhetoric of philanthropy acquired a distinctly political and communal overtone, contributing to the intensification of communal animus in the province. As part of its relief publicity, the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha published two reports outlining its relief operations. Simultaneous publicity alongside its ongoing relief work was a prerequisite for the Mahasabha's political growth. Therefore, instead of waiting to publish a final report a year later, it hurried to publish an interim report during the peak of the famine in 1943, when the public's mind was preoccupied with starvation. Thereafter, it published the final report in 1944. Both reports had almost identical titles—the interim report was titled *How Hindu Mahasabha Fight Bengal Famine*, and the final one, *How Hindu Mahasabha Fought Bengal Famine*.[112] These two important reports have remained unexamined in the existing literature on the Bengal famine for two reasons. First, as mentioned in the introduction to this article, famine-relief in general has received considerably less academic attention than the causation and victimization of the famine. Second, existing literature on Hindu communalism in Bengal in the 1940s tends to focus primarily on the Mahasabha's role in the communal riots in 1946, and its political stance vis-à-vis the partition of India.

The interim report was authored jointly by Professor Haricharan Ghosh of Calcutta University and Mr Manoranjan Choudhury, joint secretaries of the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha. In addition to containing a narrative of the Mahasabha's relief operations, the report provided a comprehensive list of miscellaneous relief centres run by the Mahasabha and the number of people served by them, as well a list of local relief organizations that received 'help' from the Mahasabha. The final report was also co-authored by Ghosh and Choudhury. A foreword by Syama Prasad Mookerjee added more weight to this report. It too provided a narrative of the Mahasabha's relief activities, plus eight appendices detailing different types of relief centres and the number of people served

[111] Ibid., p. 9.

[112] Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha (hereafter BPHM), *How Hindu Mahasabha Fight Bengal Famine*, Calcutta: BPHM, 1943, in Syama Prasad Mookerjee papers, installments V–VII, Printed Material category, S. No. 9, NMML. BPHM, *How Hindu Mahasabha Fought Bengal Famine: Report of Relief Work by Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha, with a Foreword by Dr. Syamaprasad Mookerjee*, Calcutta: BPHM, 1944, in Syama Prasad Mookerjee papers, installments V–VII, Printed Material category, S. No. 12, NMML.

by them. In addition, it contained accounts of receipts and disbursements of foodgrains, receipts and payments of money, and some brief quotations from various people and sundry reports lambasting the central and provincial governments for causing the famine. Notably, the Mahasabha chose to publish reports of its relief activities only in English, instead of Bengali. This proves that the target audience of these publications was not the vernacular-educated destitutes, but the English-educated Bengali bhadraloks.[113]

The donors and the volunteers

Before setting up the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha Relief Committee, in August–September 1943 the Mahasabha had established the Bengal Relief Committee, in collaboration with the Indian Chamber of Commerce and a few other private relief organizations. However, many of the donors explicitly 'expressed their desire that their money was to be spent through the Hindu Mahasabha',[114] and consequently, the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha Relief Fund was established.[115] However, the Bengal Relief Committee was not dissolved altogether: it continued its relief operations side-by-side with the new committee.[116]

The Mahasabha's reports do not divulge the identity of individual donors. This may have been a consequence of the donors' disinclination to advertise their affluence and their political leanings. However, from their insistence on funnelling their donations only through the Mahasabha, one can safely conclude that all these donors were Hindus. Hinduism has a long-standing belief in earning good karma (cumulative

[113] 'Bhadralok' loosely means an educated Bengali gentleman belonging to a 'high' caste. For debates on the definition, composition, and characteristics of the bhadralok, see J. H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth-Century Bengal*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968, pp. 5–13. Gordon Johnson, 'Partition, Agitation and Congress: Bengal 1904 to 1908', *Modern Asian Studies*, 7, 3, May 1973, pp. 534–535. Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*, pp. 3–17.

[114] BPHM, *How Hindu Mahasabha Fought Bengal Famine*, p. 8.

[115] Ibid. See also BPHM, *How Hindu Mahasabha Fight Bengal Famine*, p. 2.

[116] Bengal Relief Committee, *A Brief Report upto 31st May, 1944*, Calcutta: Bengal Relief Committee Publication, 1944, in Syama Prasad Mookerjee papers, installments VIII–IX, sub. file no. 4, NMML.

consequences of deeds) and *punya* (virtue) by providing relief to the needy. Notably, a survey conducted in 1943 (belatedly published in 1949) by the teachers and students of the Department of Anthropology of the University of Calcutta revealed that famine victims often attributed their distress to their bad karma.[117] Thus, the victims suffered because of their bad karma, whereas those who helped them earned good karma. The survey pointed out that 'The doctrine of *Karma* pervades the whole life of the Hindus. They firmly believe that every individual is destined to fare in the next world, according to his activities here.'[118] Accordingly, devout Hindu donors did not want to miss their share of good karma and *punya* they felt entitled to by donating to the relief-fund for the famine victims. However, to obtain the full amount of good karma and *punya*, their donations needed to go through the pious hands of Hindus only. Therefore, donating to the Mahasabha reassured the Hindu donors that their due share of good karma and *punya* would flow back to them.

The Mahasabha lauded the unnamed donors for their generosity. However, writing his diary in his prison cell in Ahmadnagar fort in Maharashtra on 21 September 1943, Jawaharlal Nehru highlighted the irony in this kind of donation:

> Side by side with this starvation and death are reports of fantastic profits in the textile & jute mills and all war industries … sometimes over 100% profit has been made in the course of a year! What a social and economic system we have to permit this and at the same time to have famine on a vast scale. The profit makers give donations for relief and are lauded for their generosity.[119]

J. R. Symonds, the officer-in-charge of the Friends' Ambulance Unit, observed that there were 'many types of relief work undertaken by hundreds—even thousands—of relief committees functioning in Bengal'.[120] Some of the organizations carrying out relief on a considerable scale were the Marwari Relief Society, Ramkrishna Mission, Bharat Sevashram, Gujarat Seva Samiti, Arya Samaj, Poona Relief Committee, Bengal Women's Food Committee, Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti (Women's Self

[117] Tarakchandra Das, *Bengal Famine (1943): As Revealed in a Survey of the Destitutes in Calcutta*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press, 1949, p. 10.

[118] Ibid., p. 10, footnote 11 therein.

[119] Nehru, prison diary, entry on 21 Sept. 1943, *Selected Works*, Vol. 13, p. 242.

[120] J. R. Symonds, 'Non-Official Relief: Mr Symonds on Obstacles Surmounted', in Santhanam, *The Cry of Distress*, Appendix IV, p. 179.

Defence Committee), All-India Women's Conference, Rotary Club, Red Cross, and Friends' Ambulance Unit.[121]

However, with the passage of time, the Hindu Mahasabha's relief activities grew so much bigger than that of the other organizations that Mookerjee and the Bengal Relief Committee (of which he remained president) received huge donations raised by newspapers outside Bengal. Though the newspapers avoided donating to the Mahasabha directly, the large amounts of money that Mookerjee personally (and the Bengal Relief Committee under his presidency) received from outside Bengal are testimony to the scale of his relief activities. According to a list compiled by the *Hindustan Times*, Mookerjee personally received Rs 50,000 from the *Janmabhoomi* Fund in Bombay and Rs 1,00,000 from the *Indian Express* Fund in Madras. The Bengal Relief Committee received Rs 21,012 from the *Hindustan Times* and the *Hindustan* Relief Fund in New Delhi; Rs 50,000 from the *Indian Express* Relief Fund in Madras; Rs 99,296 from the *Leader* Fund in Allahabad; Rs 30,000 from the *Indian Nation* Fund in Patna; Rs 20,000 (made out in the name of Mookerjee) from the *Tej* Fund in Delhi; Rs 10,000 from the *Aj* Fund in Benaras; and an additional Rs 10,000 (separately remitted in Mookerjee's name) from the same fund.[122] In addition, according to the Mahasabha's final report on its relief activities, up to 30 June 1944, Mookerjee received Rs 8,54,582-1-6 p. in cash from miscellaneous sources for the Mahasabha's own relief fund. He also collected 35,676 maunds of food grains and pulses from donors and purchases.[123]

The Mahasabha attempted to centralize interprovincial 'Hindu' funds. Raja Narendra Nath, the president of the Executive Committee of the Punjab Provincial Hindu Sabha, wrote to the press on 23 October 1943: 'I convened a meeting of Hindu leaders who are raising funds for the relief work of Bengal. I proposed that there should be a central organization of Hindus.'[124] However, his proposal was rejected by two other Hindu organizations—the Arya Samaj (Society of Nobles/Aryans) and the Sanatan Dharam Pratinidhi Sabha (Representative Assembly of

[121] Santhanam, *The Cry of Distress*, Chapter XIV 'The Press and Government: Work of Non-Official Relief Organizations', pp. 55–56. T. G. Narayan, *Famine Over Bengal*, with a foreword by Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Calcutta: The Book Company Ltd., 1944, p. 121. Mitra, *Towards Independence*, pp. 129–130.

[122] See the tables of monetary donations from various relief funds in Santhanam, *The Cry of Distress*, pp. 183–186.

[123] BPHM, *How Hindu Mahasabha Fought Bengal Famine*, p. 10.

