

# Impact of British fall in Burma on Bengal famine of 1943: experience of Faridpur district of Bangladesh

Bengal famine  
of 1943

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – After the fall of Burma on 10 March 1942 the British government extensively implemented scorched-earth policies in Bengal like denial of rice and boats. The British government had inadequate defense equipment to resist Japanese attack in Bengal. After the Japanese invasion supply of Burmese rice suddenly stopped. Faridpur district used to import rice from Burma. The Burmese conquest created an immediate and serious crisis for several rice imported districts and coastal districts of Bengal. Hence, none of the districts of East Bengal could escape its brutal clutches and severity recorded in Chittagong, Dhaka, Faridpur, Tripura, Noakhali, Bakarganj and so on.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Among the affected districts of Bengal, Faridpur has been chosen as study area due to severity of famine. This study addresses the famine scenario of Faridpur. Data has been collected from primary and secondary sources. Content Analysis Research method is used to test reliability and validity of the data. Historical Analysis Research method has been followed in this study.

**Findings** – Finding of the study shows that the government relief issues, ignorance of warnings, political nepotism and denial policy of British government intensified the famine of Faridpur district. The wartime tactics adopted by the colonial government aggravated the famine situation. This article has shed light on the government war time policy, activity and some impacts of British decline in Burma that fueled the famine in Faridpur district.

**Originality/value** – This study is my original research work and has not been published else where.

**Keywords** Burma, Deficit, Denial policy, Famine, Faridpur, Political nepotism

**Paper type** Research paper

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## Introduction

On September 1, 1939, Germany broke the non-aggression pact and invaded Poland without declaring war. As a result, on 3 September, Britain and a few hours later France declared war on Germany. This is how the devastating Second World War of history took place which lasted from 1939 to 1945. When the intensity of the war increased, due to the Rome-Berlin-Tokyo pact, Italy joined the war in 1940 and at the end of 1941, Japan joined the war on behalf of Germany and declared war against England-America in East Asia. Japan quickly occupied Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, the East Indies, the Philippines, Indochina, Thailand and Burma and bombarded the city of Chittagong on the eastern tip of the Indian subcontinent (Kanungo, 1999, p. 238). The British government became panicked about the Japanese attack in East Bengal and consequently adopted the scorched earth policy. This policy had to be implemented by the government of India and Bengal. Under this policy, government agents purchased surplus rice; Restrictions were imposed on boats and other facilities; The Indian military destroyed boats and other transports to prevent a possible attack by the Japanese

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army (Daoud, 2018, p. 458). All these obnoxious acts of British colonial authorities as well as corruption and political nepotism among native people accelerated famine in Bengal.

The British colonial Bengal suffered countless famine among which the first worst hit in 1770 and the last in 1943. The Bengal Famine of 1943 was a great calamity that reached the peak of human suffering and death. Severe epidemics of malaria, smallpox and cholera were associated with the famine. Its severity can be measured from the death toll which in the second half of 1943 happened to be around 38,000 per week in the whole province (Islam and Tasnuva, 2021, p. 231). Faridpur a district of eastern Bengal, which lies in the west of the Dacca Division, has an area of 2,821 square miles. According to the census of 1941, it had a population of 2,888,803, and a density per square mile is 1024. Faridpur, usually a deficit area, was unquestionably in a serious shortage of rice in 1943 (Woodhead, 1945, p. 114). Only six districts in Bengal were more populous, Faridpur district was one of them. The center of the district was Faridpur, a town on the bank of the river Mara Padma (O'Malley, 1925, p. 1).

The famine severity was much higher in East Bengal in comparison to West Bengal. Famine intensity in Bengal sub-division, according to Industries Department Classification Faridpur was very severely affected districts of East Bengal that Paul R. Greenough mentioned in his book. According to the classification of the Industries Department, the severity of famine distress in Bengal sub-divisions is divided into three categories. (1) Very seriously affected; (2) Severely affected and; (3) Partially/mildly affected. Fifteen sub-divisions fall into the first category, 25 sub-divisions fall into the second category and the remaining 47 sub-divisions fall into the third category. It can be seen that out of the 15 most severely affected sub-divisions, only 3 sub-divisions are in West Bengal and the remaining 12 sub-divisions are in East Bengal (Greenough, 1982, pp. 142-143).

