Conferences and Public Events – Edinburgh, Guwahati, Kolkata

RSE Network on "The British Empire, Scotland, and Indian Famines" presents:

80 years of the 1943 Bengal Famine

January 5: Inauguration & Film Screening

January 6 & 7: Exhibition, Conversation, Panel

January 8: Theatre, Walking Tour, Dance Performance

For details, scan QR Code

Sponsored by: RSE

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80 years of the 1943 Bengal Famine: Remembering through Talks and Events

(*Under the RSE Research Network Grant for the Project "The British Empire, Scotland, and Indian Famines: Writings on Food Crisis in Colonial India", Gr. No. 69777*)

January 5-8, 2024

DAY 1, JANUARY 5

Venue: Maulana Abul Kalam Azad University of Technology (MAKAUT), WB, Auditorium, XG5V+27R, Haringhata Farm, West Bengal, 741249

12.00-13.00: Opening Ceremony

Welcome (Dr. Rajarshi Mitra, Dr. Sourit Bhattacharya, and Dr. Binayak Bhattacharya)

Formal inauguration by Vice Chancellor, MAKAUT, WB, Prof. Tapas Chakraborty

Address by Vice Chancellor

Speech by dignitaries

14.00-16.30: Film Screening followed by discussion

Film: *Akaler Sandhane* (*In Search of Famine*, Dir. Mrinal Sen, 1982)

Discussant: Dr. Manas Ghosh (Jadavpur University)

Moderator: Dr Binayak Bhattacharya (MAKAUT, WB)

DAY 2, JANUARY 6

Venue: Jadunath Bhavan Museum & Resource Centre (JBMRC), 10 Lake Terrace, Kolkata – 700029

12.00: Inauguration of the Exhibition: *Monone Ponchash: Monontwor Fire Dekha*

('43 in the Mind: Re-visiting the Great Famine)

12.00-12.30: Inaugural Discussion:

Dr. Somshankar Ray, curator, in conversation with Dr Binayak Bhattacharya:

Topic: How do we re-visit the traumatic pasts of the famine?

13.30-14:00: In Conversation:

Dr Sourit Bhattacharya (University of Edinburgh), Dr Rajarshi Mitra (IIIT Guwahati), and Dr Binayak Bhattacharya (MAKAUT, WB) on:

Topic: Why did we organize this event and where to go from here?

15:00-15.30: In Conversation

Discussants (TBC)

Topic: Archiving the Famine: Challenges and Possibilities

16.30-17.30: In Conversation:

Dr Trina Nileena Banerjee (CSSSC) & Prof Sanjoy Kumar Mallik (Visva-Bharati University) with Dr Rajarshi Mitra on:

Topic: IPTA, artwork, and the famine

17.30-19.00: Exhibition closes for the day

DAY 3, JANUARY 7

Venue: Jadunath Bhavan Museum & Resource Centre (JBMRC), 10 Lake Terrace, Kolkata – 700029

12.00–19.00: Exhibition: *Monone Ponchash: Monontwor Fire Dekha ('43 in the Mind: Re-visiting the Great Famine)*

12.00-12.30: In Conversation

Sumantra Baral and Aryama Bej with Dr Rajarshi Mitra:

Topic: The Famine in Scholarly- and Art-work for the Future

14.00-14.45: In Conversation

Dr Janam Mukherjee (Toronto Metropolitan University) with Dr Sourit Bhattacharya:

Topic: War, Famine, and the End of Empire: Re-visiting the

topic today

16.00-18.00: Panel: How Do We Preserve the Memories of the 1943 Famine? On Archiving a Catastrophe

Venue: Barun De Auditorium, Jadunath Bhavan Museum & Resource Centre

Discussants: Prof Supriya Chaudhuri (Jadavpur University)

Mr. Madhumoy Pal (Writer and Ex-Journalist, *Aajkal*)

Prof Abhijit Gupta (Jadavpur University)

Dr Md Intaj Ali (Netaji Subhash Open University)

Dr Rituparna Roy (*Kolkata Partition Museum*)

Moderator: Dr Sourit Bhattacharya

18.00-19.00: Closing of the Exhibition

DAY 4, JANUARY 8

Venue: New Market Area, Kolkata

08.00-10.00: Walk through urban sites associated with the WWII

and the

1943 Bengal Famine: “A Tour through Hunger”

Guide: Dr Tathagata Neogi (*Immersive Trails*)

Venue: Madhusudan Mancha, G958+9H3, Gariahat South, Jodhpur Road, Dhakuria, Kolkata – 700031

12.00–21.00: Film Screening, Performance, Discussion

12.00-14.00: Film Screening

Dharti Ke Lal (*Children of the Earth*, Dir. K.A. Abbas, 1946)

14.30-15.30: Panel Discussion

Discussants: Prof. Sanjoy Mukhupadhyay (Jadavpur University) & Prof. Anuradha Roy (Jadavpur University); Moderator: Dr Binayak Bhattacharya

16.30–17.30: Song and Dance Performance:

Mr. Shubhendu Maity

Ms. Aryama Bej

18.30-20.30: Theatre Performance and Discussion:

Jabanbandi (*Confession*, 1944) by Bijon Bhattacharya

Produced and staged by: *Anandapur Gujob* (Independent Theatre)

Introduction: Mr. Samik Bandopadhyay (art and theatre critic)

Post-Theatre Discussion and Q&A

20.30-21.00: Closing remarks and Vote of Thanks

21.00– Closure of the Event

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Public Lecture on

“Climax of the Clearances: The Great Highland Famine and Scottish History”

