

“...Our Business Is Not To Look Back But To Look Ahead.” The Bengal Famine of 1943

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Abstract

The evolution of the Bengal Famine of 1943 stemmed from the local government's inability to respond and provide for the people of Bengal, India. In contrast the Government of India had the ability to respond to the famine yet due to the overwhelming fear of setting back the platform of independence throughout India, Viceroy Wavell and Secretary of State Leopold Amery neglected to take this path. This paper plans to argue this point through the examination of Viceroy Archibald Wavell's perspective and reflection of the Bengal Famine of 1943 as well as through powers given to the Provincial Governors through the Government of India Act of 1935. Although the British maintained power within India during The Bengal Famine of 1943, the provinces in India were given a considerable amount of authority and jurisdiction over its people and administrative policies. This act outlines the responsibility of these provincial governors and ultimately their mis-allocation of sufficient famine relief during 1943. The examination of the Bengal Famine of 1943 with respect to the Government of India Act of 1935 allows one to understand the systematic impediments that cost millions of lives.

Keywords: Bengal Famine of 1943, Government of India Act of 1935, local government

1. Introduction

In 1943, the famine which had severely stricken Bengal, India had reached a horrifying height. Viceroy Archibald Wavell in a letter to Secretary of State of India, Leopold Amery explicitly remarks that it is nearly impossible to account for all the deaths due to the many facets that disturbed this region such as, crop failure, malnutrition, starvation, and disease.¹ Estimations have varied from many reports and accounts made by government officials and scholars which have indicated the mortality of around one to three million people from the Bengal Famine of 1943.² The Honorable Food Member Sir J.P. Srivastava for the Information of the Standing Advisory Committee of the Central Legislative for Food and Commerce Department stated in a food report at the time of the famine that there were “[n]o reliable figures of mortality in the districts available...”³ But in a letter to the newly appointed Wavell in October of 1943, Viceroy Linlithgow reported the death count in Bengal since July 1943 totaled around one to one and a half million lives.⁴ (See Appendix #1 for the district death counts in Bengal). The disorderly structure of the central and regional government in reference to the Bengal famine of 1943 can be demonstrated through the inability to establish the total death count. Wavell did not dwell on the cost of lives, but instead focused on assuring a secure future for Bengal and India as a whole. In a speech to the Associated Chambers of Commerce of Calcutta he acknowledges this idea of forward thinking and planning as follows, “...our business is not to look back but to look ahead.”⁵ Wavell makes evident his willingness to assist India but recognized that one could not go forward unless there was peace with the past specifically regarding the food situation in India.

During the time of the famine, the British Empire still remained the imperial power over India. However, there were major transitions of power embedded in the Government of India Act of 1935 that allocated authority to native Indians in government positions. (See Appendix #2 for timeline of events) This specific act empowered and constricted the native Indian population as well as that of the British. The Act of 1935 granted both the regional and central government special privileges during emergency situations such as the famine. Yet it also compressed both levels of government from enacting their responsibilities due to abandonment of relief measures and instead focusing on economic prosperity from the famine and resource retention. Although many other famines had occurred under the British rule, this specific famine had more potency due to its man-made characteristics which impacted the outcomes.

Regardless of India being under the jurisdiction of the British, specifically during World War II, the evolution of the Bengal Famine of 1943 stemmed from the local government's inability to respond and provide for the people of Bengal, India. In contrast the Government of India had the ability to respond to the famine yet due to the overwhelming fear of setting back the platform of independence throughout India, Viceroy Wavell and Secretary of State Leopold Amery neglected to take this path. This paper plans to argue this point through the examination of Viceroy Archibald Wavell's perspective and reflection of the Bengal Famine of 1943 as well as through powers given to the Provincial Governors and the Government of India Act of 1935. Although the British maintained power within India during The Bengal Famine of 1943, the provinces in India were given a considerable amount of authority and jurisdiction over its people and administrative policies.⁶ This act outlines the responsibility of these provincial governors and ultimately their mis-allocation of sufficient famine relief during 1943. The examination of the Bengal Famine of 1943 with respect to the Government of India Act of 1935 allows one to understand the systematic impediments that cost millions of lives.