Greenough says "The first stage of famine can be said to have begun in Midnapur in October 1942 when the local rice supply was destroyed by water and wind" (Greenough, 1982, p. 96). According to the above-discussed severity of famine distress, West Bengal's district Midnapur falls into the third category whereas East Bengal's district Faridpur falls into the first category. Considering very severely affected districts, Faridpur has been selected as the study area. This study aims to find out the impact of famine in this district. The broad objective of this study is to contribute to the regional history of the famine in 1943. To get a complete picture of the famine of 1943 in East Bengal or present-day Bangladesh, it would be necessary to study the famine situation in each affected district. As a part of this objective, this research paper is written to illustrate the experience of the Faridpur district. The findings of the study show that the rice deficit, government rice purchase, scorched earth policy of the British government, negligence of warnings, government relief problems and political nepotism intensified the famine in the Faridpur district.

As it is a historical Analysis, the study is conducted in a qualitative research method. Data has been collected from both primary and secondary sources. The content Analysis method is used to test the reliability and validity of the data. In general, famine is a vast area of research, which needs to be revealed through the study of regional perspectives. This study is a part of unveiling the regional scenario of famine, in 1943.

There is no single cause of famine. The root cause of famine is a lack of food production, defective intervention of the state, food availability decline (FAD), decline in purchasing power of mass people, etc. There are many approaches to famine. The Malthusian approach sees population growth as the main determinant of famine. The Smithian approach argues that faulty state intervention is the leading cause of famine. The FAD approach understands famine as the result of a lack of food availability. Amartya Sen rejected the conventional view of food availability decline (FAD), his alternative argument was the exchange entitlement approach. According to Sen, "The entitlement approach concentrates on each person's entitlements to commodity bundles including food and views starvation as resulting from a failure to be entitled to a bundle with enough food" (Sen, 1981, p. 45). The FAD approach focuses on the

systemic level, whereas the entitlement approach is concerned with the individual level. The entitlement approach never asks, whether there is enough food available or not but it asks to know whether the people have access to the available food or not. Sen explained the mechanism that caused the Bengal famine of 1943 with this approach. He says, "Bengal famine was not the reflection of a remarkable overall shortage of food grains in Bengal" (Sen, 1981, p. 63). Entitlement failure may be the immediate cause of individual-level famine but may have other causes behind it at a larger scale, such as faulty state intervention. The Smithian approach to famine in the Faridpur district applies flawed state intervention which is discussed in this study. Ignoring the people of Bengal, the British colonial government adopted a war-first policy. During the Second World War, some faulty policies of the government led to famine in Bengal especially, the Coastal and riverine districts of Eastern Bengal such as Jessore, Khulna, Bakarganj, Faridpur, Tippera, Dhaka, Noakhali and Chittagong.

By reading a range of Famine texts of different genres, produced in recent years is seen that many researchers have turned their focus to understanding the Bengal famine regionally or district-wise (see Islam and Tasnuva, 2021). Iftekhar Iqbal focused on the "Boat Denial" policy as the cause of the Bengal Famine, which is an important addition to the Bengal famine research especially in East Bengal. He linked inflation to the boat denial policy. His study "Boat Denial Policy and the Great Bengal Famine" shows that the high price of rice has a strong correlation with the "Boat Denial" policy and the Great Bengal Famine originated from the misplaced process of boat Denial in East Bengal (Iqbal, 2011).

However, this study is different from his work because there are multiple factors to originated famine in Faridpur. We focused on the notorious war policies and explored how the boat denial policy, the rice denial policy, negligence of warnings, political nepotism, etc. triggered the famine in Faridpur.

### Rice deficit in Faridpur:

It was in East Bengal that the devastating famine effects were to be found, except Midnapur. In general, the moribund Delta portions of Dhaka, Faridpur, Mymensing, Bakarganj, Tippera and Noakhali were densely settled and deficit in paddy production (Greenough, 1982, p. 163). Faridpur is basically jute producing district. The cultivators used to grow jute on most of the land and grew rice and other food grains only on the few left. If that remainder is insufficient for one's family's requirement, he prefers to buy rice rather than reduce the amount of land for jute. All the rice required for consumption is not grown locally. It is estimated that two-fifths is imported (O'Malley, 1925, p. 1). Balam rice of Bakerganj is the main source of rice in Faridpur. Besides, a lot of Atap rice is also imported from Burma (Roy, 2000, pp. 29-30). The estimated rice production of the Faridpur district was a deficit of 70,000 tons in 1939 (Brennan, 1988, p. 555). The Faridpur district's structure extracted the internal movement of food grain difficulty, and the district imported rice from different sources with imports from Burma acting as a curbing effect on food grain prices.