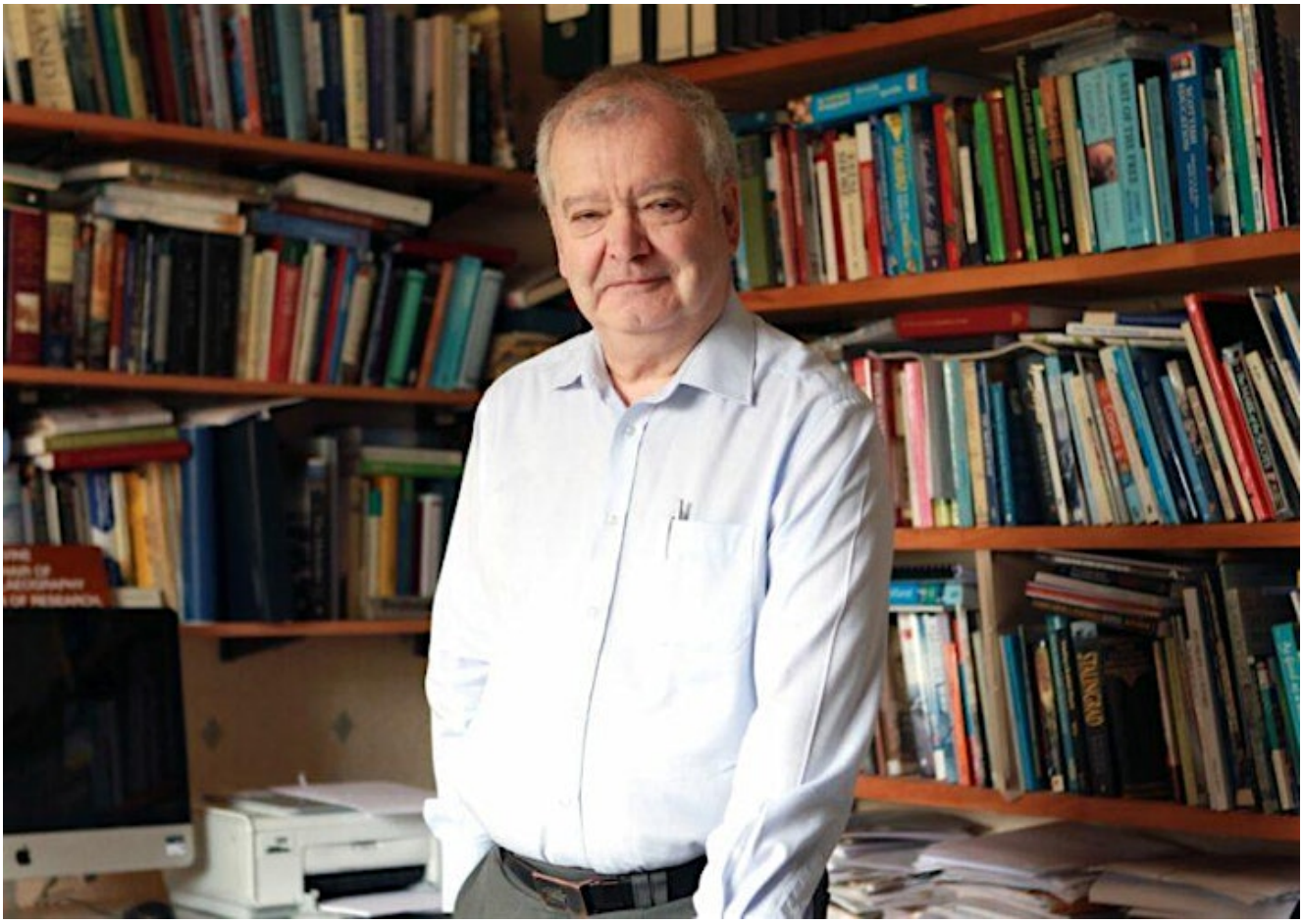
Speaker: Prof Sir Thomas Devine, University of Edinburgh

5pm-7pm, 23rd May 2023

Usha Kasera Lecture Theatre, Old College, University of Edinburgh

This public lecture sees Sir Tom Devine consider the impact of the potato blight in Scotland, and particularly in the Highlands. Devine will examine the unique history and agriculture of a landscape so dependent on the crop, and argue that it clearly contributed to the Scottish Clearances.

It is organised by the Royal Society of Edinburgh Research Network on The British Empire, Scotland, and Indian Famines.



About the lecture

This lecture considers the impact of the 1840s European potato blight on Scotland. It will focus especially on the Highlands, where over-dependency on the crop for subsistence exposed the people of the region to acute life-threatening crisis.

The first part of the lecture will seek to determine the impact of the potato failure on the people and therefore attempt to answer the question: ’Did the Highlands starve’? Throughout, comparisons and contrasts will be drawn with the Great Irish Famine (an Gorta Mór) which has attracted much more scholarly and popular attention than the famine in Scotland.

The second part will argue that the famine in the Highlands triggered an unprecedented scale and intensity of ‘clearance’, or forced removal of people from their traditional holdings, which rendered entire districts bereft of human habitation

through to the present day. One eye witness government official at the time feared the evictions were so extensive as to ‘threaten the very structures of society in these parts’.

About the speaker

Sir Thomas Martin Devine (Kt OBE DLitt FRHistS HonMRIA FRSE FBA Member Academy of Europe) is Sir William Fraser Professor Emeritus of Scottish History and Palaeography in the University of Edinburgh, the world’s oldest and most prestigious chair in the field.

Devine is the author and editor of some forty books plus numerous articles and chapters across a range of historical topics since the sixteenth century to the present including *The Great Highland Famine: Hunger, Emigration and the Scottish Highlands in the Nineteenth Century* and *The Scottish Clearances: A History of the Dispossessed 1600-1900*. He also has a high media profile in the press, radio and TV, both at home and abroad.

Devine’s many honours and prizes include the Royal Medal of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, Scotland’s supreme academic accolade and the Lifetime Achievement Award of the UK Parliament in History and Archives. He was knighted in 2015 by the late HM The Queen ‘for services to the study of Scottish history,’ the only scholar honoured for that reason to date.

About the research strand

This event is organised by the Royal Society of Edinburgh Research Network on the British Empire, Scotland, and Indian famines.

The Network is a collaboration between the University of Edinburgh and two institutions in India, IIIT

Guwahati in Guwahati and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad University of Technology in West Bengal.

The Principal Investigator of the Network is Dr Sourit Bhattacharya, Lecturer in Global Anglophone Literatures at the University of Edinburgh.

Over a number of projects on the British empire and cultural responses to famine, Dr Bhattacharya's aim is to historicise contemporary debates on neo-colonialism and global food crisis, and indigenous responses to them.

Access and recording

Please note that this is a free, in-person event held on the University of Edinburgh campus. It will not be live streamed – tickets are for access to the venue. However, the event may be photographed and/or recorded and added to the University website afterwards. If you would prefer not to appear in any recordings, please contact us in advance or speak to us on the day. It's not a problem.