[124] As cited in Dutt, *Hungry Bengal*, p. 133.

the Traditional/Eternal Religion)—who refused to sacrifice their independent activities in relief activism. Disappointed, Narendra Nath noted that 'Those who have contributed to funds of the Sanatan Dharam Pratinidhi Sabha or Arya Samaj naturally think that they are absolved from the responsibility of responding to the Hindu Sabha appeal.'[125] Nonetheless, in a face-saving gesture he announced that the Hindu Sabha 'considers it immaterial whether the funds go to the Sanatan Dharam Pratinidhi Sabha or passes through my hands'.[126]

As the Mahasabha and the Bengal Relief Committee, both under Mookerjee's leadership, together became the largest actors in the sphere of providing private relief, it is all the more important to understand the relief activism of Mookerjee and the Mahasabha. The Mahasabha's interim report spells out the structure of its relief mechanism. In addition to providing relief through its own branches, it also provided help both in cash and kind to local organizations that were also active in providing relief to the famine victims.[127] Some of these organizations, such as the Chittagong Central Relief Committee, openly acknowledged that they were doing relief works 'under the guidance of Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee'.[128] The Mahasabha also developed a system of supervision; the interim report asserted that 'The latter organizations are being properly supervised by the inspectors sent from the Head Office in Calcutta.'[129] Often local relief volunteers themselves approached the Mahasabha seeking funds. For instance, in August 1943, Braja Kanta, the head of a relief centre in Burdwan town, wrote to Mookerjee: 'I see from the papers [newspapers] that you have a lot of money at your disposal. I do not know whether according to your rules, you can help me in any way.'[130] As I shall elaborate below, the Mahasabha was particularly concerned with providing relief to the bhadraloks. Therefore, to boost his chance of receiving funds from the Mahasabha, Braja Kanta stressed that if he was given funds, his

[125] Ibid.

[126] Ibid.

[127] BPHM, *How Hindu Mahasabha Fight Bengal Famine*, p. 4. For a list of local relief organizations that received help from the Mahasabha, see ibid., p. 12, and BPHM, *How Hindu Mahasabha Fought Bengal Famine*, Appendix IV, pp. 27–28.

[128] Statement by Sj Chittaranjan Das, Secretary, Chittagong Central Relief Committee, 17 June 1944, p. 83, in Syama Prasad Mookerjee papers, installments VIII–IX, sub. file no. 4, NMML.

[129] BPHM, *How Hindu Mahasabha Fight Bengal Famine*, p. 4.

[130] Letter from Braja Kanta to Mookerjee, 23 August 1943, p. 3, in Syama Prasad Mookerjee papers, installments II–IV, sub. file no. 111, NMML.

organization would expand relief activities 'esp. for the relief of Bhadralogues (sic)'.[131]

All this raises the question as to why the Mahasabha rendered monetary and other material help to these private local relief organizations. In part, it may have been a consequence of the Mahasabha's lack of manpower and its thin organizational presence in the province. Further, helping local organizations assisted in developing a symbiotic relationship between the Mahasabha and such organizations, which in turn aided the Mahasabha's ideology and politics in penetrating Bengal neighbourhoods. In the early 1940s, Hindu volunteer groups had already proliferated in Calcutta and in the *mofussil* (outlying) towns. Joya Chatterji's *Bengal Divided*, one of the most influential works on Hindu communalism in Bengal in the 1930s and 1940s, tells us that most of these groups devoted the bulk of their energy to 'encouraging physical fitness and pseudo-military training among bhadralok youths'.[132] These volunteer groups provided a ready-made source of political labour, which the Mahasabha was able to tap into. Some of them, such as the Bharat Sevashram Sangha and the Hindu Sakti Sangha gradually became volunteer wings of the Mahasabha.[133] This spared the Mahasabha the time-consuming and onerous task of building its own relief network from scratch, and also from the local tensions that were bound to ensue had the Mahasabha attempted to replace existing local volunteer groups with its own army of volunteers.

The target beneficiaries

According to the Mahasabha, by 30 June 1944, it had spent a total of Rs 7,07,186-5-4p. and distributed 35,676 maunds of food grains through its relief outlets.[134] It further claimed to have directly maintained 227 relief centres in the 24 districts of Bengal and served 1,07,727 people on average per day. It provided a breakdown of this figure by claiming that every day it had served cooked food to 5,897 people from free kitchens and 6,450 people from cheap canteens, distributed free rations

[131] Ibid., p. 4.
[132] Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*, p. 233.
[133] Ibid., pp. 233–236.
[134] One maund is equal to 37.5 kilograms.

to 36,612 people and cheap rations to 50,569 people, and helped the rest by other means.[135]

An interesting strand of the relief provided by the Mahasabha was the 35 'milk canteens' that supplied free milk to hungry children and destitute elderly people.[136] A plan for post-famine rehabilitation drawn up in 1946 by K. P. Chattopadhyaya, a professor of anthropology at Calcutta University, and Ramkrishna Mukherjea calculated that by early 1944 the number of destitute people had risen to 10.76 lakhs (1,076,000), and broke down the figure for those under the age of 15 in the following manner:

> There are about 1.1 lakhs [110 thousand] of infants below the age of five. The earners, of the families of 45 thousands of them are dead or absent, of 28 thousands are invalids, and of 37 thousands are without work. Children over 5 and below 15 years of age among the destitutes number 3.87 lakhs [387 thousand]. Of these 2.19 lakhs are without earners, 0.91 lakhs have their earning members invalids and the remaining 0.77 lakhs children depend on unemployed adults.[137]

Notably, the authors of the plan admitted that their survey was 'limited to families actually living in villages, and could not cover the units which had migrated to other areas in their entirety'.[138] The Mahasabha's interim report pointed out further reasons for the suffering of children: many mothers were acutely emaciated from starvation and therefore 'could be of little use to the babies at breast'.[139] The report further highlighted that even the fortunate children who somehow managed to survive beyond that tender age 'could not again stand the food precariously and haphazardly procured by their parents'.[140] They needed dairy milk.

However, just at the time when the demand for dairy milk was soaring, its supply was plummeting as many livestock farmers and milkmen perished in the famine. Though no statistics are available for the loss of dairy cattle during the famine, from those that exist for the loss of plough cattle (predominantly bullocks), it can be safely concluded that a

[135] BPHM, *How Hindu Mahasabha Fought Bengal Famine*, pp. 10–11.
[136] BPHM, *How Hindu Mahasabha Fight Bengal Famine*, pp. 3–4.
[137] K. P. Chattopadhyaya and Ramkrishna Mukherjea, *Famine and Rehabilitation in Bengal*, Part II 'A Plan for Rehabilitation', Calcutta: Statistical Publishing Society, 1946, p. 6.
[138] Ibid.
[139] BPHM, *How Hindu Mahasabha Fight Bengal Famine*, p. 3.
[140] Ibid.

large number of dairy cattle similarly perished in the famine due to lack of care and fodder. A sample survey of the after-effects of the famine carried out in 1944–1945 covering nearly 16,000 families in 386 villages scattered over the whole of Bengal, which was conducted by the Statistical Laboratory of Calcutta under the lead of Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis (1893–1972), widely regarded as the father of statistics in India, found that 5 lakhs (half a million) of plough cattle died between April 1943 and April 1944, in addition to the loss of another approximately 9.4 lakhs of plough cattle put up for sale by the owners because of financial distress.[141] Richard Moses Schneer (1919–2004), a left-wing American dentist who served in the American army stationed in India during the war and who later became one of the founding members of the Friends of India society in New York City, estimated in 1947 that 'Bengal peasants lost 900,500 plough cattle during 1943'.[142] The aforementioned plan for post-famine rehabilitation drawn up by K. P. Chattopadhyaya and Ramkrishna Mukherjea noted that:

> … the famine of 1943 has caused a loss of milch cattle through death as well as sale for slaughter. Our survey indicates that the total loss is comparable to that for plough cattle. The milk yields have also gone down owing to lack of fodder. The actual shortage is probably of the order of 80% of the requirements.[143]

However, the reason most vigorously cited by the Mahasabha for the scarcity of fresh milk was the unbridled slaughter of cows by the defence forces to procure beef for the increased number of Indian Muslim soldiers as well as non-Indian soldiers stationed in India, and the export of cattle to war-bases abroad for meat.[144] In his letter dated

[141] P. C. Mahalanobis, Ramkrishna Mukherjea and Ambika Ghosh, 'A Sample Survey of After-Effects of the Bengal Famine of 1943', advance reprint from *Sankhyā: The Indian Journal of Statistics*, 7, 4, 1946, Calcutta: Statistical Publishing Society, 1946, Chapter 6 'Loss of Plough Cattle', pp. 40–46. For the organization of the survey itself, see Chapter 1 'History of the Survey', pp. 1–4.

[142] Richard Schneer, 'Famine in Bengal: 1943', *Science and Society*, 11, 2, Spring 1947, p. 175.

[143] Chattopadhyaya and Mukherjea, 'A Plan for Rehabilitation', Appendix 'The Milk Problem', p. 67.