State intervention deteriorated the famine situation which is described in the available literature. According to B.R. Sen, early in 1940, a series of bad years in Faridpur required aid from the revenue department (Brennan, 1988, p. 555). The supply of Burmese rice was stopped suddenly after the invasion of the Japanese in December 1941 which worsened the rice deficit. On March 15, 1943, in the Bengali Legislature Assembly, Agriculture Minister, Hashem Ali Khan said that Darjeeling, Rangpur, Bogra, Pabna, Malda, Dhaka, Mymensingh and Faridpur are deficit districts (BLA, Vol-LXIV, No.3, 15th Session, 1943a, pp. 215-216). Maulvi Ahmed Ali Mridha, MLA, asked the Agriculture Minister Hashem Ali Khan whether he was aware that in 1942 the paddy crop in the Goalundo sub-division had almost completely failed and the people were in distress and the Minister answered affirmative (BLA, Vol-LXIV, No.3, 15th Session, 1943c, p. 214). In another session of the Bengali Legislature Assembly of March 24, 1943, Maulvi questioned Hon'ble Minister-in-charge of Revenue, Mr. Pramanath Banerjee regarding the

entire *aus* and *aman* paddy production failure in Faridpur and Goalundo sub-divisions this year. Minister answered that he did not agree with him about the complete failure of the crop, but there was a failure (BLA, Vol-LXIV, No.3, 15th Session, 1943a, 587). Sukhranjan Sengupta, a school student of that time in Madaripur sub-division, describes the famine situation of his area as “*Shravan-Bhadra* came in 1350, then I saw mutilated corpses of people floating in the river water day after day. Famine has reached our family too. Because the price of coarse *Aush* rice which was 5/6 rupees at the beginning of the year increased to 80 rupees by the end of the year” (Sengupta, 2015a, p. 144).

The policy was criticized in the assembly by Mr. Surendra Nath Biswas who discussed about appointed agents to purchase rice in the Bengali Legislature Assembly. He says, “. . . my third charge is that the Government has done more harm than good by appointing agents to purchase the *aus* paddy in several districts, particularly the deficit districts, Sir, my district of Faridpur is a deficit district, being a jute growing district. Notwithstanding, the Government has appointed agents to purchase *aus* paddy in that district. . . it is surprising to know that the firm of Ispahanis could be appointed agents of the Government to purchase rice and paddy in Faridpur, Similar is the case with Mymensing which is mainly a jute-growing district. Still, Mymensing is a place where rice should be purchased by agents of the Government. Does this House support the purchase and removal of paddy and rice from deficit districts at this critical time?” (BLA, Vol-LXVI, No.1, 17th Session, 1943b, p. 171). Despite being a deficit district, the government appointed M/s Ispahani Limited as the rice purchasing agent (Probashi 1350, p. 483) for the district of Faridpur along with other districts which precipitated the price of rice high and worsened the famine condition.

From the analysis of the above discussion, it can be said that farmers in Faridpur were more focused on producing jute and buying rice. Faridpur’s rice market was dependent on imports for consumption as there was not enough paddy production locally. Due to the British government’s war policy, the import of rice from local sources like Bakarganj and foreign sources like Burma markets stopped. On the other hand, the production of *aus* and *aman* rice failed in Faridpur for consecutive years. According to newspapers and legislators, even though Faridpur was a deficit district, government agents bought rice from the district. As a result, this district fell under the grip of famine.

### **Government rice purchase and price up:**

It is acknowledged that Faridpur was a rice deficit district and the Government purchase policy was one of the reasons for the increase in the price of rice in this district. MLA of Faridpur Constituency Mr. Birat Chandra Mandal says “I went to Faridpur Sadar and found the agent and brokers employed by the Government of Bengal to make purchase of rice and in the dak bungalow they were allotted to live for months together. I made inquiries in the local markets and gathered that as soon as these people began to purchase the prices suddenly went up. The real position is that the Minister can no longer hoodwink the public. He has already committed a heinous crime because it is a question of life and death. A great number of people in my constituency have died. The Minister can be called a murderer because it is due to his negligence and by preaching the false gospel of security.” (BLA, Vol-LXVII, No.1, 18th Session, 1944a, pp. 51-52).

There are many other determinants of rice price increase such as hoarding, and the black market. Clear evidence was given by Renu Chakraborty that black marketers were hoarding rice in Faridpur. She writes in her book *Bharatiya Nari Andolane Communist Meyera (1940-1950)* that on March 25, 1943, two hundred women went in procession to the magistrate at Madaripur in Faridpur district to demand food. Magistrate immediately ordered to find out all the hidden rice and to be sold at Rs. 15 through the Food Committee. Volunteers went to Charmaguria and Madaripur markets and with the help of the people recovered the secret

stock of 2500 mounds of rice and 500 mounds of paddy. Two boats of rice and 6 boats of paddy were also seized ([Chakraborty](#) November, 1980, pp. 30-31). In Madaripur, large quantities of rice and wheat are wasted as food is stored in large warehouses in the city while people die in the city due to lack of food, which is a direct result of hoarding. The following [Table 1](#) shows the minimum price of rice per maund in the last week of each month of 1943 in the Faridpur district.