The British Empire and Colonial Famines: History, Culture, Critique

Third & Final Conference (Workshop)

University of Edinburgh

May 24-25, 2023

Wednesday, May 24

9.00-9.15: Opening Remarks; Snacks, Tea/Coffee

9.15-10.45: Panel 1 (Witnessing and Testimony)

Prof Supriya Chaudhuri (Jadavpur University): "Witnessing Famine: Ethics, Representation, Art"

Dr Diya Gupta (City, University of London): "Hunger and the Homeland: Considering Wartime Photographs and Letters on the 1943 Bengal Famine"

10.45-11.00: Break

11.00-12.30: Panel 2 (From Profit to Rebuilding)

Dr Janam Mukherjee (Ryerson University): "Boom Time: Big Business and Famine in Bengal"

Dr Benjamin Siegel (Boston University): "Bengal, Revisited? India's 1951 Food Crisis and the Postcolonial Quest for Indian Self-Reliance"

12.30-13.30: Lunch

13.30-15.00: Panel 3 (The Politics of Famine Relief)

Dr Joanna Simonow (University of Heidelberg): "Transnational Famine Relief and Anti-Colonial Politics on the Eve of Independence"

Dr Abhijit Sarkar (University of Oxford): TBC

15.00-15.15: Break

15.15-16.45 Panel 4 (Women, Body, and Labour)

Urvi Khaitan (University of Oxford): "'My Body Costs Five Hundred Rupees': Women's Work in War and Famine"

Dr Sona Datta (Freelance Curator, Writer, and Broadcaster): "From the Academic to the Actual: How

Hunger is still used as an Instrument of Violence against the Body”

16.45-17.00: Break

17.00-18.30: Panel 5 (Cinema, Art, and Affect)

Dr Anuparna Mukherjee (Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Bhopal): “The Famished City: Displacement and the Trails of Hunger in Calcutta of the 1940s”

Dr Binayak Bhattacharya (Maulana Abul Kalam Azad University of Technology): “The 1943 Bengal Famine and Cinema of the Left, circa 1940s”

Day 1 ends.

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Thursday, MAY 25

9.00-9.15: Snacks, Tea, Coffee

9.15-10.45: Panel 6 (Famine Prevention)

Dr Aparajita Mukhopadhyay (University of Kent): “Famine and Railways in Late 19th century Bengal: A View from the Railway Records”

Prof Vinita Damodaran (University of Sussex): “Climate Signals Droughts, Floods and Famines in South Asia”

10.45-11.00: Break

11.00-12.30: Panel 7 (Looking Back, Looking Ahead)

Dr Rajarshi Mitra (Indian Institute of Information Technology, Guwahati): “Our Famines and their Famines:

The Political Economy of Imperial Famines and Early Nationalism in Bengal”

Prof Pablo Mukherjee (University of Oxford): “Crow Meat, Crow Blood, Brown Feet: Afterlives of the Colonial Famine”

12.30: 13.00: Concluding Remarks

13.00-14.00: Lunch

Conference Ends.

Abstracts of Papers and Bio-notes of speakers:

1/ Prof Supriya Chaudhuri: “Witnessing Famine: Ethics, Representation, Art”

The 1943 Bengal famine constitutes a critical moment in the social and political history of the subcontinent, and it was also productive of a crisis of representation, whose nature we are yet to fully understand, in literature and the visual arts. For those whose task it was to bear witness, such as the photographer Sunil Janah, the artists Chittaprosad and Zainul Abedin, or contemporary writers such as Tarashankar, Manik and Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay, Bijon Bhattacharya or Gopal Haldar, the distinction that Primo Levi makes between the witness and the survivor, *testis* and *superstes*, is acute: ‘we survivors are not the true witnesses: we are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority. Those who have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, are the complete witnesses; we speak in their stead, by proxy.’ In my presentation, I want to look closely at a body of work produced in the year of the famine, 1943-44, or shortly

afterwards, by writers and artists working from their own experience, asking how the moral crisis of representation, from the survivor's perspective, is negotiated. I will discuss works like Tarashankar's novel *Manvantar* (*Famine*, 1944) and Bijon Bhattacharya's play *Nabanna* (*New Harvest,* 1944) where representation appears to fail, or to be deflected by partisan hope.

Bio:

Supriya Chaudhuri is Professor Emerita in the Department of English, Jadavpur University, and was educated at Presidency College, Calcutta, and at the University of Oxford, where she received her graduate and doctoral degrees. She has written and published in the fields of Renaissance studies, critical theory, Indian cultural history, urban studies, travel writing, sport, film, and modernism. Recent publications include the edited books *Religion and the City in India* (Routledge, 2022) and *Commodities and Culture in the Colonial World* (co-edited, Routledge, 2018), as well as articles in *Études Épistémè*, *Thesis 11, Postcolonial Studies*, *Literature Compass, Open Library of Humanities,* and *Revue des Femmes Philosophes*; and chapters in *The Form of Ideology and the Ideology of Form* (OBP, 2022), *Machiavelli Then and Now: History, Politics, Literature* (CUP, 2022), *Recycling Virginia Woolf in Contemporary Art and Literature* (Routledge, 2022), *Asian Interventions in Global Shakespeare* (Routledge, 2021), *The Cambridge Companion to Rabindranath Tagore* (CUP, 2020) and *The Cambridge History of Travel Writing* (CUP, 2019). She is active in debates on the humanities, urbanism, gender, education, and intellectual liberty in India.

2/ Dr Diya Gupta: "Hunger and the Homeland: Considering wartime photographs and letters on the 1943 Bengal Famine"

The 1943 Bengal Famine brings into focus features of turbulent life in 1940s India, as experienced on the home-front, and imagined and empathised with from international battlefronts. I will consider here photographs by communist journalist Sunil Janah, which urgently invite us to bear witness and make the catastrophic visible, and then move on to letters exchanged between Indian soldiers, stationed in the Middle East and North African fronts, and their loved ones. Reading these photographs and letter extracts alongside each other allows for fresh layers of meaning to emerge. How did Indian soldiers, fighting for the British, discover that there was widespread hunger in their homeland, despite the censorship of their letters? How did they conceive of the food they consumed as army rations while knowing that others at home remained hungry? In what ways does letter-writing become testimony when used by Indian civilians who did not themselves starve, but witnessed the ravages of famine? Through this comparatist approach, I trace the ways by which wartime communities of knowledge and bonds of empathy were being formed by contemporary audiences of both Janah's photographs and Indian soldiers' letters.

Bio:

Educated at Jadavpur University, Kolkata, as well as the University of Cambridge and King's College London, Diya Gupta is a literary and cultural historian, and Lecturer in Public History at City, University of London. Formerly a 'Past and Present' Fellow at the Royal Historical Society and Institute of Historical Research, she takes multilingual approaches to life-writing, visual culture and literature, in relation to war. Her first book, *India in the Second World War: An Emotional History* (Hurst and Oxford University Press) was published in April 2023. See https://www.diyagupta.co.uk.