Different interpretations of the Government of India Act of 1935 exemplifies the complexity of this document. In a journal article written by the late Suniti Kumar Ghosh, a Marxist, "'Play Fair and We Will Play Fair: Pages from Congress History (1992)," examines the purpose and substance of this specific act in India. The author discusses the conversations that were between several authoritative members of the government and their ability to convey the function of this act to political activists such as, Gandhi, and Nehru in order to properly administer power to the Indian government. Ghosh reminds the reader of one of the act's main objectives, which was to promote the agenda for independence through the delineation of governance responsibilities between the British and Indian officials. The author, as a former citizen of this region, was in an astute position to write several articles bridging the connections of disunity in the government. The main focus of this article highlights the act's ability to weave a correspondence between the Imperial British and native Indian governments. This journal article does not reflect upon the disarray that the province of Bengal encountered during WWII, but rather features plans that the Government of India established within the Government of India Act of 1935.⁷

Compilations of Wavell's life have developed some insight into the Indian Government Act of 1935 yet also appears to miss the full relevance of the act during this period of time. The focus of these biographies stem from the relationships that Wavell had with his counterparts both in Britain and in India. In *Wavell: Soldier and Statesman* (2006), British author and military historian, Victoria Schofield examines the life of Archibald Wavell, a man who served many positions within the British military, and ultimately finished his career as a politician by serving as Viceroy of India. She argues that although Wavell received a considerable amount of scrutiny from Prime Minister Winston Churchill, following WWII he received verbal recognition for his efforts and "dogged determination" to find a solution and finish the job (specifically as the Viceroy of India).⁸ Schofield incorporates elements of the pressure Wavell was under as Viceroy and discusses how it was extremely difficult to resolve due to the constriction of the Government of India Act of 1935.

Echoing some of Schofield's work on Wavell, Muhammad Iqbal Chawla, explores Archibald Wavell and his political outlook of India in his book *Wavell and the Dying Days of the Raj: Britain's Penultimate Viceroy in India* (2011). As Dean, Professor, and Chairman at the University of the Punjab, Lahore, Chawla evaluates Wavell's agenda with regards to the conflict of political parties such as, The Muslim League and Congress. Chawla acknowledges the research of Victoria Schofield about Wavell's life but, suggests that there is an absence within her work regarding his time as Viceroy. This author addresses the weaknesses of the Bengal government exhibiting his recognition of the systematic decay in this region.⁹ Despite all of Wavell's interactions with the political parties and both the British and Indian government he was limited in his ability to alleviate the famine from the Bengali people. Another biography of Wavell focuses on the juxtaposition of his role as Viceroy and his perspective of the imperialistic authority in India. The following book *Archibald Wavell: The Life and Times of an Imperial Servant* (2009), by Adrian Fort, a Clarendon Fellow at Oxford University, delves into the food problem in Bengal, India and exposes the Government of India Act of 1935. Fort describes how this act neglected to assist Viceroy Wavell, the Executive Council and the Provincial Governors that had authority over this region. The author argues that Wavell constantly teetered between being a pawn for the British Empire and an advocate for those affected by the Bengal Famine of 1943.¹⁰ Evidently Fort did not

fully understand the repercussions of the 1935 act that delineated much of Wavell's efforts from being pertinent due to his inability to provide immediate relief to the Bengal province.

Joya Chatterji, a Professor of South Asian History at Cambridge University explores the transition of Bengal from a metropolitan centered political focus to the widespread engagement with the rural regions due to the immersion of the Government of India Act of 1935. In her book, *Bengal Divided: Hindu communalism and partition, 1932-1947* (1994), Chatterji states: "...the politicisation of the countryside was associated with the growing polarization of politics around 'communal' lines and it played a central role in shaping the course of Bengali politics in the following two decades."¹¹ She argues the 1935 act initiated a movement amongst Congress to appeal to those in the rural sections of Bengal society, which had previously been ignored entirely. Under this new constitution, Congress needed to pay close attention to agrarian matters and societal needs.¹² Chatterji's research describes the internal political dilemma specifically within Bengal as a result of the implementation of the Government of India Act of 1935. The politicalization of the rural communities and the resulting power brokering between the central government and the rural communities contributed to the lack of structured relief to this province in 1943.