In the foregoing table, the price increase in May was about 253.06% as compared to January 1943. The prices mentioned are the minimum dominant price. Actual prices were often higher and supplies were not always available to buy rice even at these high prices in the market. Price increases acted as a regulator in creating famine conditions in Faridpur District.

**Scorched earth policy:**

A situation arose that after the fall of Burma on March 10, 1942, the Japanese army might arrive on the coast of Bengal adjacent to Burma. The British government lacked adequate defense equipment to withstand a Japanese attack. Moreover, many Bengalis, including Sushil Dhara of Medinipur, were elated by the success of the Japanese. The military department was afraid that the people of Bengal might welcome the Japanese. For this reason, Prime Minister Winston Churchill on 14 November 1941 insisted on the ‘Scorched Earth Policy’. The ‘scorched earth policy’ is the massive destruction of the territory to be surrendered ([Mukhapadhyaya](#), 2017). Given the callous attitude of Winston Churchill, the British prime minister, towards India, both Sir Jon Arthur Herbert, governor of Bengal and Lord Linlithgow, the viceroy, treated Bengal as a kind of endangered war zone where resource-investment or grain storage was to be avoided for fear of Japanese intrusion ([Islam and Tasnuva](#), 2021, p. 233).

The scorched earth policy’s sinister name is ‘Denial Policy’. There are two forms of this denial policy are - the *Rice Denial Policy* and the *Boat Denial Policy*. The military authorities put into action of denial policy in early 1942 involving above mentioned two significant measures. One was the removal from the coastal districts of Midnapore, Bakarganj and Khulna of rice and paddy estimated to be more than local requirements until the end of the crop year, and the other was the removal, destruction and sunk of all boats, capable of carrying 10 passengers or more, from those parts of the delta considered vulnerable to invasion ([Woodhead](#), 1945, p. 25). The Boat Denial Policy was instituted in May 1942 for fear of a Japanese invasion of Bengal through the lower delta and finally, in June 1943 all restrictions were removed. Between these periods, famine had been spread in many places. By the end of November 1942, the total number of boats 66,563 were destroyed, sunk and removed ([Woodhead](#), 1945, p. 26). Behind the imposition of the Boat Denial Policy were stray and rare incidents of the use of boats by members of the Japanese armed forces, such as the

Month,1943	Rs. a. p./Mamund
January	12 4 0
February	13 2 0
March	25 0 0
April	24 0 0
May	31 0 0

**Source(s):** FIC, report on Bengal, p. 40

**Table 1.**  
Minimum price of rice  
per Maund in the last  
week of each month of  
1943 in the Faridpur  
district

incident in Char Dhulashar in Bakarganj in 1942, where seven Japanese army officers tried to escape from a reconnaissance landing using a government boat but the government said that Japanese army using country boat to sneak into Bengal and were cited it as evidence of the danger of the Japanese army (De, 2006, p. 13).

Amalendu Dey, a resident of Madaripur town in Faridpur district, spoke about the plight of boatmen and fishermen in his article *Michhiler chape Longorkhana*-“This (boat denial) policy endangered the lives of many boatmen and fishermen. These working-class people fell to death due to a lack of livelihood. We were shocked to see a stack of such boats on the banks of the Ariyal Kha River in Madaripur town. On the other hand, the denial policy complicates transportation problems, causes food shortages in various regions, and increases prices” (Dey, 2015, p. 138). He further said, “There were two villages named Darga Khola and Kulpaddi near Madaripur city. Across the Arial Kha River, there were farmers in large areas. The famine-stricken and destitute people of these regions come to the town in the hope of food” (Dey, 2015, p. 140).

Leonard George Pinnell testified to the Famine Commission that the economy of the fishing class had completely collapsed due to the removal of the boats. In December 1943, a journalist visited Faridpur in East Bengal. He was then told by an elder, that in his fisherman’s village of 200 families, 50 of them had been completely wiped out, and 35,000 families had lost their homes and crops due to the construction of military camps and airfields. This is also a special reason for being sacrificed in Famine (Mukhapadhy, 2017, pp. 84-85). The fact that 50 fishermen’s families were wiped out that shows how terrible the boat denial policy was in the Faridpur district.