3/ Dr Janam Mukherjee: "Boom Time: Big Business and Famine in

Bengal”

The Bengal famine of 1943, as has been argued by Amartya Sen, for one, was essentially a boom-time famine. Throughout the 1940s, in and around Calcutta, record profits were being made in war-time industries. On the cusp of war, Indian capitalists, in particular, were ideally placed to capitalize on Empire at war. It is during this period that Indian capital also rung the bell on European industrial interests, buying out European firms at record pace and commandeering the helm of war-time production, as well as national influence, in the process. The question of how these profits, and this influence, can be directly connected to the economic and market dislocations that underpinned famine in Bengal has not been widely studied. In this presentation I will trace the direct connections between the rapacity of industrial Calcutta and the starvation of Bengal. Throughout this period of extreme hardship for many millions, various chambers of commerce, as well as their constituent members, were empowered by colonial and military authorities to make bulk purchases in the province, write those purchases off against Excess Profits Tax (EPT), and transport food grains into Calcutta by means of special arrangements made in relation to wart-time policies. Industrial Calcutta was granted almost limitless powers to purchase in open markets, with little accounting of the size of purchases or the places of storage. The long history of speculation in commodity markets by an important sector of the business community in Calcutta raises further questions about market withholding, particularly after the Japanese bombings of the city in December, 1942. Procurement schemes in early 1943 were all embarked upon with the explicit aim of shifting rice from the countryside, and into the warehouses of industrial Calcutta, and a census in the spring of 1943 to asses the “food position” of the province, conspicuously excluded Calcutta, where it was well understood significant stockpiles were being hoarded. Meanwhile, the economic situation in India at large was being further undermined by

the accrual of a massive IOU in the form of “sterling balances” being held in London against war expenditures in India. By 1944, the Federated Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) were claiming these sterling balances as their own in the Bombay Plan, even while Bengal continued to starve. By the end of the war the dominance of Indian capital lent it inordinate influence in shaping plans for a transfer of power in the short and volatile years to come. In short, I will be looking to analyze the extent to which the economic and political influence of India’s big business houses was built in direct relation to the mass disempowerment and starvation of Bengal during World War Two.

Bio:

Janam Mukherjee is an Associate Professor of History at Ryerson University in Toronto, Canada. He holds a PhD in Anthropology and History from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Dr. Mukherjee’s book *Hungry Bengal: War, Famine, Riots and the End of Empire* incorporates extensive archival and oral history research to draw structural links between war, famine, social upheaval and civil violence in mid-twentieth century Bengal. Mukherjee is also an anti-war activist, musician and creative writer.

4/ Dr Benjamin Siegel: “Bengal, Revisited? India’s 1951 Food Crisis and the Postcolonial Quest for Indian Self-Reliance”

In 1951, not even a decade past the ravages of the Bengal Famine, the specter of widespread shortages across India threw nationalist leadership’s claims to moral authority into stark doubt. Over a precarious year, imports paid for by scarce reserves of foreign aid averted greater crisis. Yet observers in the press were relentless on free India’s leadership, likening the crisis of 1951 and eroding many of the claims the

Congress party had made around the just provision of foodstuffs. This paper examines the interlinked relationship between the Bengal Famine and the shortages of 1951, a crisis that has been all but entirely absent from popular and scholarly accounts of the early years of India's independence. Drawing on popular accounts of the famine, this paper reveals the significance of 1951 in India's struggle for food and post-colonial self-determination, exploring how it illustrates the meaning of "self-reliance" and the fear of failure, how it widened the scope of engagement with India's food problem to a global scale, and how it set the stage for later debates of the 1950s and 1960s.

Bio:

Benjamin Siegel is a historian of modern economic life and politics, agriculture, and the environment, with a geographic focus on South Asia and its entanglements with the wider world. His first book, *Hungry Nation: Food, Famine, and the Making of Modern India* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), interrogated the ways in which questions of food and scarcity structured Indian citizens' understanding of welfare and citizenship since independence. Professor Siegel's current book project, *Hooked: A Transnational History of the United States Opioid Crisis*, is under contract with Oxford University Press. He is working on three interlinked future projects: a short history of tangible and intangible resources in modern India, a global history of South Asian development, and a project on traffic, roads, and automobiles in the region.

5/ Joanna Simonow: "Transnational Famine Relief and Anti-Colonial Politics on the Eve of Independence"

One might think that the response of aid providers and fundraisers to the famine in Bengal rightly takes a back seat in the history of the famine. The negligence and complicity of the British government, the American-led international aid community and Indian elites who did too little, too late to prevent the deaths of millions of Bengalis is well documented. As to the many local and more distant non-governmental relief providers and fundraising committees, lack of resources and political influence crippled their assistance; Bengal's needs far outstripped their capacity. Despite their marginal place within histories of the Bengal famine, it is these numerous small-scale efforts undertaken to counter the humanitarian tragedy unfolding in the Indian province that this paper investigates. I suggest that such a study embeds the Bengal famine more firmly into the history of South Asian decolonisation, as well as pushes the geographical boundaries that commonly frame studies of the famine.

News about the famine moved through personal and organisational contacts, first alerting the South Asian diaspora and Indian political organisations, before the famine was reported in the Indian national and international press. In the months that followed, the geographical reach became wider and the political background of those in favour of famine relief more diverse. Mobilising aid and raising public awareness of the famine served political groups outside India to express support for Indian nationalism (and for a very specific political and social group on this political spectrum). In India, the United States and Britain, the political context of the Second World War hindered public criticism of British imperialism. Famine relief became a means for political parties and interest groups to reach out to the Indian elite and demonstrate their political endorsement. Mitigating starvation in Bengal also served Indian organisations and individuals to advocate and protect the interests of particular social groups. Since famine relief operated through different political frames, it can be used as

a burning glass for the political arena of Bengal and wider India, and for the international contacts of Indian political groups on the eve of independence.

Bio

Joanna Simonow (she/her) is Assistant Professor in the Department of History of the South Asia Institute in Heidelberg. Her work on famine relief, nutrition and food politics has been published in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, *Zeithistorische Forschungen* and the *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*. Her book *Ending Famine in India: A Transnational History of Food Aid and Development, c. 1890–1950* is forthcoming with Leiden University Press in June 2023. Her current research explores the sexual and private histories of Indian anticolonialism and South Asian diaspora formation in Europe.