[144] Gajendra Singh's recent research shows that between 1 January 1941 and 1 February 1942, the number of Mussalman (Muslim) combatants (excluding non-combatant defence employees) in the Indian army increased from 1,55,237 to 2,39,000. See 'Class Composition of the Army in India', Asia and Africa Collections, L/WS/1/456, British Library, and 'Indian Army Morale and Possible Reduction, 1943–1945', Asia and Africa Collections, L/WS/1/707, British Library, as presented in Gajendra Singh, *The Testimonies of Indian*

16 November 1942 to Sir John Herbert, the governor of Bengal, Mookerjee alleged that:

> Cows were requisitioned under the Defence of India Rules … although they were giving milk and some were with calf, a good many were snatched away from private houses by the police and the military for the purpose of feeding the troops. Such inhuman callousness is indeed unparalleled.[145]

The deficit in available milk was held to be the reason for the low vitality of the Bengalis which rendered them vulnerable to diseases and thereby increased famine mortality. An appeal to the public issued in August 1943 by the Bengal Relief Committee (functioning under the auspices of the Mahasabha) seeking donations and public cooperation for its relief activities, again touched on the issue of 'supply of meat to the military':

> Apart from the food position, there has been a severe loss of cattle due to death and disease. What is more distressing and alarming is that cattle are being purchased in large numbers for supply of meat to the military. Government should immediately stop this, as this not only reduces the already limited supply of milk but will vitally affect cultivation. Further, the low vitality of the people may lead to large scale mortality as soon as diseases, like malaria and cholera break out in the province during and after the monsoon.[146]

The abovementioned sample survey of the after-effects of the famine found that large purchases of cattle were made by 'outsiders' from agricultural societies, 'possibly' by 'military contractors for the supply of meat for consumption by the army'.[147] In the face of an acute dearth of milk, the orthodox Hindu taboo on cow-slaughter was reinforced, which in turn fanned age-old communal tensions surrounding beef. The Mahasabha publicized the slaughter of cattle as the root cause of the paucity of dairy milk, and against this backdrop, opened its 'milk canteens'. According to the claim of its final report on relief operations, 5,475 infants and 'invalids' 'regularly' received a free supply of milk from

Soldiers and the Two World Wars: Between Self and Sepoy, London: Bloomsbury, 2014, Appendix II 'Recruitment into the Indian Army during World War II', p. 256.

[145] Mookerjee, *Leaves from a Diary*, Appendix IV 'Letter to His Excellency Sir John Herbert, Governor of Bengal', 16 November 1942, p. 209.

[146] 'Appeal Issued by the Bengal Relief Committee', place of publication not mentioned: Bengal Relief Committee, 1 August 1943, p. 1, in Syama Prasad Mookerjee papers, installments II–IV, sub. file no. 114, NMML.

[147] Mahalanobis et al., 'A Sample Survey of After-Effects of the Bengal Famine of 1943', p. 42.

these canteens.[148] Providing milk to children was an effective way of reaching out to Bengali parents; it had enormous potential to earn the Mahasabha their gratitude.

While examining the 'social construction' of the Bengal famine, Iktekhar Iqbal's study assumes that 'Since wealthier people lived in the cities and towns, they did not go short even if they had to pay more for rice.'[149] It is true that among the roughly three million people who died in the famine, none was from the bhadralok class—the dead were all from the poorer classes. However, Iqbal's assumption steamrolls the heterogeneity of the experiences of disparate strata within the elastic category of the bhadraloks. Though his postulation rings true for the bhadraloks who were rent-receiving, non-cultivating absentee landowners, as I will demonstrate below, the salaried bhadralok whose wages remained mostly static throughout the war had a hard time keeping up with wartime inflation. Syama Prasad Mookerjee wrote a letter to Sir Thomas Rutherford (1886–1957), the acting governor of Bengal from September 1943 to January 1944, apprising him of the famine. In the letter, he made the priority of his party clear in terms of the target beneficiaries of its relief activities:

> There is one class of people whose suffering is most acute and they belong to poor middle class families. They can neither have their meals at free kitchens nor do they get doles from Government. It is they who form the backbone of the social and political life of Bengal and it would be disastrous if they are weakened and crushed.[150]

Pandit Hriday Nath Kunzru (1887–1978), the noted liberal educationist and parliamentarian from the Kashmiri Pandit community, visited famine-stricken Bengal as a member of the Council of States and president of the Servants of India Society. He too argued that 'people belonging to the lower middle class owing to their inability to beg are, perhaps, suffering more terribly than the other classes'.[151] Though Kunzru was a liberal, his observations on the famine suited the politics

[148] BPHM, *How Hindu Mahasabha Fought Bengal Famine*, p. 11, and Appendix III, p. 26.

[149] Iftekhar Iqbal, 'Return of the Bhadralok: Ecology and Agrarian Relations in Eastern Bengal, c. 1905–1947', *Modern Asian Studies*, 43, 6, November 2009, p. 1349.

[150] Letter from Syama Prasad Mookerjee to Sir Thomas Rutherford, undated, p. 2, in Syama Prasad Mookerjee papers, installments II–IV, sub. file no. 119, NMML.

[151] Ghosh, *The Bengal Tragedy*, Appendix I 'Catastraphe (sic) of Unprecedented Nature', observations of Pt. Hriday Nath Kunzru, p. 87.

of the Mahasabha to such an extent that its final report on relief quoted from the speech he delivered in Calcutta in October 1943.[152]

Within this context of concern for the middle class, we need to identify the cultural reasons that attracted Bengal's middle classes to the Mahasabha's relief programmes in preference to the government's relief efforts. A contemporary 'first hand description' of the famine left behind by K. Santhanam (1895–1980), an English-educated, middle-class Iyengar Brahman from the Madras presidency who was the joint editor of the *Hindustan Times* newspaper and also a Congress leader, asserted that:

> It is nevertheless a fact that many respecting Bengalis prefer to starve in their homes than go to the gruel kitchens. This fact was adduced by a District Magistrate as a merit of the gruel kitchens. 'Some indignity is necessary to keep down the relief to the minimum,' he said. Administrative convenience was of more importance to this official than the loss of self-respect of a whole people. Anyone who has seen the sickening scramble and clamour at these gruel kitchens will agree that it is hardly possible for the poorest to go to these kitchens and not feel ashamed.[153]

Reputation, honour, and concepts of bodily purity and pollution were of utmost importance to Bengal's bhadraloks. Even the Bengal government's instructions on the organization of famine-relief noted that there were middle-class people 'who would starve rather than come to state openly that they are in need of gratuitous relief'.[154] Nutritionist Wallace Aykroyd too agreed that 'Sometimes pride may prevent families from seeking relief in the form of wages or cooked food; they prefer to starve at home.'[155] A report on the efforts of various relief organizations published by the Relief Co-Ordination Committee in 1943 pointed out that bhadralok families 'my [by] tradition are unwilling to make their position, however precarious, known to others'.[156] Most of these families were dependent either on small fixed

[152] Excerpt from Pt. Kunzru's speech in Calcutta in October 1943, quoted under the heading 'Some Thoughts on Bengal Famine', in BPHM, *How Hindu Mahasabha Fought Bengal Famine*, p. 38.

[153] Santhanam, *The Cry of Distress*, pp. 40–41.

[154] Government of Bengal, *Instructions for the Organisation and Distribution of Relief*, 1943, pp. 4–5, in Leonard George Pinnell papers, Mss Eur. D911/4, India Office Records and Private Papers, British Library, London.

[155] Aykroyd, *The Conquest of Famine*, p. 58.

[156] Relief Co-Ordination Committee, *Relief Organisations Fight Bengal Famine*, Calcutta: Relief Co-Ordination Committee, 1943, p. 4, in Syama Prasad Mookerjee papers,

salaries or small incomes from professions.[157] At least in wartime Bengal, the disparity in the levels of food consumption by the poor and the urban middle class was actually narrowing. Unlike in the pre-war period, now even middle-class Bengalis felt the pinch of scarcity: there was a noticeable decline in their food consumption. Their spending on food rose steeply because of wartime inflation. In 1947, a statistical study of the ramifications of the war on the consumption patterns of the middle class in Calcutta conducted by S. Bhattacharyya of the Statistical Laboratory of Calcutta revealed that their average monthly per capita expenditure on food skyrocketed from Rs 8.5 in 1939 to Rs 16.4 in 1945.[158] As per the study, in 1945, compared to 1939, 'Protective food like milk, fish, meat and eggs has become much thinner and for the lower levels, i.e. up to total expenditure Rs. 100 [families who could afford to spend a maximum of one hundred rupees per month on food], these are as good as non-existent.'[159]

During the famine, in order to buy food, many middle-class families had to sell or mortgage whatever bits of gold jewellery they had.[160] In the gendered division of household work typical of traditional middle-class households in much of the world, Bengali women were more in touch with the harsh everyday realities of the kitchen than the men in the family. A handwritten letter to Mookerjee, dated 19 August 1943, written in Bengali by Aparna Sengupta, a little-educated middle-class Hindu housewife personally unknown to Mookerjee, vividly informs us about the predicaments faced by middle-class households and their expectations of Mookerjee and his party:

I am completely unknown to you. If I tell my identity, you will definitely understand who I am. But I feel really ashamed to disclose my identity. I am the wife of a teacher, and the daughter of a teacher in Patna … It is almost one and a half years now that my husband has been getting half

installments V–VII, Printed Materials category, S. No. 10, NMML. See also BPHM, *How Hindu Mahasabha Fight Bengal Famine*, p. 4.

[157] BPHM, *How Hindu Mahasabha Fight Bengal Famine*, p. 4. See also Bimal Chandra Sinha and Haricharan Ghosh, *Food Problem in Bengal with a Foreword by Dr. Syamaprosad Mookerjee*, Calcutta: published privately by Professor H. C. Ghosh, 1943, p. 10. See further Relief Co-Ordination Committee, *Relief Organisations Fight Bengal Famine*, p. 4.

[158] S. Bhattacharyya, 'World War II and the Consumption Pattern of the Calcutta Middleclass', *Sankhyā: The Indian Journal of Statistics*, 8, 2, March 1947, pp. 199–200.

[159] Ibid., p. 200.