Herbert summoned the Joint Secretary of the Commerce and Labor Department, M. K. Kirpalani, a member of the Indian Civil Service - also appointed by the Governor himself - and assigned him the more specific task of implementing the policy of “rice denial” in three districts; Midnapur, Barisal and Khulna. Kirpalani estimated that in these three extremely productive districts there would be a surplus of 123,000 tons of rice (Janam Mukherjee 2011). Even though Faridpur was a rice-deficient district and not included in the “rice denial” district rice was purchased by government agents under the Rice Denial policy which has already been discussed above.

Where there is paddy in Ganj or Arat, big and medium farmers in Gola, and rice threshing yards for big families - the police conducted house-to-house raids in villages and destroyed as much as possible or forcefully sent the rice to the government’s agents. All these works were done under the rice denial policy (Mitra, 2015, p. 100). As a result, the farmers and traders of the village were angry with the police. Moreover, the police’s efforts to control prices by force sometimes led to violent incidents. For example, on the 12th of September, 1943, Mr. Asghar Ali, an assistant inspector of police in Faridpur, was brutally murdered, in a rural marketplace by an angry cultivator’s mob while trying to enforce a new control order (Greenough, 1982, p. 165).

Viceroy Lord Linlithgow had informed the Indian Secretary that less than 40,000 tons of rice had been collected from the Denial area and distributed elsewhere. But this account appears to be an attempt to conceal the truth. Before the Woodhead Commission, Minister Shri P. N. Banerjee said, 4,76,000 tons of rice was collected from the Denial area. Of this, 86,848 tons were distributed in East Bengal. Of the remaining 3,36,436 tons, 52,716 tons went to Sinhalese. The rest of the rice was eaten by the industrial people around Calcutta and the army (Sengupta, 2015b, p. 238).

These denial policies disrupted the lives and economy of the people in the area concerned, as can be seen from Herbert’s letter to Linlithgow, dated 19th June 1942. Herbert writes: “I doubt whether the magnitude of our denial policy is fully appreciated. By removing registerable [sic] boats to at least 50 miles from the coast a variety of problems have arisen in addition to the main question of moving the boats. This withdrawal has seriously interfered



with the economic life of the areas concerned; it is difficult to dispose of paddy and rice in the coastal areas, and the reverse trade in Kerosene, mustard oil, etc., has virtually ceased; many fishermen have their main annual profit from the season; it is impossible to ferry cattle and *bargadars* to carry on cultivation in chars; while with the greatly restricted communication, there is a further apprehension that crime and disorder may increase” (Rahim & Rahim, 1999).

Analyzing the above point, it can be seen that after the fall of Burma, the British government adopted the ‘Scorched Earth Policy’ which included the boat denial policy and the rice denial policy. These two policies were imposed on Bengal which led Bengal to the epicenter of famine. The boat denial policy is destroying the livelihood of Faridpur fishermen. Under the policy of rice denial, violent incidents occurred in Faridpur in an attempt to forcefully control the price of rice, even though there was a shortage of rice production in Faridpur, government agents bought rice, obstructing the free movement of rice, resulting in the destruction of the rice market system and an abnormal rise in prices that brought famine to public life and also triggered the famine in Faridpur district.

### District officials warnings and scenario of socio-economic distress:

In January 1943 the District Officers warned from various parts of Bengal that famine was imminent and reported about the distress. The district officer of Faridpur reported as in Table 2.

In May and June, it became evident in the districts of Chittagong and Noakhali, and a steep rise in mortality. By July most of rural Bengal was falling into famine, the death rate raised almost all districts more than the normal, and the peak was in December 1943. In Faridpur the famine was revealed in January 1943 and the excess death rate of normal was 51.1% (Woodhead, 1945, p. 114). In the last five months, 5,46,971 people were infected with malaria in Faridpur, out of which 30,075 people died (Chatterjee, 2011). In the district of Faridpur how many people died actually, was tough to figure out accurately. The number of deaths in the Faridpur district for several consecutive years is known from the question and answer of the Bengali Legislature Assembly on March 14, 1945. Death statistics of Faridpur District in several years are given in Table 3.

The FIC points out, “It was not, however, until 11th June that the Government called for detailed information about the areas affected, the numbers involved and the nature of the relief required. Orders for the organization of relief measures were not issued until 20th August, and the Famine Relief Commissioner was not appointed until 26th September. We feel that all this should have been done at least 3 months earlier” (Woodhead, 1945, p. 99). At that time, if the colonial government had taken adequate measures, the severity of the famine in Faridpur might have been alleviated. Here are some scenes of the horror of famished death in Faridpur-Madaripur. The United Press message dated October 31, from