6/ Dr Abhijit Sarkar

TBA

7/ Urvi Khaitan: "'My Body Costs Five Hundred Rupees': Women's Work in War and Famine"

Despite the significant corpus of existing work on the Bengal Famine, its gendered effects remain understudied. This paper focuses on the women made destitute by the Famine and how they coped with this impoverishment, mounting survival strategies through their engagement with the labour market. The image of starving mother and child was ubiquitous in contemporary accounts and depictions of the Famine—in general, women have

been conceived of as passive victims, driven to prostitution out of crippling hunger. Such a unidimensional and reductive approach to women's experiences of the Famine is problematic for at least three reasons. One, it ignores a longer-term history of complex and multi-sectoral women's labour market activity in Bengal. Two, the idea that women were left helpless after their husbands or other male earners abandoned them denies independent economic agency to women, who also lost their livelihoods and resources. Three, while saying that women took to selling sex because of starvation is not incorrect, it is an oversimplification that does not sufficiently address the absence of *choice* in such a labour market. The *mechanisms* by which that choice was circumscribed or taken away altogether from women have not been analysed.

A mixed-methods approach bringing together qualitative archival material, quantitative data, photographs, and oral histories makes it possible to reconstruct a history of women's work as they navigated an economy marked by extreme constraint and asymmetries of power. Gendering Famine data shows that even while more men than women died, women were disproportionately *displaced* in comparison to men. When put in conversation with stories of individual displacement, distinct women's histories of the Famine emerge. Women adopted multi-pronged strategies of survival and wartime labour was one of a limited range of opportunities available to them. In their tens of thousands, they joined the military Labour Corps, building the roads and runways that would form the foundation of the Allied war effort in South Asia. Many of these women also worked in prostitution to supplement their earnings or as their chief source of income, or were trafficked into the sex trade. On the one hand, this generated panic among Indian social and political activists about what they saw as a moral collapse. On the other hand, venereal disease was a major source of anxiety for military commands.

The bodies of labouring women became sites for panics and

anxieties about interracial encounters that undercut hierarchies and pushed against social barriers. Responses to their labour were in general condemnatory, patronising, and moralising. Notwithstanding this elitist discourse, the women who peopled the Corps or worked in prostitution were economic agents who, operating in highly circumscribed contexts, were actively making decisions about survival, work, and the family. They were individual providers of labour power and were key actors in a global wartime economy with extensive transnational links. They were not simply passive recipients of charity, but actively looked for strategies to subsist and make do—whether it was through relief kitchens or other charitable organisations, manual labour, prostitution, or all of these combined—while they bore a disproportionate burden of an increasingly extractive and command-based economy.

Bio:

Urvi Khaitan is a final-year doctoral student in History at the University of Oxford. Her thesis on women and work in the Indian economy analyses the ways in which women pushed to the margins of colonial society engaged with paid work. Taking the 1940s—a period of war and famine—as lens, the thesis takes a case-study approach to investigate women's work across formal and informal economies. She has published an article on colonial India's 'women beneath the surface'—the tens of thousands of women who worked in coal mines while battling a cost-of-living crisis and starvation during the Bengal Famine and Second World War.

8/ Dr Sona Datta:"From the academic to the actual: How hunger is still used as an instrument of violence against the body"

What can remembering past hunger through the medium of contemporary cultural production tell us about the cultural politics and aesthetics of food in the present? The 1943

Bengal Famine was a direct consequence of colonial resource extraction, hoarding and unchecked inflation. Rice harvests that had sustained local populations for millennia were appropriated by the British for the war effort, making no provision for the Bengalis' survival needs. This manufactured famine has echoed down through the years in an image of a region unable to provide or care for itself implicating the memory of three national narratives.

Our aim is to use art to create a site of interrogation with this crisis of the past and find in the act of remembrance fresh resonances with food crises in our own times. In collaboration with NPO Poet in the City we are facilitating artists to collaboratively interrogate their creative

endeavour around the central idea, leading to public art commissions in the UK, India and

Bangladesh through 2023-5.

This project provides evidence for academic and public reappraisal in the context of decolonisation, responding effectively to modern British audiences today and to the UK's standing in dynamic research and groundbreaking creative economies.

Bio:

Sona Datta is a freelance curator, writer and broadcaster. She was previously Head of South Asian art at the Peabody Essex Museum in Massachusetts where she extended the world-renowned 20th C Indian art collections to include the best contemporary art referencing all of South Asia.

Prior to the PEM, Sona worked at the British Museum for 8 years where her exhibitions included the flagship *Voices of Bengal* season (2006), which attracted more people of South Asian extraction than any project in the British Museum's history. Sona also radically redefined the British Museum's engagement with modern collecting through the acquisition of contemporary art from Pakistan that linked to the Museum's rich holdings of historic Indian painting. In 2015 she wrote and presented the BBC4 series *Treasures of the Indus* now broadcast to a global audience of >90m. In 2019, she curated *She Persists* at the 58th Venice Biennale, showcasing the work of three generations of trailblazing female artists from as many continents including, Judy Chicago, Lynda Benglis, The Guerilla Girls, Mithu Sen, Rose McGowan and others.

Her new book is a radical revision of Indian art, which will reset the lens on the so-called 'East'. She lives in London with her husband, two boys (and no dog). As a writer she is represented by David Godwin Associates.

9/ Dr Anuparna Mukherjee: "The Famished City: Displacement and the Trails of Hunger in Calcutta of the 1940s"

My paper explores the affective contours of Calcutta's modernity—the former capital of the British Empire in India in the decade of 1940s through a trail of catastrophes— World War II, the famine and the Partition. To locate the fraught transition of the city and its neighbourhoods in the last years of British rule, the paper specifically evokes the sensory landscape through food, disease and the intrusion of jarring sounds that pervaded the urban life against the specific context of the ravages of war and the famine. The paper further delves into the accelerated and chaotic human movements, destitution and hunger through "sensory

displacements” and their impact on the urban subjects, altering the perceptions of the quotidian. The paper brings together a constellation of works from the paintings and illustrations of Somnath Hore, Chittaprosad and Zainul Abedin to the plays and poems of the Inter-War writers, who brought forth new and radical ways of apprehending the sensorial reality of the urban and the modern, informed by the history of colonial subjugation. Against the locally configured history of the Bengal famine and mass starvation, these works are particularly preoccupied with the emaciated and *hungry bod*y—as the conduit of “mediation” between art, community and social relations. They depict the body at its breaking points through disease, malnourishment and continuous assault on the senses. By engaging with their aesthetics this paper, thus, reads “hunger” as a recurrent trope that redefined the understanding of the modern urban space.