In order to fully comprehend the political dynamics in Bengal, India one must refer to Sabyasachi Bhattacharya's book, *The Defining Moments in Bengal, 1920-47* (2014). As former chairman of the Indian Council of Historical Research, Bhattacharya compiles a nuanced understanding of the political sphere that gave life and shape to the region of Bengal specifically between the 1920's to the independence of India. He demonstrates the divisions of parties that continuously battled for authority within government at all costs such as, acts of violence, corruption and bribery. In conclusion, he discusses how the acts of violence only propelled further disruptions in the political realm of Bengal. With respect to the all-encompassing Government of India Act of 1935 which distributed authority to governors, ministers, and other civil servants there was a considerable amount of unconstitutional behavior in Bengal. Rather than discussing the Government of India Act of 1935 in greater detail he focuses on the "policy of mutual exclusion," that propelled chaos, and poor administration which ultimately "tore apart the socio-political fabric of Bengal."¹³ Bhattacharya provides great insight into the political makeup of Bengal which set in motion key conditions that both hastened and exacerbated the Great Famine of 1943, as well as the lack of administrative support to positively impact the impending natural disaster.

Until the release of the recent amateur book, *Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and The Ravaging of India During World War II* (2010), by Madhusree Mukerjee the Bengal Famine of 1943 garnered little notice. Mukerjee takes a firm stance in pointing blame at Prime Minister Winston Churchill and the British Empire for the creation of the Bengal Famine of 1943. Mukerjee argues that there were adequate rice supplies, yet Churchill reserved them for the British citizens and military personnel. She addresses each element of this time period and attempts to bring to life what she believes to be the truth providing a different perspective than the heroic Western image of Winston Churchill. *Churchill's Secret War* is filled with heart-wrenching emotion and thoughtful consideration of the native people of Bengal.¹⁴ The majority of the secondary sources surrounding this topic are strictly from the British and Western perspectives and therefore, create a myopic view of the event. Mukerjee provides a completely nuanced point of view of the Bengal Famine of 1943 and its origins, yet noticeably neglects to incorporate the Government of India Act of 1935 which constricted the Provincial Governors and the Executive Council from allocating relief to the Bengal region. Madhusree Mukerjee oversimplifies the Bengal Famine of 1943 by focusing the blame on the British, but this event was much more complicated. Mukerjee's argument can easily be deconstructed with the examination of the Government of India Act of 1935, as it clearly breaks down the chain of responsibility.

Each of these authors analyzed the density of the Bengal Famine of 1943 and its controversial dynamics for scholars and governmental personnel to harness. The disarray in Bengal can be examined through the Government of India Act of 1935, which ultimately developed a system that entangled both the Provincial governors and ministers as well as the Government of India from assisting those immediately impacted by the Bengal Famine of 1943. This act designated jurisdiction to the governor, and the ministers of each province through a public election process.¹⁵ This paper will examine a small portion of the government in Bengal prior to the beginnings of the famine and during 1943 to grasp how innocent lives of millions of Bengal people died as a result of little to no access to food, and medical treatments. The post famine historical outlook has coalesced around the idea of British imperial powers' selfishness and its impact on the Bengali people. Yet the problem was deeply rooted within the governmental system which encompassed both the British government and the native Indian politicians alike.

Before delving into the structure of the governing body in Bengal one must understand the serious threat of a Japanese attack in Bengal. In early 1942 the Japanese occupied the previous "British possession," Burma as defined in the Government of India Act of 1935, which created an onset of crisis' in Bengal.¹⁶ The Japanese advancement and control of Burma was a major hazard for the Bengal government and the British as its geographical location bordered this country.¹⁷ (See Appendix #3 for a map of India) Extensive measures to prevent the invasion and attack by the Japanese were enacted by Sir John Herbert, the Governor of Bengal. The "scorched earth or denial policy" as

commonly noted in literature associated with the Bengal Famine of 1943, removed means of survival from the people of the Bengal province.¹⁸ The process of this policy is described by scholars as a “two prong” system that destructed and extracted anything related to rice, in addition to means of transportation for both commercial and private entities throughout the Bengal region. This policy completely stripped individuals in Bengal of resources such as boats which connected rural districts to central hubs of food, as well as food resources that the Japanese could have used to sustain their encroachment and military campaigns. Correspondingly, individuals were stranded and unable to acquire resources such as food without access to the extensive river system throughout Bengal that connected civilians to resources. In addition, inflation struck the economy furthering the decline in Bengal.¹⁹