Date	Particulars
12th January 1943	Economic condition in Sadar and Goalundo sub-divisions of Faridpur daily becoming worse due to failure of paddy crop and high prices of all commodities. Opening of test works on an extensive scale essential and six more officers needed. Distribution of gratuitous relief should also be continued up to July 1943
24th March 1943	Rice position very serious Situation in Goalundo and parts of Sadar of Faridpur district now much worse than was expected
23rd June 1943	Situation in Faridpur has deteriorated still further. Relief operations were for long confined to Sadar and Goalundo but the resources of most of the people in other areas have also been exhausted and urgent steps should be taken to alleviate their distress

**Source(s):** Famine inquiry commission report on Bengal, Appendix-VI, p. 226

**Table 2.**  
District Officer's  
warnings from the  
Faridpur District

Gosainrhat (Faridpur) gave a pathetic story of a living man being devoured by dogs and jackals. The masses stated that there had been three other cases of a like nature (Ghosh, 1944). The Associated Press reported on September 17, 1943, from Madaripur that “a destitute child recently devoured by jackals in the Municipal Market compound” (Ghosh, 1944, p. 87). The Correspondent of a Calcutta newspaper at Madaripur stated on October 21, 1943.

On the morning 15th instant the dead body of a destitute, half a portion of which was devoured by jackals, was found by the side of the street near the local Dak Bunglow and sweepers threw the body into the river Arialkhan (Ghosh, 1944, p. 88).

The scenario of socioeconomic distress can be seen also in the descriptions of Sukhranjan Sengupta as to the famine in the Madaripur district. He says, “In this sub-district town even a year before that time, I saw the fishermen were throwing Hilsa fish to the sailors of other boats passing by, saying ‘whatever you bring home’. But at the beginning of the rainy season that year, I saw that Hilsa fish was not being sold in the Madaripur market. Why? Suddenly, one day in the neighborhood of the city, a group of people was shouting, ‘Don’t buy Hilsa fish - dead people are floating in the river, don’t eat Hilsa’. Seeing the growing crowd of beggars from house to house, I realized that people are in scarcity of food. One morning I ran into the street in the crowd of people. I saw the corpses of some naked children of 3/4/5 years on the other side of the road. The old people were saying, ‘He died because of lack of food. Or parents strangled their children because of hunger” (Sengupta, 2015a, p. 143).

It has already been referred to the fact that the death rate was reached in the peak in December 1943. Faridpur district death began in the Middle of August 1943. The statistics of starvation deaths were regularly published in the newspaper ‘Desh’ under the heading ‘Saptahik Sangbad’. Madaripur death toll due to starvation is mentioned on 17th August. It is said that 40 dead bodies were found in different streets of Madaripur in the last three weeks, according to a news report dated 15th August (Desh, 11 Bhadra 1350, 130). As of September 18, the statistics of starvation deaths in Madaripur city stated that 100 people have died of starvation so far (Desh, 8 Ashwin 1350, 244). Witnessing the famine situation, Sir Jagdish Prasad published a statement in the newspaper. In this statement, he said, “In a *langarkhana* in Faridpur, I saw a man licking food like a dog. Dead bodies, starving and sick women are being removed from the roadside every day. A man wanders about in search of food in despair and appears at the door of the Collector’s court, where he falls down on the stairs and dies. While removing his dead body, a woman sits awkwardly in a corner pushed out a knob and said – ‘Take that also.’ In that small knob was the dead body of her child” (Desh, 1 Ashwin 1350, 187).

Relief and rehabilitation:

The distress that grew in Faridpur during the first 6 months of 1943 was reported by the commissioner and district officers, which is shown in Table 2. Famine appeared in many parts of Bengal by the end of June, but in Faridpur it appeared as early as January 1943. Despite several warnings, the government did not officially acknowledge the famine, rather gave an excuse to the Famine Commission regarding no declaration of famine. Without a

Table 3.  
Death statistics of  
Faridpur District in  
several years

Year	Death from all causes
1941	70,404
1942	80,174
1943	1,00,122
1944 (up to November)	71,665

Source: Bengal Legislative Assembly 1945. Vol. LXIX, No-2, Question no-190, p.100



declaration of the famine, they are not legally bound to give any relief to the people and implement the Famine Code. It was only in mid-September of 1943 that the Indian authorities permitted the use of the term “famine” in dispatches by correspondents (Islam, 2012). However, at the beginning of June, a confidential circular was issued to the collectors indicating that famine might have to be declared and requesting them to report to the government on the position in their districts. The object of these inquiries was to obtain information on which the relief policy of the Government could be based. Replies received about the medial of July, showed the situation to be grave. A circular issued by the Revenue Department on August 20th described in detail the relief measures to be taken and the administrative procedure to be adopted (Woodhead, 1945, p. 69). From the above discussion, it is clear that relief measures were delayed due to an official lengthy process.