Bio:

Anuparna Mukherjee is an Assistant Professor of Literature, at the Department of HSS, IISER Bhopal. She holds a PhD in Literature from the Australian National University (ANU), Canberra. Her research interests include memory studies, cities and neighbourhoods, and colonial modernity. Her recent publications include “viral nostalgia” in EPW and “Knots of Time Reading Nostalgia in Bengali Literature from 13th to the 19 Century” in the anthology, Retelling Time: Alternative Temporalities from Premodern South Asia by Routledge. Her essay on “waste and spectrality” is included in the anthology on Nabarun Bhattacharya by Bloomsbury. Her latest writing, “Imperial

Malady: Empire and Affect in Colonial Narratives” in

Ecological Entanglements: Affect, Embodiment and Ethics of Care, has been published by Orient Blackswan.

10/ Dr Binayak Bhattacharya: The 1943 Bengal Famine and Cinema of the Left, circa 1940s

The paper attempts to network the cinematic modes of addresses through which the left-wing cultural movement in India attempted to produce a creative response to Bengal Famine of 1943. Although the cinemas of India started responding to the issues of food crisis and hunger since the early 1940s (*Roti*, 1942), the Bengal famine of 1943 appeared a completely different experience for the artists of that time. Films made during the famine, notwithstanding the censorship, were relatively silent, with only passing references about the crisis (*Udayer Pathe*, 1944). Indian People's Theatre Association's (IPTA) *Dharti Ke Lal* (Children of the Earth, 1946), on the contrary, was the first and most prominent cinematic works during that era which expansively portrayed the Bengal famine and its impact on a broader social canvas. A loose adaptation of the landmark Bengali play *Nabanna* (The Harvest, 1943), also staged by the IPTA artists, the film narrates the plight of a village family during famine. Visual representation of famine that *Dharti Ke Lal* established, however, has a larger history. It accommodated a whole range of creative responses from literature, visual arts, theatre, music, journalism and photography within its formal structure to develop a new representative feature of famine and hunger. Such responses emerged mostly from the creative attempts led by the leftwing intellectuals. Most of the artists and activists from the leftist collective opted for a formal improvisation, as the available modes were hardly adequate to realise and express the depth and gravity of the famine. In addition to that, a sense of documentary realism, relatively

unfamiliar to the available cinematic modes of that era, also found its space in *Dharti Ke Lal*. The paper traces such processes in leftwing cultural movement that did not only create new instances in *Dharti Ke Lal*, but gave birth to a political iconography of famine and hunger in Indian cinema for the years to come.

Bio: TBA

11/ Prof Vinita Damodaran: "Climate Signals Droughts, Floods and Famines in South Asia"

TBA

12/ Dr Rajarshi Mitra: "Our Famines and their Famines: The Political Economy of Imperial Famines and Early Nationalism in Bengal"

We have schooled ourselves to draw a line of demarcation between Indian famines and European ones. The former are gigantic calamities while the latter are Lilliputian distresses.

- *The Bengal Magazine* (1881), Vol 9, pp 333 – 334.

In the two decades between 1860 and 1880 British India was hit by nearly five severe famines. Early Indian nationalists used comparative approaches to analyze the causes behind these famines and had put together a coherent critique of the British Empire's malicious economic policies. The literary culture in Bengal had responded in metaphors, allegories and narratives as economic nationalists were forming their theories about the drain of wealth from imperial peripheries to fatten its centre. This paper looks at two writers – W W

Hunter (1840 – 1900) and Lal Behari Dey (1824 – 1892) – who responded to British Empire's famine policies in their writings. Several years before the first Famine Commission (1880) published 'scales' to measure famine, W W Hunter, a Scottish historian and a civil servant in India, wrote treatises on famine policy and was keen on establishing a famine system. Hunter's famine system was more anthropological in nature. He was bent on establishing a cultural archive to fathom the causes behind famines in the Indian province of Bengal. Reverend Lal Behari Dey, a celebrated Bengali convert to Christianity, was a minister of the Free Church of Scotland in India. As an editor of *The Bengal Magazine*, Reverend Dey commissioned articles on famines in India. In his *Bengal Peasant Life* (1874) and *Folk Tales of Bengal* (1875), he created allegories on monstrous hunger and equally monstrous governance. In this paper, I look at how Hunter's famine system becomes the colonial narrative that Reverend Dey desires and dreads. He builds a phantasmagoria of famine tragedies that flesh out Hunter's reports of cannibalism and other untold horrors during the famines.

Bio:

Dr Rajarshi Mitra is Assistant Professor in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Information Technology, Guwahati. Before joining IIIT Guwahati, he was Assistant Professor in Department of English, Central University of Karnataka. He has an M Phil (2010) from the Department of English, University of Hyderabad and a PhD (2014) from the Department of English Literature, The English & Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad. For his PhD, he had worked on natural history narratives from India between 1857 and 1950, and his M Phil was on colonial tiger hunting narratives. His research interests include history of cinema and various cultural experiences of the British Empire. He has published papers on the Bengali experience of the First World

War, famine rhetoric in British India, cinema propaganda in colonial India and the big game hunting culture of the Raj era. In IIITG, he teaches Anglo-American Science Fiction, Introduction to Film Studies and Indian Writing in English.

13/ Prof Pablo Mukherjee: "Crow Meat, Crow Blood, Brown Feet: Afterlives of the Colonial Famine"

TBA

The British Empire and Colonial Famines: History, Culture, Critique

Second Conference

Indian Institute of Information Technology Guwahati

January 7- 8, 2023

Saturday, Jan 7

9.00am – 9.15am: Registration

9.15am – 9.30am: Welcome (Dr Rajarshi Mitra, Dr Sourit Bhattacharya, and Dr Binayak Bhattacharya**)**

9.30am – 11.00am: Panel 1: Famine in India – Debates and Discourses (Chair: Prof Sachidananda Mohanty)

Venue: *Board Room*

- Prof Arup Maharatna (Central University of Allahabad): “Famine Mortality, Epidemics, and Relief Policy – Major Colonial Famines in British India”
- Prof Sanjay Kumar Sharma (Ambedkar University): “‘Profit vs Profiteering: Negotiating Laissez Faire during Famines in Colonial India”
- Dr Srimanjari (Miranda House, University of Delhi): “Famines and Society”

11.00am- 11.15am: Break

11.15am – 12.45pm: Panel 2: Famine Regions – Odisha and Bengal (Chair: Dr Peter Schmitthenner)

Venue: *Board Room*

- Prof Bidyut Mohanty (Institute of Social Sciences, Delhi): “Deep Social Impact of Famines: Emergence of a Chhatrakhia Community and the Orissa Famine of 1866.”
- Prof Sachidananda Mohanty (Former Vice-Chancellor, Central University of Odisha): “The Odisha Famine of 1866 and the Birth of a New Province”
- Dr Tirthankar Ghosh (Kazi Nazrul University): “Disaster, Ecology and State: A Cyclonic Approach to Famines of Colonial Bengal”