In Viceroy Wavell’s speech at the Annual Meeting of the Associated Chambers of Commerce in Calcutta the Viceroy discussed the turmoil which India had endured throughout the progression of World War II. Wavell conveyed how detrimental the threat of the Japanese was for the people of Bengal as they were at the forefront of attack. He stated how the Japanese invasion of Malaya and Burma created widespread fear and shock and essentially conceived the onset of the famine.²⁰ Despite the Japanese encroaching upon the Province of Bengal, Wavell turned his focus towards structuring relief through the central government. During the latter part of 1943 the British India army was at the core of providing assistance to Bengal and all over India, but as Wavell firmly declared, the central government needed to assert its powers in respect to the authority bestowed upon them via the Government of India Act of 1935. Furthermore it was vital for the central government of Bengal to construct plans that benefitted the region’s future regarding food allocation and structural improvements of government. Wavell wrote;

Bengal has the sympathy of the world at present, but this will not continue unless it is obvious that she is making every effort to help herself. The next six months will be the testing time, during which the Bengal Government’s policy must be energetically pursued, and its administration strengthened.”²¹

Wavell continued to address the Associated Chambers of Congress on December 20th, 1943 and concluded his speech regarding the food situation in Bengal as follows, “[t]he solution of Bengal’s food problem now lies in Bengal’s hands.”²² Wavell remained stern in this claim as he continuously commented on the weakness of the Bengal Government. He acknowledged the transition of power to the native Indian peoples yet he constantly made the reader or listener aware that as Viceroy and Governor-General he would not coddle the central government through provincial and national problems.

In the decade prior to the Bengal Famine of 1943 the Government of India Act of 1935 was constituted by British India. This act initially attempted to organize a “Federation of India”²³ which would have distributed responsibility to the Governor’s provinces, the princely states, and some Chief Commissioner’s provinces. Unfortunately for the Indian nation this division of power did not come into fruition due to friction between the Congress and the British Government. Nehru exclaimed that it was a “new charter of slavery.”²⁴ In 1937 following nationwide elections, provincial autonomy was added which entitled the regional Governors to more power. The Government of India Act of 1935 transformed the ability of native Indians to hold responsibilities within their provinces and for their citizens.

Wavell was highly attuned to the Act of 1935, especially with regards to the power it appropriated to the Governors. In respect to his understanding of the act, Wavell remarked on Amery’s response and demonstrated the uncertainty of the Governor’s ability to engage with the Bengal Government. Wavell discussed the ambiguity of the act’s effectiveness in recognition of the Bengal government and its current crisis.

I already had the constitutional problem under examination and the possibility of having to take over. But the S. of S. [Secretary of State] seems by his last telegram to have got cold feet over Section 93 Government in Bengal; and the Governor and his chief officials are at present a weak instrument. I shall probably have to get assistance from the Army.²⁵

Amery and Wavell frequently discussed the logistics of the Government of India Act of 1935 with close attention to the authority it gave the provincial governors in Section 93.²⁶ The act was constructed as a mechanism that would propel the native Indian peoples into positions of authority in preparation for independence. The Government of India Act of 1935 excelled in some regions of India whereas in Bengal it worked against the British government’s original intention. The Bengal province starting in the 1920’s to late 1940’s dealt with political agitation that set it apart from other regions throughout India. The Muslim League held the majority of legislative assembly seats, this political group occupied the greater number of minister positions and supported the British war effort during WWII. In comparison to the Muslim League the Congress represented a small portion of Bengal’s government structure. This political group did not support the war efforts due to the lack of communication by the British and their dire push for independence.