Relief operations, however, were undertaken only on a limited scale that was not enough to save lives. Government relief measures were to include test relief, gratuitous relief, milk canteens, rationing, temporary orphanages and emergency hospitals, etc. There were 228 gruel kitchens opened by the government in the Faridpur district and 19,055,115 persons (may be a meal) were fed from these kitchens (BLC, 17th May, 1st Session, 1944c, p. 826). Based on the information received up to April 15, 1944, there were 6 temporary orphanages and 109 milk canteens opened by the government in the Faridpur district. There were 425 orphans in these orphanages and 17,729 children, lactating and expectant mothers were fed from these canteens (BLC, 17th May, 1st Session, 1944, 794). The following Table 4 shows the Expense of Different Kinds of Reliefs and Loans in Faridpur, 1942-1944 (31st January).

(1) Test relief work in Faridpur:

The amounts were sanctioned for the test relief work respectively Rs.6,500 and 7,65,000 in Faridpur District for the year 1942-43 and 1943-44. The temporary staff such as Relief Officer-12, Clerks-19, Sub-overseers-8, Mohurrirs-25 and Orderly Peons-12 were employed for execution of the relief works in 1943-44 (BLA, Vol. LXVII, No.6, 30th May, 18th Session, 1944b, pp. 51-53). The following Table 5 shows Sub-division wise amounts that were allotted and spent for test relief work in Faridpur District.

	1942-43, Rs	1943-44, Rs. (31 <sup>st</sup> January)
Amount spent for test relief	34,862	3,70,164
Amount spent for gratuitous relief	30,984	10,71,873
Amount spent for agriculture and other loans	1,74,000	27,57,460

**Source(s):** Bengal legislative assembly, Vol. LXVII, no-5, Question no. 149, p. 94

**Table 4.**  
Expense of different  
kinds of reliefs and  
loans in Faridpur,  
1942-1944 (31st  
January)

Sub-division name	1942-43 Allotted, Rs	1942-43 Spent, Rs	1943-44 Allotted, Rs	1943-44 Spent, Rs
Sadar	15,000	12,732	2,43,000	1,12,725
Goalundo	25,000	21,354	2,54,000	2,14,868
Madaripur	4,000	NIL	93,000	70,300
Gopalganj	1,000	775	1,75,000	1,16,157
<i>Sub Total</i>	45,000	34,861	7,75,000	5,14,050
Reserve	20,000	—	—	—
<i>Total</i>	65,000	34,861	7,75,000	5,14,050

**Source(s):** Bengal legislative assembly, Vol. LXVII, no. 6, Question no-358, p. 51-53

**Table 5.**  
Sub-division wise  
amounts were allotted  
and spent for test relief  
work in Faridpur  
District

In 1942-43 the allotted amount for test relief work in Faridpur district was Rs.65,000 but spent only Rs.34,861 and in 1943-44 the allotted amount was Rs.7,75,000 but spent only Rs.5,14,050. In Madaripur sub-division expense in 1942-43 was nil which shows the inefficiency of government relief work.

(2) Famine Relief Emergency (F.R.E) Hospitals in Goalundo:

Khan Sahib Hamiduddin Ahmad on behalf of the Hon'ble Minister Khan Bahadur Maulvi Jalaluddin Ahmad in charge of the public health department stated that eighteen relief Hospitals were working in the sub-division of Goalundo in the district of Faridpur. Staff from different religions had been employed to work in those hospitals (BLA, Vol. LXIX, No.1, 28th Feb, 20th Session, 1945d, pp. 272-73). Details are laid in Table 6.

The government also provided relief through various agencies. The government ran several centers in the villages of Korkandi, Kalargaon, Tulsar and Idilpur with the help of Mahila Atanraksha Samiti. There were 104 government work centers in Faridpur. Here, girls were taught to trim pulses, make *shorty*, weave mats with *hogla* (aquatic grass), etc. About 10,000 girls worked staying in these centers and 20,000 girls used to go home at night. The government rescued 40 girls from prostitution in Madaripur (Chakraborty November, 1980, p. 50).

Political nepotism and corruption:

The notorious actions of the British colonial authorities, political nepotism of the provincial government and corruption among the local population were the causes of famine at the district level in Bengal. During the famine, the two governments of Bengal A.K. Fazlul Huq (December 1941 to March 1943) and Khwaja Nazimuddin's Muslim League (April 1943 to March 1945), each claimed that the other had caused the famine due to corruption and failure to act. Some aspects of political nepotism in the Faridpur district are highlighted here.