[160] BPHM, *How Hindu Mahasabha Fight Bengal Famine*, p. 4. See also Relief Co-Ordination Committee, *Relief Organisations Fight Bengal Famine*, p. 4.

salary. I cannot express how our nine children, I and my husband, widow sister-in-law—these twelve people are surviving on this meagre income and providing for the education of the children and medical expenses. It was very difficult even when my husband was getting full salary. I cannot write in words what situation we have come to; it is not possible too. I am just letting you know that for the last two months, we have been half-fed; sometimes we cannot eat even one meal a day stomach-full. Whatever is being brought home by my husband and 18-year-old son by their hard work is proving inadequate… You please save the family of this poor sister by arranging for 1 maund of rice per month for us by any means.[161]

Reflecting his own middle-class origins, Santhanam argued that 'The distress of those who are getting Rs. 30 or 40 a month is no less than those of others attending the gruel kitchens. The lot of the peasants who own or cultivate a few *bighas* is clearly better.'[162] While describing a relief centre in Dacca in the autumn of 1943, Michael Brown, a contemporary independent observer, wrote in his 1944 polemical study of the food crisis:

Artisans, clerks, teachers and less wealthy professional men existed on a meal a day supplied at the cost of one or two annas[163] by the city relief committee's canteens. Ordinary incomes were useless when rice cost seven to ten times its normal price or was not available at all.[164]

Even some of those who were earning much more than Rs 30 or 40 a month felt the pinch of inflation. Asok Mitra, the abovementioned civil servant who was the sub-divisional officer of Vikrampur sub-division during the famine, later recalled in his memoir:

With my take-home pay of Rs. 500 a month I had to feed a family of three and a retinue of five persons. This was not all. There were (sic) an average of about three extra mouths to feed every day at the height of the famine. If a person like me could not afford rice at more than Rs. 16, it stands to reason that there would be less than 10 percent of all families in my subdivision, who could afford even that much as prices steadily peaked from February onwards to Rs. 80 and 90 in October 1943.[165]

[161] Letter from Aparna Sengupta to Mookerjee, pp. 75–76, in Syama Prasad Mookerjee papers, installments II–IV, sub. file no. 111, NMML. Translation mine.

[162] Santhanam, *The Cry of Distress*, p. 42. *Bigha* was a traditional unit of measurement of land, equal to approximately 1,333 square metres.

[163] A unit of currency, 16 to the rupee.

[164] Brown, *India Need Not Starve!*, p. 2.

[165] Mitra, *Towards Independence*, p. 119.

In the villages, numerous Brahmans lost their customary income from acting as priests for the 'low' castes, as villages were depopulated by the famine.[166] Srijiba Nyayatirtha, the Brahman principal of the Bhatpara Sanskrit College, wrote to the civil supplies minister of Bengal, making the peculiar demand that the government should sanction 'at least the amount of ration of an adult person' for each idol of the Hindu deities so that the rice offerings (*naibedya* or *bhog* in Bengali) could be received by the Brahman priests who often had no other means of sustenance.[167] Nyayatirtha complained that 'The want of provision of Bhog Puja of deities in the rationing area of Bengal has created a vital problem and wounded the religious feelings of the Hindu Public.'[168]

However, in government circles, the middle class in general was perceived as people who commanded comfortable earnings. This perception was further reinforced by the middle class's own reluctance to reveal their privation, as such a revelation would have compromised their status or respectability in the eyes of their neighbours and relatives. As an outcome of their assumed affluence, the *Famine Manual*, prepared by the Revenue Department of the Bengal government in 1941, had categorically handed over provision for the bhadralok families to private relief. As per the manual, 'indigent persons who are likely to need relief, but who are not eligible for the Government dole, e.g., able-bodied indigent *Bhadralog* who will under no circumstances work at test works' were to be provided for from private donations to non-official charitable funds.[169] Faced with a choice of manual labour or dependence on private relief, the middle class chose the latter. Against this background, Santhanam urged that the 'public [that is, non-government] relief organizations need to devote some attention to them, particularly as the officials do not seem to be well disposed to consider their difficulties'.[170]

[166] Chittaprosad, *Hungry Bengal: A Tour through Midnapur District, by Chittaprosad, in November 1943*, Bombay: New Age, 1944, p. 4. (Note: the book contains no pagination; the pages have been numbered by me.)

[167] Letter from Srijiba Nyayatirtha, principal of the Bhatpara Sanskrit College, 24 Parganas district, to the Civil Supplies Minister, Bengal, undated, pp. 1–2, in Syama Prasad Mookerjee papers, installments VIII–IX, sub. file no. 4, NMML.

[168] Ibid., p. 1.

[169] Government of Bengal, Revenue Department, *Famine Manual*, Alipore: Bengal Government Press, 1941, pp. 56–57.

[170] Santhanam, *The Cry of Distress*, p. 42.

The Bengal government's refusal to acknowledge the hardship faced by the middle class pushed them into the open arms of the Mahasabha. The relief it provided was precisely what Santhanam asked for the middle class: 'special relief', exclusively aimed at them, was a dignified setting for receiving food assistance. Unlike government relief, which had a blanket policy, the Mahasabha devised special forms of relief for middle-class families already red-faced by the mismatch between their bhadralok identity and diminished material status, which avoided further eroding their self-esteem. The Mahasabha came up with cheap grain stores, which did not provide grains as alms free of cost, but rather sold them at a very cheap rate, thus eliminating the inference that customers were recipients of charity.[171] Though the middle class paid nominal prices for the rice they received, it still engendered the feeling that they 'bought' and did not beg. Thus, relief provided by the Mahasabha was able to reconcile two apparently irreconcilable states in middle-class households—that is, on the one hand, their pride in their social honour and, on the other, their growing need to obtain help from outsiders to feed themselves.

The middle class was so impressed by the relief provided by the Mahasabha under Mookerjee that one Mr Nath, a trustee of the Islamkati Parbatinath Polytechnic Institute in the Khulna district, wrote to Mookerjee in Bengali in September 1943 to say that he believed that the Goddess Bhagwati was arranging food for the hungry through Mookerjee.[172] In fact, to further its appeal among the 'upper' caste Hindus, the Mahasabha took special care to provide food-relief to the Brahman pandits of Bengal's *tols* (rural informal schools with a traditional Sanskritic curriculum).[173] Its interim report highlighted that it had spent Rs 6,000 to provide relief to the Brahmans.[174] Richard Schneer, the aforementioned American dentist, claimed in 1947 that 25,000 rural teachers had become 'destitute' in Bengal in 1943–1944.[175] In his study of the Bengal famine, Paul Greenough has pointed out that 'As Brahman teachers are regarded with veneration by Hindus, it was

[171] BPHM, *How Hindu Mahasabha Fight Bengal Famine*, p. 4.

[172] Letter from Mr Nath to Mookerjee, 10 October 1943, p. 141, in Syama Prasad Mookerjee papers, installments II–IV, sub. file no. 111, NMML. Translation mine.

[173] Pandits were Brahman priests-cum-teachers in the *tol*s, which were also called *pāthasālā*.

[174] BPHM, *How Hindu Mahasabha Fight Bengal Famine*, p. 4.

[175] Schneer, 'Famine in Bengal', p. 175.

not surprising that a special effort would be mounted to spare them famine distress.'[176] As teachers had considerable social influence in their villages, winning their support and loyalty through the provision of 'special relief' was an indirect but very effective way of gaining political sway over the villages.

In addition to village pandits, the Mahasabha also provided 'special relief' to urban schoolteachers in some districts in East Bengal and to a hundred families of lawyers, pleaders, and Muktears (low-ranking lawyers/law clerks) in the Faridpur district. According to its report, teachers in 35 schools in the Munshiganj sub-division in Dacca, teachers of high schools who fell under the District Teachers' Association in the Noakhali district, teachers of all high schools of the Pabna district, and teachers of all high schools of the Chandpur sub-division in the Tippera district received such 'special relief'.[177]

In addition to teachers, many poor students also received food from the Mahasabha's relief centres, thus allowing it to increase its influence in the education sector. T. G. Narayan, a correspondent from *The Hindu* newspaper who toured the famine-stricken Tippera district in Bengal in 1943, related an intriguing conspiracy theory in circulation among some of the starving students in Dacca:

> In Dacca I heard that students fainted in classrooms and their famished teachers were in no healthier state. Many of the students there got their food from the cheap canteens. The future leaders of the country were having a bad time indeed. In their anger they said the famine had been engineered by the Government to crush the Hindu intelligentsia.[178]

This kind of conspiracy theory regarding the Muslim League government's role in the famine was no doubt beneficial to the Mahasabha's relief-politics which was already aimed at discrediting the League government.

A major reason for the popularity of the Mahasabha's relief among the Hindu middle class was the government's explicit refusal to make any 'special' relief arrangements for them on the basis of their claimed superiority in terms of caste and culture. In its testimony to the Famine Inquiry Commission, the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha argued that often the cooks at government gruel kitchens were Muslims,

[176] Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery*, p. 133.
[177] BPHM, *How Hindu Mahasabha Fought Bengal Famine*, p. 13.
[178] Narayan, *Famine Over Bengal*, p. 215.

making it 'impossible' for Hindus to receive cooked food from there.[179] On the one hand, the state's refusal to treat the middle class as 'special' and, on the other, the middle class's intransigence in refusing equal treatment with the poorer classes created a clear-cut fissure between the state and the middle class. The first-hand reportage by T. G. Narayan is illuminating in conveying this:

> The middle class also suffered because no organized government relief touched it. Free kitchens, homes for destitutes and emergency relief hospitals were, in the main, meant for the working classes. Middle class people were free to go to them. But they wouldn't and couldn't because their notion of respectability stood in their way and it was also difficult to jostle with hundreds of unwashed men, women, and children for a meal of gruel. They would prefer to get dry grain doles … Many district Magistrates when approached for help were reported to have disowned responsibility for aiding the middle class and said that if they would not go to the free kitchens they should fend for themselves.[180]

The abovementioned survey conducted by the teachers and students of the Department of Anthropology of the University of Calcutta in 1943 said about government free kitchens: 'In the villages, on rare occasions, Hindus and Muhammadans had separate free-kitchens and concessions to caste prejudice was made on some occasions in the interest of higher caste people … In Calcutta these exceptions were very rare.'[181] In contrast, the Mahasabha's 'special relief' arranged for the speedy distribution of uncooked rice to the bhadraloks which allowed them to take rice into their homes and cook it in private, away from the public eating by sundry castes at the free relief kitchens. Thus, the Mahasabha's 'special relief' spared the middle class the 'polluting' task of physically jostling with 'hundreds of unwashed men, women, and children', mostly 'Untouchables' by caste, and allowed them to keep their caste-based notions of respectability, bodily purity, and pollution intact.