12.45pm – 2.15pm: Lunch

2.15pm – 3.45pm: Parallel Sessions: Panels 3 & 4: Bengal Famine

Panel 3 Bengal Famine: Memories of Hunger (Chair: Dr Dhurjjati Sarma) Venue: *Board Room*

- Deepawali Mitra (Jadavpur University): “Remembering the 1943 Bengal Famine through Children’s Literature”
- Shireen Sardar (Jadavpur University): “Remembering *Chiyattorer Monontor* (Bengal Famine of 1769-70) – Politics of Colonial Crisis”
- Srijita Biswas (IISER Bhopal): “Writing Memory of Hunger: In Search of ‘Astonishing Smell of Rice”

Panel 4 Bengal Famine: History and Politics (Chair: Dr Trina Nileena Banerjee)

Venue**:** *Conference Room*

- Subhasis Pan (Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University): “Look Back to Hunger: The British Empire and the Bengal Famines in the Nineteenth Century India”
- Reeti Basu (Jawaharlal Nehru University): “War, Famine and Foreign Soldiers”
- Dr Ranu Roychoudhury (Ahmedabad University): “Bearing Witness to Mid-Twentieth Century Hunger in India” ***online***

3.45pm – 4.00pm: Break

- **4pm – 5.30pm: Parallel Sessions: Panels 5 & 6 (Chair: Dr Srimanjari)**

Panel 5: The Famished Body: Visual Culture and Famine

Venue**:** *Board Room*

- Seng Ong (University of Cambridge): “The Famine Pastoral: Colonial Famine and Western Visual Culture” ***online***
- Sumantra Baral (Jadavpur University): “The Artist as

Reporter: 1943 Bengal Famine and Inception of Visual Reportage in Colonial Bengal”

- Attrita Goswami (University of Burdwan): “The Famine in the Frame: Studying Visual Representations of the Famished Body in India and Ireland”

Panel 6: Various Famines (Chair: Dr Sourit Bhattacharya)

Venue**:** *Conference Room*

- Dr Dhurjjati Sarma (Gauhati University): “The Mizo Famine of 1959–60 and the Assamese Response”
- Nilanjana Chatterjee (Durgapur Government College): “Indigenous Naga Famine”
- Upal Chakrabarti (Presidency University): “Sites of Death as Fields of Labor and Improvement: Famine Relief in British India” ***online***

5.30pm: Close of Day 1

7.00pm: Conference Dinner

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Sunday, Jan 8

9.00am – 10.30am: Panel 7: Famines – Moral Responses (Chair: Prof Sanjay K Sharma)

Venue**:** *Board Room*

- Dr Tanuja Kothiyal (Ambedkar University): “The Moral

Economy of Distress: Famine and Negotiations in the Thar Desert in the 18th and 19th Centuries”

- Dr Trina Nileena Banerjee (CSSSCAL): “Scenes from the Famine: Chittoprasad, the IPTA and the Art of Visual Reportage”
- Dr Peter Schmitthenner (Virginia Tech): “Water on the Brain”: Arthur T. Cotton and Debates about Famine in Late 19th Century India”

10.30am – 10.45am: Break

10.45am – 12.15pm: Panels 8 & 9

Panel 8: Famine, Migration and Imperial Response (Chair: Dr Tanuja Kothiyal)

Venue**:** *Board Room*

- Sagarika Naik (Princeton University): “Famine, Empire and Migration in South Asia.”
- Ayan Das (Vidyasagar University): “‘Famine, Migration, and Demographic Change: Analysis of Relation between Famine of the Chota Nagpur and Demographic Change in the Brahmaputra Valley under the Colonial Regime.”
- Dr D Sathya (K L University): “Imperial Railways and Alleviation of Famine Distress in Colonial South India (Special Reference to The Great Famine of 1876-78)” ***online***

Panel 9: Famine: Representation and Beyond (Chair: Dr Binayak Bhattacharya)

Venue: *Conference Room*

- Dr Avishek Ray (National Institute of Technology Silchar): “Testimonial Evidentialism and (Anti-)Colonial Aesthetics Documenting the 1943 Bengal Famine”
- Dr Jati Shankar Mondal (Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University): “Colonial Brutality, Artistic Sensibility and Cultural Codes: Reinterrogating (the Fall of) Empire through Famine Sketches of Bengal Famine (1943) and related writings”
- Dr Umasankar Patra (National Institute of Technology, Tiruchirappalli): “Hunger, Precarity, and Belonging: Reading Ananta Das’ Representation of Famine in Odisha”

12.45pm – 2.15pm: Lunch

2.15pm – 3.45pm: Panels 10 & 11

Panel 10: Famine Region: South India (Chair: Dr Rajarshi Mitra)

Venue: *Board Room*

- Rahul Vijayan & Prof Nagendra Kumar (IIT Roorkee): “Revisiting the Madras Famine: The Politics of Caste, Hunger and Protests”
- Dr C Chandra Sekhar (SRR & CVR Government Degree College, Vijayawada): “Burning Hunger: The Great Famine, Caste Differences and Missionary Christianity in Colonial India” ***online***
- Swathilekha Thampy (Kannur University): “Analysis of Famine of Travancore Princely State; 1860 to 1878”

Panel 11: Bengal Famine: Revisited (Chair: Dr Avishek Ray)

Venue: *Conference Room*

- Sourapravo Chatterjee (University of Calcutta): "Framing Famine: A Socio-Semiotic Analysis of Mrinal Sen's *Akaler Sandhane*"
- Dr Dipanjan Ghosh (Nabadwip Vidyasagar College): "The Politics of the Great Bengal Famine through the Lens of the Famine Trilogy of Gopal Halder"
- Aryama Bej (Jadavpur University): "Spectacle of 'Hunger': Socio-Realist Dance in 1943 Bengal Famine"

03.45pm – 4.30 pm: Conference Feedback – Roundtable

Venue: Board Room

4.30 pm – Vote of Thanks

4.45 pm – End of Conference

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Conference Abstracts:

RSE Research Network

"The British Empire, Scotland, and Indian Famines"

Second Conference

The British Empire and Colonial Famines: History, Culture, Critique

Indian Institute of Information Technology, Guwahati

January 7- 8, 2023

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DAY ONE: SATURDAY, JANUARY 7, 2023