The political nepotism and corruption of the government can be seen in the appointment of shop and Wholesale Dealers. Md Ayub Ali is one of the four wholesalers under the Faridpur Municipal Rationing Scheme. The Civil Supplies Minister S. H. Suhrawardy said on 15 December 1944 in a question and answer session of the Bengali Legislative Assembly that Md. Ayub Ali, a wholesaler, was selected on the recommendation of a majority of non-official members of the Town Supply Committee. He acknowledges that wholesale trader, Md. Ayub Ali is the brother-in-law of Faridpur District Muslim League Secretary, Maulvi Abdus Salam Khan (BLA, 15th Dec,19th Session, 1945a, pp. 547-48). The ration shop dealer in Ward No.11 of Faridpur town has been allotted to Fazlar Rahman (alias Fazlu Mia) who is also the maternal uncle of Maulvi Abdus Salam Khan (BLA, Vol. LXVIII, 12th Dec, 19th Session, 1945b, p. 338). The contract for the construction of the Faridpur State Orphanage was also given to Fazlu Mia (BLA, Vol. LXVIII, 12th Dec, 19th Session, 1945b, p. 338). The Rajbari Camp Hospital contract was given to Fazlu Miah instead of C. W. D contractor Maulvi Khandaker Abdul Majid. Although, Maulvi Khandaker Abdul Majeed expressed his desire to do the work to the Sub-Divisional Officer. But the District Magistrate on his own initiative

**Table 6.**  
The Doctors and staff  
from different religions  
work in F.R.E  
Hospitals in Goalundo

Staff	Total	Muslim	Scheduled caste	Others
Doctors	25	3	2	20
Compounders	18	2	1	15
Clerks	6	0	1	5
Nurses	104	36	6	62
Menials	152	42	54	56

**Source(s):** Bengal legislative Assembly, Vol. LXIX, no. 1, Question no-83, p. 272-73

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gave the contract to Fazlu Mia on March 6, 1944 (BLA, Vol. LXIX, 20th Feb, 20th Session, 1945c, p. 46). In this way, the Faridpur District Muslim League Secretary, Maulvi Abdus Salam Khan's relatives were given contracts one after another due to political considerations.

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## Conclusion

Eventually, it can be said that the British colonial government was scared of losing India like Burma. That is why, they implemented the denial policy without any concern for the economic life of the people, and many warnings about upcoming famine from sub-divisional officers were avoided. The faulty state intervention due to the fall of Burma fueled the famine in Bengal. The government's policies such as the rice denial policy destroyed the district rice market and the economic life of natives and the boat denial policy particularly destroyed the lives of many boatmen and fishermen of the Faridpur district. It was not unknown to the British government that the inhabitants of Faridpur or the people of Bengal would starve to death if the riverine Bengal's lifeline boats were stopped and rice was removed from the coastal area, especially the rice deficit district of Faridpur. So it can be said that the Bengal famine of 1943 is not a natural disaster. It is a man-made disaster as mentioned by BM Vaita in his book entitled *Famine in India: Some Aspects of the Economic History of India, 1860-1965*. The factors discussed above clearly establish the causes of famine in the Faridpur district and portray the evidence of famine severity. Even after warnings from the district level, relief measures were not started due to bureaucratic complications. The study also discloses that there was political nepotism in each operation of the Ration Shop, Control Shop, Wholesale Dealers and even the appointment of contractors for the construction of state orphanages. So, Political nepotism and corruption have made life miserable for the famine-stricken people of Faridpur.

According to the census of 1941, Faridpur District had a population of 2,888,803. Total death in Faridpur District from all causes in 1943 and up to November 1944 was respectively 1,00,122 and 71,665. Severe epidemics such as malaria accompanied the famine. In 1943, in the last five months, 5,46,971 people were infected with malaria in Faridpur, out of which 30,075 people died. As a result, the excess mortality recorded in Faridpur districts in 1943 was 51.1%. Hence, the experience from this district reflects the severity of the famine.

From the above discussion, it is evident that this study deals with the regional scenario of the Bengal famine. There are more severely affected areas in Bengal that need to be addressed to get a holistic scenario of the Bengal famine. There might be individual reasons for famine in different areas. Without district-wise research on famine, it is not possible to get an accurate picture of why a district faced famine and which district suffered less or more severely. A district might be affected by famine later, yet become very seriously affected, such as Faridpur. On the other hand, some districts were affected earlier but partially or mildly affected like Midnapur. Faridpur was a rice-deficient district and its neighboring district Bakerganj was a rice-surplus district but both of the districts suffered from famine. Hence, more district-wise research is needed to explore the cause of famine. Another avenue of research in the future could be to study the coastal and riverine districts of East Bengal.

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