The survey further revealed that even during the height of the famine, 14.16 per cent of famine-affected people surveyed were still scrupulously observing socio-religious restrictions on cross-caste and cross-religion inter-dining.[182] Of the people surveyed, 53.8 per cent conceded that they had temporarily given up observing caste and religious restrictions

[179] 'Testimony of the Bengal Provincial Mahasabha', p. 261, in Sir Manilal. B. Nanavati papers, NAI.
[180] Narayan, *Famine Over Bengal*, pp. 215–216.
[181] Das, *Bengal Famine*, p. 9.
[182] Ibid., p. 88.

vis-à-vis eating practices due to the pressure of starvation. However, they simultaneously emphasized that they would reinstate the customary eating rules as soon as food availability improved.[183] Notably, 32.04 per cent of the surveyed people claimed to have permanently discarded all scruples about accepting food from people belonging to other castes.[184] However, the survey warned that 'It is difficult to say how far the claims of this "no scruple" group would survive in normal times. It was not very difficult to put forward such a claim at a time when the whole social order was very rudely shaken by the famine.'[185]

An account in the newspaper *Hindustan Standard* on 9 October 1943 reported that long queues were 'causing much inconvenience to men of social position who cannot stand in the crowd waiting for 3 or 4 hours'.[186] Therefore, besides caste considerations, the distribution of uncooked rice by the Mahasabha spared the bhadralok recipients the enervating task of travelling to the relief kitchens every day and waiting there in long queues to be fed.

Relief and religious conversion

Freda Bedi, née Houlston (1911–1977), a British woman who moved to India with her Indian husband and participated in the independence movement, toured famine-stricken Bengal in January 1944 on behalf of the newspaper *The Tribune*. In her account of the tour, we find a fleeting reference to the Muslim non-government organizations that were providing relief.[187] Though Bedi mentioned 'Relief Committees of the Muslim League', it is important to note that the League did not establish its own relief wing. This can be explained in terms of the party's reluctance to give the impression that its government had outsourced the responsibility for carrying out its duties to the League's party machinery, and in terms of its unwillingness to serve the opposition parties with an opportunity to accuse the party of communal bias in providing relief.

[183] Ibid., pp. 88–89.
[184] Ibid.
[185] Ibid., p. 89.
[186] 'More Starvation Deaths in Districts', *Hindustan Standard*, Calcutta, 9 October 1943, in Syama Prasad Mookerjee papers, installments II–IV, sub. file no. 113, NMML.
[187] Freda Bedi, *Bengal Lamenting*, Lahore: The Lion Press, c. 1944, p. 89.

Some of the private Muslim relief organizations mentioned by Bedi were the Moslem Majlis, the Ahrars, the Muslim Chamber of Commerce, and the Khaksars.[188] As expected, the Mahasabha had no plaudits for the works done by these Muslim non-government organizations. Instead, it denounced the leading organization among them—the Khaksars—for relocating Hindu famine victims, often orphans, to shelters at a distance from Bengal. Shan Muhammad, a scholar of the Khaksar Movement, notes that the Khaksars were rigorously trained in performing 'social service' with rigid discipline, with the tacit aim of winning over an increasing number of people to Islam.[189] In addition to the emphasis on social service, which was a major component of the Khaksar identity, there was also a potent element of Islamic militarism in the movement. Muhammad Aslam Malik, a political biographer of Allama Inayatullah Mashraqi (1888–1963), the founding father and supreme leader of the Khaksar movement, argues that 'Mashriqi's militaristic philosophy', and particularly his thesis of *Ibadat* (worship), was primarily aimed at making Muslims 'Soldiers of Islam'.[190]

Therefore, among all the Muslim volunteer organizations, the Khaksars posed the most serious challenge to the relief-politics of the Mahasabha. Consequently, to discredit its relief activities, the Mahasabha tried to impose its own narrative on the Khaksar relief strategy. It projected the transfer of Hindu famine victims from Bengal by the Khaksars as proof of the 'intrinsic evilness' of the Muslim 'nature' as a whole, and subsequently pitted this alleged 'evilness' against the claimed altruism of the Hindu nature to hint at the moral and cultural 'superiority' of Hindus over Muslims:

> Famine and pestilence exhibit different sides of human nature … The other side of human nature is reflected in the activities of certain organisations including the Khaksars who held out to the starving poople (sic) assurances to provide them with food, clothes and shelter and began to remove men, women and children to distant places in India without paying any regard to their religion or choice.[191]

[188] Ibid.

[189] Shan Muhammad, *Khaksar Movement in India*, Meerut: Meenakshi Prakashan, 1973, p. v.

[190] Muhammad Aslam Malik, *Allama Inayatullah Mashraqi: A Political Biography*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 41.

[191] BPHM, *How Hindu Mahasabha Fought Bengal Famine*, p. 16.

J. R. Symonds, the officer-in-charge of the Friends' Ambulance Unit, was dismayed 'at the communalism of organizations which set out to give relief to Mussalmans, Hindus or Christians only'.[192] Famine-relief as a tool of conversion to Hinduism was a novel phenomenon in 1943. In the historiography of famines in India, such a use of famine-relief is unrecorded for earlier famines. However, with regard to Christianity, Dick Kooiman has analysed the archives of the London Missionary Society to meticulously examine the issue of conversion to Christianity by 'Untouchable' Indians 'as a strategy for sheer physical survival and in response to an immediate emergency like a famine or epidemic' in South Travancore in India in the nineteenth century.[193] David Hardiman has similarly observed that the great famine of 1899–1900 in western and central India 'led to a wave of conversion' to Christianity among the Bhil people following extensive relief work during the famine by Christian missionaries.[194] However, many missionaries were against allowing conversion of the '"rice-Christians" who were in it merely to fill their stomachs'.[195] Accordingly, they were reluctant to baptize the Bhils before the famine was over; they wanted to filter the 'true' devotees of Christ from those who merely wanted food in exchange for converting to Christianity.[196] Thus, it seems that the relief works were not designed as a tool of mass conversion, though it certainly made the Bhils overall amenable to Christianity.

The Mahasabha's final report on famine-relief claimed that starving Hindus were being converted to Islam by the Muslim volunteers who provided them with food in exchange for their conversion. The report alleged that starving Hindus were being forced to renounce Hinduism 'for a morsel of food':[197]

> Another aspect of human nature could be seen when people pretending to do humanitarian service insisted on change of religion. Some of the unfortunate destitutes of Bengal who lost their all left their homestead for unknown destination, some again changed their religion for a morsel of food.[198]

[192] Symonds, 'Non-Official Relief', p. 182.

[193] Dick Kooiman, 'Mass Movement, Famine and Epidemic: A Study in Interrelationship', *Modern Asian Studies*, 25, 2, 1991, p. 283.

[194] David Hardiman, *Missionaries and their Medicine: A Christian Modernity for Tribal India*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2008, p. 73.

[195] Ibid., p. 86.

[196] As argued in ibid., p. 88.

[197] BPHM, *How Hindu Mahasabha Fought Bengal Famine*, pp. 17–18.

[198] Ibid.

Seeing that the famine created scope for religious conversion, the Mahasabha rushed to provide relief to the vulnerable Hindus to 'save' them from converting to another religion and to ex-Hindus to 'restore' them to Hinduism.[199] According to its final report on relief 'A large number of destitutes who were forced to forsake their religion were fishermen, moochis,[200] and other sects of the depressed classes' at the bottom of the food-availability pyramid.[201] The report narrated how the Mahasabha sent foodgrains to Mollarhat in the Khulna district for the relief of the Namasudras, a 'low' caste population concentrated mainly in the marshlands of East Bengal.[202] The report claimed to have 'saved' and 'restored' a large number of families who had abandoned their Hindu faith in an attempt to escape starvation.[203] Here the Mahasabha's invocation of the rhetoric of 'saving' implicitly involved the notion of 'fallen', suggesting that even if one's decision to convert to another religion was prompted by the desperation to be free from the clutches of starvation, it would essentially be a 'fall' in the life of a Hindu, from which they needed to be saved.

