

Abstract

In Bengal, Second World War had produced a cataclysmic effect to shake every social segment and unleashed forces which eventually changed the social fabric of Bengal permanently. This dissertation is an effort to document the ravages at a microscopic level.

As hostilities began in 1939, the colonial regime prioritised the sustenance of the war effort and unleashed a ruthless repressive machinery to counter-balance the growing gulf with Indian subjects. For Bengal, it was Japan`s entry into the war on Axis side which brought a decisive change. Following the British capitulation in South-East Asia, the province became a major base of operation for the Allied military forces. From 1942, Calcutta, with its extensive industrial base, became a target of multiple air-raids by the Imperial Japanese Army. The province also witnessed the influx of Indo-Burmese refugees, as they fled fearing retribution from the invading Axis forces. Ensuing uncertainty coupled with price rise of essential items, rampant black-marketing, illegal hoarding made the war increasingly unpopular among the masses. To forestall Japanese advance, the British government initiated the ‘denial policy’. Country-boats were destroyed and stored paddies were confiscated in several East Bengal districts with a cataclysmic effect as the resultant food crisis would snowball to a full-blown famine in 1943-44. Many of the famine victims would desperately flock to Calcutta, only to die from hunger on city streets.

In the din of the war, the colonial paranoia of Fifth Columnists, saboteurs and spies had driven the regime to scrutinise colonial subjects from all walks of life, i.e. engineers, students, trade unionists, ex-revolutionaries as they came under the intense scrutiny of vast and expansive surveillance mechanism. Foreigners also came under suspicion. Jewish refugees fleeing from the growing clout of the Third Reich in Europe, Chinese migrants, Nepalese activists experienced the colonial repression. Even drifters, stateless adventurers were not spared. As Bengal became the staging

ground of Allied armies in their effort to reclaim South-East Asia from Axis occupation, a large number of foreign troops amassed in army cantonments all over Bengal. It was not their ideological adherence to the enemy or their potential to halt the war economy, but their involvement in different shades of crime, ranging from sexual assault, drunken brawl, and burglary to murder and smuggling which had made them subject to surveillance. In this sense, segments of population in wartime Bengal, inhabiting the same space and time yet divided by social and material locations, form the focus of my thesis. What connected them was the thread of official attention.

How the process of late-colonial intelligence gathering unravelled and affected the lives of political suspects, refugees, drifters and military deserters constitutes the central theme of this research. The racial, gender and class dimensions of war-time emergency measures are revealed through obscure lives that came under the radar of the colonial state. By recording the neglected and insignificant individuals and their social relational circuits, this research has attempted to introduce an understanding of the war from the margins.