The Muslim League set out to create a separate state from the Congress which allowed for them to congregate in one particular region such as, Bengal. The full extent of the famine was the product of political agitation between parties and the fermentation of corruption within the inner workings of the local government. The interior disturbances led to failure of the interpretation of the 1935 act that enabled the Governors to negotiate their own interests and promote the continued exploitation of resources. Section 93 of the Government of India Act of 1935 titled as, *Provisions in Case of Failure of Constitutional Machinery*, designated; "...the government of the Province cannot be carried on in accordance with the provision of this Act, he [Governor] may by Proclamation-(a) declare that his functions shall... be exercised by him in his discretion; (b) assume to himself all or any of the powers vested in or exercisable by any Provincial body or authority;..."²⁷ Prior to the Bengal famine, the province encountered a long period of discourse within its political system as dictated by author Sabyasachi Bhattacharya. He claims that in 1935, "[t]he Congress in Bengal, indecisive and unable to cope with the flood of communalization of politics, became victim to the politics of exclusion it had created as a system."²⁸

The Bengal government lacked the morale and structure which other provinces had configured during World War II, which gave those in government key advantages to either escape or survive the massive discrepancy of food by means of corruption, bribery and hoarding. Wavell expresses the obtuseness of the Bengal government in his journal entry on December 1, 1943; "...apathy, inefficiency, and lack of public spirit -- in the matter of food; this only confirms what I already knew or suspected; we want a new Governor and some new men at top; but how to galvanise the corpse [sic] of Bengal administration will be a problem for the best man."²⁹

During this period of upheaval and disharmony former Commander-in-Chief of India, Archibald Wavell was appointed by Prime Minister Winston Churchill to Viceroyalty of India. On June 24th, 1943, the appointment had been made and the intensity of the famine continued to grow. The Prime Minister kindly acknowledged that "[Wavell would] have to become a civilian, and put off uniform."³⁰ Wavell's transition from Commander-in-Chief of India to Viceroy of India would have been a major adjustment for him as the grandson, and son of prominent British and Scottish military personnel.³¹ Wavell was thrust into a unique situation, and scholars would later note that the British War Cabinet did not expect him to succeed in this appointment due to the extreme circumstances India faced at this time with respect to World War II.

In spite of obstructions from the War Cabinet, the Prime Minister and the Government of India, Wavell held his ground in advocating for famine relief. To highlight an example of his eagerness to alleviate the pandemonium in Bengal one must refer to his November 3rd, 1943 journal entry. In this specific entry Wavell emphasizes an encounter he had a few days prior with the Director General of the Indian Medical Service. The conversation referred to the pharmaceutical position in Bengal during that time period, and the Director General responded as follows, "I am going down there on Nov. 8 to see for myself."³² Wavell, dissatisfied with the Director General's response regarding his attendance at the Simla conference, indicated to him, "...that sanatoriums at Simla could wait but the Bengal famine would not."³³ The Viceroy was acutely aware of the haunting realities for civilians in the province of Bengal and he attempted to educate officials on this matter through action.

The appointment of Wavell stemmed from a sense of urgency and the need to replace his role as Commander in Chief in India. Churchill assumed that Wavell would act as a puppet for the British government in India. In juxtaposition Wavell boldly comments, "[a] very curious chain of circumstances then forced on him my appointment as Viceroy as the only way out of a difficult place; he was pleased to find it well received, and then horrified to find I had liberal views about India and was prepared to express them."³⁴ He tackled the food situation in India and specifically within Bengal with full force and passion. The Viceroy used extreme caution when contemplating the enforcement of Section 93 as it would empower him to overstep the authority of the Bengal Government.³⁵ Wavell, a mastermind of strategy, recognized the backlash this action would cause and continued to refuse the enactment of Section 93. If he went forth with this power, then the Bengal government would have been unable to flourish and prosper during harsh circumstances. By overstepping the Bengal government in order to provide sufficient relief Wavell would have created further discord in this region, although he may have been able to allocate resources. The Viceroy had to weigh both outcomes and ultimately felt that the Government of India needed to refrain from enacting Section 93.³⁶

Wavell wrote in his journal the overall notions of the low civic morale which constituted little forward motion in providing relief for the people of Bengal. *The Famine Inquiry Commission: Report on Bengal*, also reiterates the absence of assurance within the Bengal government,

While other Governments in India were admittedly faced with a much less serious situation than the Government of Bengal, their generally successful handling of the food problem, and the spirit in which those problems were approached, and the extent to which public co-operation was secured stand in contrast to the failure in Bengal.³⁷

This report was constructed as a result of the complete disarray in Bengal following the height of the famine. Without acknowledging the Government of India Act of 1935, this report unconsciously manifests that the authority allocated to the provincial governors through the act was not efficiently or effectively used. This resulted in leaving many Bengal civilians helpless in a time of most urgent need.