The report further proposed that 'Hindu orphans should remain in the custody of Hindu organizations and Moslem orphans with Muslim orphanages.'[204] Thus the Mahasabha overtly dragged religion into the food issue by advocating relief along communal lines. Such a proposal tried to set limits on the humanitarian cross-religion relief of hunger and served to foreclose the possibility of reaching out to the communal 'other' during a common humanitarian crisis. The report tells us that Mookerjee met the Khaksar leaders working in Calcutta and urged them to return the Hindu destitutes who had been taken away from Bengal to the Mahasabha and other Hindu relief organizations.[205]

Because of the highly organized nature of the Khaksars' social activism, the rising popularity of their relief works also provided serious competition to the Muslim League's sway over Bengali Muslims. Already shamed for

[199] Ibid., p. 18.
[200] Cobblers.
[201] BPHM, *How Hindu Mahasabha Fought Bengal Famine*, p. 18.
[202] Ibid., p. 14. For a discussion on the socio-economic profile of the Namasudras, see Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872–1947*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011, 2nd edition with a new postscript, pp. 11–29.
[203] BPHM, *How Hindu Mahasabha Fought Bengal Famine*, p. 18.
[204] Ibid., p. 16.
[205] Ibid., p. 17.

its failure to pre-empt the famine, and for its inadequate and chaotic relief arrangements, the League ministry wished to avert any haemorrhaging of remaining support and also to avoid the task of dealing with any communal clashes that the Khaksars' relief activities had the potential to cause. Notably, there had already been so much hostility between the two organizations that there was a knife attack on Muhammad Ali Jinnah on 26 July 1943 in Bombay by a Muslim man who described himself as a Khaksar.[206] Given the bitter rivalry between the two organizations, it was only a matter of time before the League ministry ordered a halt to sending Hindu destitutes out of Bengal in a bid to hinder the Khaksars' relief activities and thereby to stall their spiralling popularity among the hungry in general. The Mahasabha's final report conceded that the League government had issued circulars rescinding earlier orders that had allowed the relocation of destitutes outside Bengal and banned any further removal of them from the province.[207] However, eventually the report attributed the ban to the 'strenuous efforts of the Mahasabha under the leadership of Dr. Mookerjee and several other humanitarian and relief organizations'.[208]

Notably, the Mahasabha itself continued to send destitutes to Hindu relief centres outside Bengal. Its final report lists six such Hindu organizations and individuals, namely, the Arya Pradeshik Pratinidhi Sabha in Lahore, International Arya Samaj in Delhi, the Bengal Famine Relief Committee in Ambala Cantonment, Lala Sriram in Lahore, Dr Kedarnath in New Delhi, and Dr Amarnath Suri in Hyderabad, Sind.[209] In total, these organizations and individuals received 207 lone boys and 89 families.[210] With regard to their return to Bengal, the report skirted around the issue, claiming that they were 'living happily under the care of different Hindu Organizations'.[211] However, because of the pressure by the League government on the issue, the report gave a vague assurance that they would be brought back to Bengal 'as soon as the conditions here are favourable for their rehabilitation or as soon as they express their desire to come back to

[206] Jawaharlal Nehru mentioned the attack on Jinnah in his prison diary on 27 July 1943 and observed: 'it indicates a background of bitterness against Jinnah among certain groups of Muslims'. *Selected Works*, Vol. 13, pp. 195–196.

[207] BPHM, *How Hindu Mahasabha Fought Bengal Famine*, p. 17.

[208] Ibid.

[209] Ibid., Appendix VIII, p. 31.

[210] Ibid.

[211] Ibid., p. 20.

Bengal'.[212] My sources are completely silent on whether this assurance was ever actually realized or not.

The political dividend of relief

'Shyama Prasad Mookerji has risen in stature. All others seem to be insufferable pygmies.' Remarkably, these were the words of Jawaharlal Nehru, a lifelong warrior against religious communalism and the arch-enemy of the Hindu right, recorded in his prison diary in September 1943. He expressed his sadness at the political wrangling in the Bengal Assembly while starving people were dying on the streets, and his simultaneous admiration for Mookerjee's speech about the famine in the Assembly.[213] However, did the Mahasabha's relief activism earn the party any concrete gain in electoral politics, as opposed to mere gratitude for free food and a conventional Hindu sense of affiliation to a Hindu charity? Did the starving Hindus who flocked to its relief kitchens care to get involved in its politics?

To answer these questions, it is imperative to discuss why Mookerjee, who almost single-handedly led the Mahasabha in its relief activities, became widely popular during the famine. Why did middle-class Hindu women like Aparana Sengupta, as discussed earlier, think of Mookerjee as their saviour to the exclusion of other political leaders? The answer lies in his personal background. He was a Brahman by caste and himself a member of the middle class. He also had the requisite amount of educational capital to be accepted as a qualified representative of the educated bhadraloks, able to voice their grievances. He was a barrister-at-law and the vice-chancellor of Calcutta University from 1934 until 1938.[214] In addition, he had an esteemed lineage. His father was Sir Asutosh Mookerjee (1864–1924), a distinguished educationist who was knighted in 1911 for his contribution to education and was also vice-chancellor of Calcutta University between 1906 and 1914, and again between 1921 and 1923. Because of his administrative courage in maintaining the autonomy of the university in the face of dictates from high colonial bureaucrats, and

[212] Ibid.

[213] Nehru, prison diary, entry on 21 September 1943, *Selected Works*, Vol. 13, p. 244.

[214] Ashim Kumar Datta, 'Introduction', in Mookerjee, *Leaves from a Diary*, , p. vii. See also Basu, *Dr. Syama Prasad Mookherjee*, pp. 16, 18.

because of his robust personality, Sir Asutosh was conferred the popular epithet '*Banglar bagh*' (Bengal tiger).

Coming from such a family, from the outset of his political career Syama Prasad Mookerjee commanded popular reverence and acceptability. He embodied what the Hindu middle class aspired to be. He served as a model Hindu Bengali—'enlightened' by Western education, while at the same time rooted in Indian Hindu culture and religious tradition. During the famine, when most of the established bhadralok leaders of the Congress were behind bars in connection with the Quit India Movement launched in August 1942, he emerged to be seen as the sole bhadralok leader to possess sincerity and express concern for the distress of the Hindu middle class. Hence, pleas for help with food were directed to this newly emerged saviour.

In Bengal, the Mahasabha was heavily dependent on his personal charisma as he became the biggest crowd-puller of the party. It took much care to make its leader known to the common recipients of relief. For instance, T. G. Narayan, the aforementioned reporter from *The Hindu* newspaper, described the scene at a relief hospital run by the Mahasabha in Contai sub-division of the Midnapore district in November 1943: 'Every room in the hospital had a picture of Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee. I do not know what therapeutic effect that had on the patients. The physician-in-charge couldn't enlighten me on this point.'[215] Thus, while the emaciated famine victims in the Bengal districts were being treated, the Mahasabha made sure that they would become familiar with Mookerjee.

In addition to ensuring publicity for its leader, during the famine the Mahasabha was also striving to make itself widely known as a party. An important source for this facet of the Mahasabha's relief activism is a rare account of a tour of the famine-stricken Midnapur district in November 1943 by Chittaprosad (1915–1978), a noted Bengali painter and member of the Communist Party of India. Chittaprosad's account, titled *Hungry Bengal*, was proscribed by the Bengal government soon after its publication. Existing copies, of which there were several thousand, were burned. Until 2011, only two copies were known to have survived: one is with Chittaprosad's family and the other somehow found its way to the British Library in London. In 2011, the Delhi Art

[215] Narayan, *Famine Over Bengal*, p. 172.

Gallery published a reprint of the account from the copy retained by Chittaprosad's family.[216]

In famine-stricken Contai town, Chittaprosad visited an erstwhile Congress office which was now a Hindu Mahasabha centre.[217] There was a sign at the door which he recalled as 'Mahasabha Nari Samiti or some such thing'.[218] Thus, the Mahasabha made sure that its name was displayed conspicuously when helping people. Freda Bedi wrote in her account of her tour of Bengal in January 1944 that 'bigger Relief Committees' were setting up branches of their organizations, 'often communal ones'.[219] Though Bedi did not name any of these 'bigger Relief Committees', it is most likely that branches of the Mahasabha, the biggest private relief provider, often operated alongside its relief kitchens as its number of branches increased from 1,004 in 1942 to 1,217 by 1944, and its membership figure leapt from a mere 15,474 in 1942 to a handsome 40,887 by 1944.[220]

Chittaprosad accused Mookerjee of blatant political partisanship in providing relief. According to him, wherever the Bengal Relief Committee, underhandedly dominated by the Mahasabha, included representatives from other political parties, Mookerjee did not send cheap rice there, but provided it to only those branches of the Committee where the Mahasabhaites were clearly in full control.[221] Thus, Chittaprosad argued that Mookerjee was deliberately using famine-relief for political ends. An entry in Mookerjee's personal diary proves that he was aware of these allegations of political bias in his relief activism. He wrote in his diary on 5 January 1946: 'I was specially charged with having made political use of a situation that was so serious.'[222] However, as might be

[216] Chittaprosad, *Hungry Bengal: A Tour through Midnapur District, by Chittaprosad, in November 1943*, Bombay: New Age, 1944; reprint New Delhi: Delhi Art Gallery, 2011. The Delhi Art Gallery published the reprint in conjunction with the exhibition titled 'Chittaprosad: A Retrospective, 1915–1978' organized in 2011. A two-volume catalogue was also published in conjunction with the exhibition. In this catalogue, the family copy has been referred to as possibly the only surviving copy. The Delhi Art Gallery and Chittaprosad's family were unaware of the copy kept at the British Library in London where I consulted the original 1944 publication.

[217] Ibid., p. 4.

[218] Ibid. 'Nari Samiti' in Bengali means Women's Society.

[219] Bedi, *Bengal Lamenting*, p. 96.

[220] BPHM, *Annual Report for the Year 1943–44*, p. 137, in All India Hindu Mahasabha papers, file. C-59, NMML.

[221] Chittaprosad, *Hungry Bengal*, pp. 14–15.

[222] Mookerjee, *Leaves from a Diary*, p. 92.

expected, he claimed in his defence: 'My whole energy and attention were employed for organizing relief, irrespective of party and communal considerations.'[223]

Through its relief works, the Mahasabha succeeded in presenting itself to Bengali Hindus in the countryside as an alternative to the Congress. There are instances of this in Chittaprosad's account. For example, the abovementioned Mahasabha centre in Contai town visited by Chittaprosad was being run by a man who 'was a former Congressman, now turned Mahasabhaite'.[224] Another local Congress leader named Satish Jana admitted to being connected to all relief organizations, 'particularly the Mahasabha'.[225] Chittaprosad encountered a Hindu village doctor in Midnapur whose first words to him and his colleague were: 'Congress or Mahasabha?'[226] Such a binary query in a far-flung village indicates that the Mahasabha had established itself as an alternative, or at least as a competitor, to the Congress in certain rural areas during the famine. A 'popular' local Congress leader in Gopalpur village urged Chittaprosad and his colleague: 'Let us not discuss politics, please. Tell me, if you can, how to get relief, more relief.'[227] Thus, even for a Congress leader, the exigency of obtaining relief was more important than formal politics. The Congress was failing to provide relief whereas the Mahasabha was reaching out to people. Therefore, in popular rural thinking, the Mahasabha, to the exclusion of other political parties, succeeded in emerging as a rival to the Congress through its relief activism.

Chittaprosad's account makes us aware of the intricate ways in which the Congress's rural support was further eroded in the Midnapur district, which was gravely hit by the famine. Midnapur was the district where the Quit India Movement received its strongest mass support in Bengal only 14 months previously in August 1942. According to Chittaprosad, in their zeal to defy the Bengal government and impede its procurement for the army, the Congress supporter *jotedars* (landowning rich peasants) resolved 'Not a grain of paddy to Government', and accordingly burned, or buried, or threw into the rivers thousands of maunds of paddy.[228] Some of them, 'to teach the

[223] Ibid.
[224] Chittaprosad, *Hungry Bengal*, p. 4.
[225] Ibid.
[226] Ibid., p. 5.
[227] Ibid., pp. 12–13.
[228] Ibid., p. 7.

bureaucracy a lesson', sold grain to the hoarders.[229] In the words of Chittaprosad, who was a communist:

> Inspired by only one feeling, hatred of foreign domination, the people of Midnapur of course did not realise then that in their anger they were not doing Government any harm, but merely preparing the way for their own starvation. To deprive Government of rice, they put it in the hands of the hoarders: to fight Government, they strengthened the hands of the enemy at home. Patriotism provided a convenient mask for the hoarders at that time to bring off their shady deals, but the self-same 'patriots' did not hesitate later to set the police on hungry peasants when they cried for a morsel of food.[230]

Along the lines of Chittaprosad, Michael Brown too argued in his 1944 polemical study of the food situation that during the Quit India Movement 'the organizers hurt the public far more than the authorities and succeeded in holding up the movement of large quantities of food at a vital period'.[231] Brown contended:

> The 1942 disturbances thus had a two-fold effect. The direct one of destroying food and the means of moving and distributing it, and the indirect but no less effective result of giving the profiteer, hoarder and speculator a fairly free run by tying up the forces of supervision for about five months. Also, the gospel of defiance of authority took effect far beyond the political sphere and encouraged every petty shopkeeper in his anti-social ways.[232]

Notably, these allegations against the Congress also came from the office of no less than the supply member of the Central Legislative Assembly. Commenting on the food debate in the assembly, *The Tribune* newspaper wrote in its editorial on 20 November 1943:

> It is a pity that on the last day of the food debate in the Central Legislative Assembly the Supply Member should have indulged in a vicious and uncalled-for attack on the Congress. He said that if there was predetermined famine in this country, he knew of one group of persons who pre-conceived, pre-determined, and planned to bring about this condition by asking the agriculturalists not to sell grains.[233]

The editorial mounted a strong defence of the Congress against the allegation.[234] However, according to Chittaprosad, when famine struck,

[229] Ibid., p. 15.
[230] Ibid., p. 7.
[231] Brown, *India Need Not Starve!*, p. 67.
[232] Ibid., p. 68.
[233] As cited in Dutt, *Hungry Bengal*, p. 105.
[234] For *The Tribune*'s defence of the Congress, see ibid., pp. 105–108.

villagers regretted rallying round the Congress in the preceding year and now grew bitter with the party. This drove them into the open arms of the Mahasabha.

Interestingly, although the Mahasabha succeeded in elevating its political standing in certain parts of Bengal, often at the cost of the Congress's influence, it failed to reap electoral success. Abul Mansur Ahmed, who acted as the provincial Muslim League's publicity secretary in the run-up to the election to the provincial legislature in 1946, later wrote in his Bengali memoir that assigning responsibility for the famine became a major issue in the election.[235] After the famine, the first chance to test the Mahasabha's strength in electoral politics came with this election. However, the party failed miserably. In total, it could field candidates in a mere 26 seats,[236] and only won the safe seat of the Calcutta University constituency from where Mookerjee was re-elected unopposed.[237] It received merely 1.2 per cent of the total votes in the unreserved 'General Urban' class of constituencies.[238] As per the 'Communal Award', only non-Scheduled Caste Hindu males were eligible to vote in these constituencies.[239] In the unreserved 'General Rural' class of constituencies, the Mahasabha received just 2.8 per cent of the total votes.[240] Again, only non-Scheduled Caste Hindu males were eligible to vote in these constituencies. In contrast to this abysmal performance by the Mahasabha, the Congress received 96.8 per cent of the votes in the 'General Urban' constituencies and 74.4 per cent of the votes in the 'General Rural' constituencies.[241] The Mahasabha candidates were defeated by gargantuan margins. For instance, the Mahasabha candidate from the Calcutta East constituency, Sarojendra Prasad Bagchi, received just 27 votes against the 12,305 cast

[235] Ahmad, *Amar Dekha Rajnitir Panchash Bachhar*, p. 182. Translation mine.

[236] 'Detailed Statement Showing the Result of Elections to the Bengal Legislative Assembly', in *Return Showing the Results of Elections to the Central Legislative Assembly and the Provincial Legislatures in 1945–46*, Delhi: Government of India Press, 1948, pp. 110–136.

[237] Ibid., p. 136.

[238] 'Number of Votes Polled by Various Political Parties in the Bengal Legislative Assembly', in *Return Showing the Results of Elections to the Central Legislative Assembly and the Provincial Legislatures in 1945–46*, p. 71.

[239] Ibid. For a discussion on the 'Communal Award' in Bengal, see Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*, pp. 18–54.

[240] 'Number of Votes Polled by Various Political Parties in the Bengal Legislative Assembly', p. 71.

[241] Ibid.

for the winning Congress candidate, Jyotish Chandra Ghosh.[242] The Mahasabha candidate, Patit Paban Chatterjee, from the Calcutta Central constituency, received a mere 217 votes against the 13,566 received by the winning Congress candidate, Basantlal Murarka.[243]

Overall, the Muslim League in Bengal did better than Congress, winning 113 seats, whereas the Congress finished with 86 seats. Comparative history of social class in wartime India and Britain is rare, but in one of the few, Indivar Kamtekar has pointed out that because the franchise in India was based on property and educational qualifications, the poor who suffered the most in the famine were not on the voter lists.[244] Thus, it was impossible for the worst sufferers to comprise a vote bank for any political party. However, Sugata Bose has made an interesting argument that because of their suffering at the hands of the land-owning Hindu rent collectors and Hindu grain dealers during the famine, the Muslim peasants and landless labourers voted en masse in favour of the Muslim League in the provincial election of 1946 as a reprisal against the Hindu rent collectors and grain dealers. Thus, in Bose's framework, 'The memory of famine victimization in no uncertain way contributed to the League's impressive victory in the post-war provincial elections.'[245] However, his conclusion seems to be far-fetched, simply because most of the Muslim famine victims were too poor to have voting rights in the 1946 election.

Regardless, as elaborated in this article, the main beneficiaries of the Mahasabha's relief works were not the perennially poor Hindus, but those from the middle class, a considerable section of whom did have the right to vote. Despite this, the Mahasabha was trounced in the election. Does this electoral rout mean that all the vigorous relief activities of the Mahasabha failed to earn loyalty to the politics of Hindu communalism? Most probably, it does not. Joya Chatterji's findings caution us against treating the election result as proof of the want of support for the politics of Hindu communalism. Instead, the Mahasabha's electoral debacle can be seen as proof of the adoption of Hindu communalism by the Congress. Chatterji accepts that 'In the early forties, the Mahasabha had been able to draw away a significant

[242] 'Detailed Statement Showing the Result of Elections to the Bengal Legislative Assembly', p. 110.

[243] Ibid.

[244] Kamtekar, 'A Different War Dance', p. 218.