The Executive Council was situated around Wavell. This group of officials occupied various positions and departments in the Government of India such as, Commander-in-Chief, Food, Labour, and so forth. The Viceroy conversed with them on a frequent basis about the various problems that needed to be addressed immediately. Regarding a meeting with the Executive Council Wavell asserted that, "I think their chief feeling was that the Central Government would be held responsible anyhow if things went wrong in Bengal, so that we might as well take the bull by the horns."³⁸ Seeing as that it was war time, Wavell felt immense pressure to allocate relief specifically to Bengal and any other provinces dealing with significant food discrepancies. Yet he constantly battled the Government of India Act of 1935 and the powers it distributed to the provinces. He wanted to empower the provincial Governors and their ministries but due to their evident feeble action in response to the famine, the Viceroy felt conflicted and compelled to step in and take initiative. In a telegram to Amery, Wavell prescribes the main disturbances in Bengal such as "...indiscriminate buying of rice in rural districts after the loss of Burma which denuded areas of normal supplies, and natural calamities..."³⁹ Wavell ensures the urban center of Bengal, Calcutta that he did not intentionally mean to criticize the local governing but his utmost concern was to save the lives and to cease the suffering of those affected by famine.⁴⁰ The Famine Inquiry Commission credited Viceroy Wavell for his keen awareness of the famine and his ability to, "...immediate[ly] turn [the situation] for the better."⁴¹

Viceroy Wavell focused on the inefficiency of the governing body in Bengal as he was not eager to incorporate the military as a mechanism of regulation. In addition to Wavell, Sir J.P. Srivastava, Member in charge of the Food Department of the Government of India, addressed similar notions of the Bengal government. Furthermore Srivastava called upon the Central government as well to take initiative with the food problem in India. Srivastava claimed that the horrifying results of the famine in Bengal stemmed significantly from the exponential and unregulated growth of rice prices. He addressed the situation as follows, "[s]o, the main reason for the so-called famine conditions in the various areas of the country is that the prices are beyond the reach of the poor man and unless we control them, how are we going to *feed* the poor man?...[B]ut I hope very soon the farmer and the cultivator will be able to secure the necessities of life much cheaper."⁴²

Srivastava demonstrated profound passion for the weaknesses and causes of the Bengal famine. Yet he provided hopeful solutions to this devastating event. He recognized that the government system in effect did very little to perpetuate change and relief to those in Bengal. He attributes a considerable amount of the progress in Bengal to the Food and Civil Supplies Commissioners as well as the Regional Commissioners that sought out relief. Srivastava specifically commented on the improvements of these commissioners in his speech to the All-India food Conference, explaining;

The Bengal Government have taken in hand the expansion and reorganisation of their Civil Supplies Department and have appointed a Food and Civil Supplies Commissioner to supervise and co-ordinate [sic.] all activities in respect of food, its procurement and distribution...More recently, a Relief Commissioner has been appointed to supervise and inspect relief arrangements throughout the province and to advise and assist local officers in the matter. Emphasis has been laid on the importance of affording relief in kind through free kitchens and cheap grain shops.⁴³

Secretary of State Leopold Amery and Viceroy Archibald Wavell also established firm confidence in Srivastava's progress with the Ministry of Food. In a letter to Amery, Wavell commented that, "Srivastava feels that at the Centre his Department is now fairly well organized and that the need for additional staff is mainly in the Provinces where procurement and distribution are still giving difficulty."⁴⁴ Srivastava Minister of Food recognized the colloquium between the functions of government and those who were and were not facilitating those functions adequately. The foundation of Bengal's continued disarray stemmed from the complete and utter disorganization and lack of civic duty within the administrative and political positions.