[245] Bose, 'Starvation amidst Plenty', p. 725. See also Bose, *Agrarian Bengal*, pp. 219–220.

section of the Congress' traditional constituency.'[246] However, 'when Congress policy turned towards a more business-like defence of Hindu interests, many Hindus renewed their allegiance to the Congress and voted for it in the 1945–1946 elections'.[247] Because of the far higher national standing of the Congress, there was a popular understanding among Bengali Hindus that it was politically 'better equipped' than the Mahasabha and therefore was more likely to safeguard Hindu interests more effectively.[248] Notably, the Hindu recipients of relief did not fear earning bad karma by deserting the Mahasabha and switching to the Congress after receiving relief from the former, whereas the Hindu donors had hoped to earn good karma by donating to a Hindu body like the Mahasabha, as discussed earlier. This is because the provincial Congress was now willing to reach a compromise with 'Hindu' politics. Joya Chatterji asserts that by 1946, 'the Bengal Congress came to present an unequivocally Hindu profile'.[249] In fact, she argues, 'the political differences between it and the Mahasabha became difficult for the untutored eye to discern'.[250] Suranjan Das too, in his study of communal riots in Bengal, has pointed out that 'a section of Congressmen developed a strong sense of Hindu identity, especially in view of the perceived threat from the Pakistan movement'.[251]

My findings supplement these existing studies as I found that the overlapping of the support-base of the Mahasabha and the Congress was a serious handicap in the way of the former's political expansion. For instance, on 1 July 1945, during the Simla Conference held between the viceroy Lord Archibald Wavell (1883–1950) and Indian political leaders (barring anyone from the Mahasabha) to discuss the proposed 'Wavell Plan' for Indian self-government, the viceroy wrote to the secretary of state Leopold Amery in a (once-confidential) communication that 'The Mahasabha is a curious body; many of its rank and file seem to be Congress men, and on big political issues will follow Gandhi rather than Syama Prasad Mookerjee or Savarkar.'[252] In the election of 1946 in

[246] Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*, p. 250.
[247] Ibid.
[248] Ibid., pp. 229–230.
[249] Ibid., p. 228.
[250] Ibid.
[251] Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal*, p. 167.
[252] 'Field Marshall Viscount Wavell to Mr Amery', marked 'PRIVATE AND SECRET', 1 July 1945, L/PO/10/22, in Mansergh (ed.), *The Transfer of Power*, Vol. V, document no. 555, p. 1182.

Bengal, a large number of the Mahasabha supporters seemed to have done precisely that. In fact, Mookerjee himself admitted in his personal diary on 10 January 1946 that 'Since the Congress leaders repeatedly proclaimed that there would be no compromise on Pakistan, the people felt that the Congress had accepted the tenets of the Hindu Mahasabha, and so did not see any need for a separate existence of the Hindu Mahasabha'.[253] Further, in the same diary entry he noted that after the war, 'The thousands of Congress supporters who had been jailed were released, and they returned with a redoubled will to make the congress victorious.'[254] As discussed earlier in this article, their incarceration had previously engendered a political vacuum which the Mahasabha had succeeded in filling.

Making the distinction between the Hindu communalism of the Congress and that of the Mahasabha was all the more difficult in Bengal as in North India an aggressive communal rhetoric distinguished the Mahasabha from the Congress, whereas in Bengal their rhetoric was the same. Joya Chatterji has pointed out:

> The Mahasabha in Bengal generally avoided the cruder rhetoric and style that characterised their movement in other parts of India. This owed much to the sophisticated leadership of Shyama Prasad Mookerjee and is as much a commentary on the extremism of the Bengal Congress as on the suave restraint of Mookerji.[255]

Though the Mahasabha's showing in the 1946 election was an electoral catastrophe for the party, beneath the surface of electoral politics, its relief works seem to have earned the party considerable support at the neighbourhood level, as indicated by the role played by the volunteer organizations supported by the party in the communal riots later in the year. As discussed earlier in this article, numerous volunteer bodies received money for relief works from the Mahasabha's relief fund. By enlisting them in its relief activities, the Mahasabha created a network of Hindu volunteers on the ground. This strategy of building a synergic alliance with local volunteer groups during the famine seems to have worked in the party's favour. Joya Chatterji's research tells us that these volunteer groups mobilized vast sections of Calcutta's Hindu bhadralok youth for the Mahasabha.[256] Suranjan Das's study has demonstrated

[253] Mookerjee, *Leaves from a Diary*, p. 125.
[254] Ibid., p. 127.
[255] Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*, pp. 249–250.
[256] Ibid., p. 237.

that during the Great Calcutta Killing of August 1946, Hindu *akhara*s (gymnasiums) became the 'local organizers' of the riot.[257] Yasmin Khan's study of the partition of India too informs us that Hindu volunteer bands and neighbourhood clubs and gymnasiums took an active part in the violence against the Muslims in August 1946.[258] Given the big part played by the Hindu volunteer corps in the Calcutta riots, it seems that by involving them in earlier famine-relief activities, the Mahasabha had succeeded in indoctrinating them with Hindu communalism. Later, during the riots, the Mahasabha seems to have reactivated the mobilization that it had achieved during the famine and built on the grassroots organization that it had established through its relief operations.

As discussed earlier in this article, the Mahasabha provided 'special relief' to urban schoolteachers and the families of lawyers, pleaders, and Muktears in some districts in East Bengal. In the list of areas where such 'special relief' was distributed, the district that stands out is Noakhali, the site of a grisly Hindu–Muslim riot in October 1946. The sample survey of the after-effects of the famine conducted by the Statistical Laboratory of Calcutta put Noakhali sub-division in class I, that is, the class of sub-divisions 'Most affected' by the famine.[259] Here Muslims were in the majority. The Mahasabha's final report on its relief works explicitly declared that 'The main object of the entire relief work by the Mahasabha' was 'to give special help to distressed Hindus, *particularly in areas where they were economically and numerically weak*'.[260] Mookerjee's personal diary talks of information, true or false, that he had allegedly received about Hindus in Noakhali. In his diary entry on 21 October 1944, he wrote that 'In 1940–41 there were serious allegations of the oppression of the Hindus specially in Noakhali.'[261]

Arup Maharatna's study of the demography of the Bengal famine points out that, according to the 1951 Census of India, the Hindu population in East Bengal dwindled by 6 per cent between 1941 and 1951 (East Bengal became part of Pakistan in 1947) and the Muslim population increased by

[257] Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal*, pp. 185–186.

[258] Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007, pp. 65–66.

[259] Mahalanobis et al., 'A Sample Survey of After-Effects of the Bengal Famine of 1943', p. 6.

[260] BPHM, *How Hindu Mahasabha Fought Bengal Famine*, p. 20. Emphasis mine.

[261] Mookerjee, *Leaves from a Diary*, p. 39.

the same percentage in the same period.[262] In view of the numerical strength of the Muslim 'other', there had been a political space among Hindu teachers and lawyers in Noakhali waiting to be seized by a vocal and active Hindu organization. The Mahasabha occupied this space through food-relief, among other activities. In the district, the party had a powerful local organizer named Nalini Ranjan Mitra, himself a schoolteacher. The number of the Mahasabha's branches in Noakhali increased from eight in 1943–1944 to 143 in 1945–1946.[263] The district had 146 unions which means that the party had established almost a branch per union by 1945–1946.

Afterword

This article has demonstrated how central religion and caste were present in responses to the Bengal famine. In an epoch of heightened communal angst preceding India's blood-soaked partition, the issue of food-relief caught fire swiftly once the Mahasabha decided to light a political matchstick to it. For the Mahasabha, the famine was a golden opportunity to accentuate the ineptitude of the Muslim League ministry, as manifested in its failure to keep Bengal fed and thereby to diminish the League's acceptability as a party to run a future government in post-partition Bengal.

For the Mahasabha, the personal charisma of Syama Prasad Mookerjee played a pivotal role in consolidating the support of the troubled middle class from the 'upper' castes. As a highly educated middle-class Brahman himself, he was able to inject a sense of affinity into the Hindu middle class. Consequently, the distressed middle class looked up to him as a saviour who, unlike the government relief officials, understood their need to retain an exalted position in the social hierarchy and the compulsion to seek aid in the form of food, and subsequently would

[262] Maharatna, *The Demography of Famines*, p. 195. Due to net inflow of Hindus from eastern Bengal as a result of heightened tensions between them and the Muslims there, the population of Hindus in western Bengal rose by 15 per cent between 1941 and 1951. However, there was also a corresponding decline of 10 per cent in the Muslim population of western Bengal. Ibid. These changes in the demographic composition further helped the Mahasabha in western Bengal as the party was traditionally stronger in that part of the province.

[263] 'List of Mahasabha Branches', in All India Hindu Mahasabha papers, file no. P–32, pp. 139–155, and file no. P–14, pp. 138–139.

devise relief mechanisms that struck a balance between the two. As demonstrated in this article, the Mahasabha under the leadership of Mookerjee did just that.

There exists no thorough study of relief activism during the famine as a means of disseminating communal politics and mobilizing the public along communal lines. Against this gap in the existing literature, this article has demonstrated how famine-relief emerged as a novel site for practising overtly communal politics, and how it was used by the Mahasabha as an apparatus for its expeditious organizational growth and political mobilization. In doing so, the article has offered new insights into the ground-level dissemination of populist Hindu communal politics during a humanitarian crisis. It has revealed that the politics of religious communalism made far greater inroads into famine-relief than has been hitherto realized. The inadequacy and ineffectiveness of government famine-relief made the Mahasabha's efforts more appealing to vast sections of Hindu Bengalis, particularly those belonging to the 'high' castes. In many localities, the Mahasabha succeeded in running an almost-parallel relief machinery to that of the government. In these areas, as a result of the virtual takeover of the task of relief by a private body like the Mahasabha, the indispensability of the government food administration run by the League was called into question.

Delivering relief in Hindu *para*s allowed the Mahasabha to develop a symbiotic relationship with local volunteer corps consisting of mainly young Hindu males, which in turn aided in publicizing the Mahasabha's populist communal ideology at the neighbourhood level. Though the Mahasabha largely failed to convert the recipients of its relief into its voters in the 1946 provincial election, the mobilization that it had done through famine-relief proved to be handy during the communal riots later in the year.

In general, during the famine, at the level of quotidian politics, the amount of private food-relief became proportional to the political dividends that a certain class, community, or caste was projected to yield. When religious allegiance began to determine the thin line between life and death, the already vitriolic communal politics in Bengal became even more toxic. Communalization and politicization of an indispensable prerequisite for human existence—food—inscribed communal hatred onto quotidian existence, which in turn widened the already existing chasm in the Bengali society along the lines of religion.