Sir Thomas George Rutherford was the acting Governor of Bengal following Sir John Arthur Herbert in October 1943. Viceroy Wavell was hesitant to appoint Rutherford to the Bengal province as he felt that he lacked the stamina to uplift the political structure in order to allocate relief. The Viceroy was keenly aware that in order to change the trajectory of Bengal there would need to be an all-encompassing figure as the provincial governor. Secretary of State Leopold Amery was eager to appoint Rutherford as he had excelled during his time in the province of Bihar but, he

also felt that he would accommodate Bengal better rather than bringing someone without previous involvement in the provinces of India.⁴⁵ Although he had done well for himself during “normal” times this did not comfort Wavell as Bengal’s conditions worsened.⁴⁶

Despite Wavell’s concerns regarding Rutherford he was aware that an appointment needed to be made swiftly as Sir John Arthur Herbert was declining in health (See Appendix #4 for the breakdown of Government positions in India). In a letter responding to Amery’s suggestion of Rutherford, Wavell explained the forward movement he had made with the new Governor of the Bengal province. In the letter Wavell expressed that the passing of the Governor’s ordinance in Section 89 gave jurisdiction to the Bengal Government to take action with regards to the ever-growing problems.⁴⁷ Wavell stated, “...this ordinance suggests that the Bengal Government are becoming conscious that not only India but the whole world is looking to them to do something positive and effective...”⁴⁸ Following Wavell’s visit with Rutherford in Bengal, the Viceroy had left very disappointed by his lack of duty and ability to coordinate relief to this region. In a telegram to Secretary of State Leopold Amery, he conveyed his concerns about Rutherford as the acting Governor in Bengal. Wavell describes his notion to Amery as follows; “[h]e did not impress me as feeling, or inspiring in others any sense of, the extreme urgency of the problem. Rutherford’s attitude is that he will of course carry on as long as required but unless he is to be made permanent the soon he gets back to Bihar the better he will be pleased.⁴⁹

Viceroy Archibald Wavell dictated that a new administrator needed to be implemented as the Governor in order to adequately assist the people of Bengal. He wanted an individual who was of “first class” quality to step in and make positive changes to this region.⁵⁰ Wavell in addition to the telegram to Amery on October 29th, 1943 conveyed his notions of the Bengal Governor in his personal journal which stated, “...the acting Governor (Rutherford) rather disappointed me -- no fire in him.”⁵¹ The Viceroy, a man of extensive military background with an ardent interest in strategy, recognized the holes in the Bengal government and the political structure that encompassed it. His experiences enabled him to recognize the lack of potential Rutherford presented as the acting Governor in Bengal during this difficult time.

One month into Rutherford’s appointment as Governor of the Bengal province, he broadcasted a speech from the Calcutta Station of All-India Radio. The broadcast focused particularly on the disproportion of food within the province. Rutherford, at the time of this broadcast, had experienced first-hand encounters of the famine. He explained how the food had been wrongly apportioned to the Bengal people, specifically as a result of store owners, and elites hoarding food for their own security purposes. In addition to corruption amongst civilians in Bengal, he acknowledged that food prices needed to be adjusted accordingly and rationing needed to be strictly implemented. In this broadcast, Rutherford laid out the facts surrounding the famine and lack of food sources. The broadcast appeared dull, and the information provided was common knowledge. His approach did not motivate the people of Bengal to move forward but rather burdened them with more statistical data and negative descriptions of those at the highest level. He expressed how he would implement policies to uplift the region from continual decay yet lacked overall morale to inspire the people of his province.⁵²

The province of Bengal had twenty-six districts which the Governor had responsibility over.⁵³ Through the establishment of the Government of India Act of 1935 a new office was created called the Prime Minister of Bengal, also known as the Chief Executive of the Bengal Government. This was a vivid example of the transitions of power to the native Indian’s through the act of 1935. In addition each district in Bengal had a specific minister to report to that would represent the masses in the legislative assembly.⁵⁴ The Famine Inquiry Commission Report on Bengal interviewed over two hundred and eighty commissioners, officers, representatives, district members, and other divisions of the government in order to understand the causes and effects of the Bengal Famine of 1943 (See Appendix #5 , for list of officials interviewed). This investigation by the Famine Inquiry Commission demonstrated that the provincial region of Bengal differed in its ability to govern in comparison to other regions throughout India. The major issue that this region endured was the inability to regulate prices, control hoarding, and sustain governmental assistance over firms chosen for the procurement of grain due to the political party tensions. The Famine Inquiry Commission Report on Bengal stated, “[b]etter success would have been achieved if procurement had been undertaken by an official agency instead of by agents chosen from the trade, and if Government had made it clear that they would not hesitate to requisition from large producers as well as from traders, in case supplies were held back.”⁵⁵ The Report on Bengal concluded that the controversy of procurement represented the overwhelming theme of this particular governments lack of organization.

The responsibilities that the Government of India Act of 1935 ignited to the minister was acknowledged, yet it did not further the individuals within society. Not only did this act burden the Government of India and the Government of Bengal due to one’s ability to initiate authoritative behavior, but rather when ignored by the Government of Bengal it tore apart the province. The provinces in India that prospered through the guidance of this act and the responsibilities dictated were not confronted with the divisions between political and religious affiliations such as, the Muslim League

and Congress. The majority of provinces and princely states in India at this time benefitted from the acts creation, but due to the inner conflict between parties, and the instability within the government itself the structure deteriorated swiftly (See Appendix #6, for breakdown of Bengal's Provincial Government).

Viceroy Wavell explicitly remarked on Bengal's status as a province through the following description; "[t]he real fact is that Bengal is utterly inefficient; it is soft in every respect, and has simply carried on up to date because nothing hard has happened to it. Now that it is brought up against the test of war and its attendant misfortunes it is quite unable to stand up on them."⁵⁶ Furthermore, Wavell expressed that Governor Rutherford restricted Bengal from crawling out of the pit of famine, and civil disarray. In the same letter to Amery, Wavell addressed his reasoning for contemplating the use of Section 93, which ultimately was a decision he could authorize as Governor-General. By executing Section 93, Wavell had the ability to initiate emergency relief for the individuals affected by the famine, disease, and weak governing. In conclusion Wavell writes to Amery,

The situation in Bengal has naturally been my chief trouble. I only recommended Section 93 to you after much heart-searching, as I realize the political implications -- a possible head-on collision with Jinnah and the Muslim League -- and it is contrary to my principles of action, in education a people up to self-government, that one should take the reins out of their hands when one sees difficulties ahead. But we are drifting into such a serious situation, with its possible effect both on the war and on world opinion, that I decided that the recommendation was inevitable.⁵⁷

Wavell admitted he would not have thought about enacting Section 93 if Governor Casey was able to take Governor Herbert's position immediately rather than Rutherford. Correspondingly to the provincial Governor concerns, the Cabinet also had to decide on whether or not to disband the ministers from governing. Bengal faced turmoil between the political parties which further divided the needed help in this region. (See appendix #7 for a map demonstrating the party demographics both in and surrounding Bengal.)

The Bengal Famine of 1943 is long overdue an analysis of the dynamic discourse between the British and Indian governments. For the native Indian people the focus was on attaining Independence from the British. Yet for the British Empire their goal was essentially to initiate a system that allowed the Indian people to prosper within their local governments following the removal of the British as well as protecting India from threats during World War II.

The Government of India Act of 1935 was the last constitutional construction by the British and it framed the many issues revolving around Bengal's inability to provide adequate relief for the civilians. There was a breakdown in Bengal amongst the various political parties and their allegiances to the British government. The threat of a Japanese invasion forced Governor Herbert to enact the "scorched earth policy," which ultimately destroyed all possible avenues for the people of Bengal to attain survival needs. The inner turmoil between the numerous ministries in Bengal continued to prolong relief which increased the death toll. The liberal Viceroy Archibald Wavell fought an internal battle of enacting Section 93 of the Government of India Act of 1935 which would have granted him power to provide resources and assistance to the millions destituted. But the Bengal government would forever be dependent on the authority of the British government if he had taken this route. Therefore, he left the Bengal government to intervene which ultimately left the problem of the famine unresolved.⁵⁸

The Bengal Famine is extremely controversial due to the vast amount of problems this region, the country of India, and the world faced during this time period. Many scholars attempted to convey the causes of this famine yet have neglected the role of the 1935 Act. Furthermore, scholars recognize that the famine was a result of multiple factors which unfortunately were interwoven simultaneously. After thoroughly investigating the Bengal Famine of 1943 through the literature that encompasses this event, the focus needs to be turned away from pointing blame towards one group of individuals over the other. Both the Indian government and the British Empire struggled to execute sufficient and adequate relief to these individuals' in Bengal. This situation stemmed from people of authority unable to put forth action that provided assistance to those desperately in need of help. The Government of India Act of 1935 was created with the intent of providing India the foundation for independence. Without obvious foresight of World War II or severe crop failures in the province of Bengal, this act significantly contributed to the prolonged Bengal Famine of 1943, which ultimately took the lives of millions.

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