9.30 am – 11.00 am

Panel 1: *Famine in India – Debates and Discourses*

Chair: Prof. Sachidananda Mohanty

Venue: Board Room

Prof. Arup Maharatna (Central University of Allahabad)

"Famine Mortality, Epidemics, and Relief Policy – Major Colonial Famines in British India"

As famines generally turn calamitous at least in its immediate/short run consequences, it often gives rise to debates and controversy over its exact causation and accountability. Those in power or at the helm of ruling and administering a polity have perennially evinced a tendency to portray and posit famines as a natural disaster rather than anything else. This tendency is perhaps nowhere more glaring than in the official reports and documents produced by the British colonial administration in India's historical context of many major famines that occurred in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The colonial affinity of positing famines and its catastrophic consequences squarely as an unintended outcome of nature's unpredictable/unavoidable fury has not only not died down in the post-colonial period, but its supportive argumentations and rationalizations of late have acquired much academic and intellectual sophistications in echoing the old colonial 'alibis' for large-scale acute hunger, starvation and millions of excess human deaths caused directly by various epidemics that used to ensue following mostly those drought-induced historical famines across India.

For example, there is an ongoing debate as to whether the famine-induced epidemics – the proximate recorded causes of the bulk of excess deaths – can be attributed directly to famine-caused food shortage, starvation, and acute nutritional deprivation as such or to social, climatic, and other inevitable disruptions including population movements and excessive crowding in relief camps, which produce influences

on mortality apparently/admittedly independent of those caused by famine and food shortage per se. My proposed paper would seek to throw new/additional light on my earlier contribution to this debate. More specifically, I propose to reinforce my earlier position, namely, that excess mortality due proximately to the outbreak of various epidemics cannot be seen to be dissociated or distinct from excess mortality caused directly by famines commonly defined in terms of distress, mass hunger, starvation, and nutritional debilitation.

Prof. Sanjay Kumar Sharma (Ambedkar University, Delhi)

"Profit vs Profiteering: Negotiating Laissez Faire during Famines in Colonial India"

The expansion of British rule in early nineteenth century India was marked by a number of famines that brought about decisive shifts in relief policies that were shaped in the context of new notions of political economy and state responsibility. This paper analyses evidence drawn from some instances of famines in north India on the specific issues of profit and profiteering during dearth marked by price rise and hoarding. The attempts by British officials to promote the tenets of free trade and non-interference in the market considered good for the economy posed dilemmas during subsistence crises when food prices rose beyond popular expectations. Such situations were often aggravated due to hoarding by grain dealers who withheld supplies to the market expecting windfall gains. In this they were aided by the reluctance of colonial officials to interfere in the market to regulate prices as official British policies were driven by prevailing notions of political economy that favoured *laissez faire*. However, they were met with indigenous responses that regarded profit-seeking in times of famines as illegitimate profiteering. There were numerous instances of plunder of grain and violence against landlords and traders dealing in grain during famines in British India. Studies of their

pattern indicate that violence was often selective as generally the targets of ire were those who were perceived as taking undue advantage of shortages and price rise. There were popular expectations from colonial administrators to intervene in the market to ensure supplies and sale of food at 'just' prices. This produced ambivalences in the colonial bureaucracy committed to the doctrine of laissez faire as local officials grappled with a starving populace reeling under high prices often due to hoarding and 'illegitimate' profiteering. This paper analyses some select narratives produced in colonial north India dealing with such issues during situations of dearth. It analyses official debates on the desirability of administrative intervention to regulate high prices, the opinions of the English press and texts produced by members of emerging indigenous middle class in north India. Based on these, the paper will attempt to explore the complex ways in which the officially sanctioned theoretical doctrine of laissez faire operated in practice and was negotiated by the functionaries of the colonial regime and its subjects during subsistence crises.

Dr. Srimanjari (Miranda House, University of Delhi)

"Famines and Society"

Both war and famine evoke images of stark finality. When we think of these two 'events', we relate them with rampant death and devastation. The two events may occur independent of each other at different periods of time but when they occur one after the other as cause and effect, the impact is doubly devastating. In the colonial situation in India, when the state equipped itself with absolute powers during World War II, the impact of the two crisis situations unfolded in extremely complex ways in Bengal.

While the situation of constant hunger was not unknown in several parts of Bengal, the extent of it and the millions of lives that it affected in multiple ways during the famine of

1939-1945 was unprecedented. During this crucial period, while the Bengal countryside was slow to change, the towns and cities, particularly the city of Calcutta witnessed far-reaching transformations.

The city had beckoned many kinds of opportunity seekers. This paper intends to show how the famine and day-to-day life during the famine affected different sections of society. The famine prompted writers, photographers, painters and researchers to travel and collect data and information which in normal course of time may not have caught their attention. When we tap these and other kinds of literature, which some refer to as 'peddler literature', we are able to visualise how persistent hunger moulds senses and sensibilities.

11.15 am – 12.45 pm

Panel 2: *Famine Regions – Odisha and Bengal*

Chair: Dr. Peter Schmitthenner

Venue: Board Room

Prof Bidyut Mohanty (Institute of Social Sciences, Delhi)

"Deep Social Impact of Famines: Emergence of a Chhatrakhia Community and the Orissa Famine of 1866."

All the great famines have produced serious consequences in the social, economic and political spheres. Unavailability of food, with loss of purchasing power impacts society as a whole. In fact, role of food in the history of humanity determines the nature of the cultural processes in the development of the ethnic and regional identity as well as

political formations. It is true that societal response tries to minimize these effects by assimilating some of the impacts over time but the scars are so deep that it takes generations to erase it, and that too rarely completely.

Thus, in studying famines, economic statistics on failure of crops, extent of rainfall, number and categories of dead and sick, migrants and malnourished and so much else is no doubt important for capturing the magnitude of the famine. But it is equally significant to grasp the social and cultural experience of the people and the processes which were unleashed by natural calamity and policy measures before, during and after the famine. These may only be partly gathered from the government documents. One has to go into many other kinds of sources, non-official documentation, literary writings, study of related institutions, social practices, folk tales and sources of memory, among others. Only then can one capture the comprehensive picture of the historical catastrophe.

We have examples such as the famous painting by Van Gogh, *Potato Eaters* which is a permanent reminder of the Irish Famine of 1845-49 and its manifold consequences encrypted in people's psyche even today. Studies of impact of the 1874 and other famines on castes in Bihar, especially on the Kurmi community show the far-reaching effects of the famine period on the life of people. The widespread effects of the Bengal Famine of 1943 on the social process, political behavior, literature, arts and films, besides state policy, are well-documented. Similarly, I wish to take up the case of the emergence of the *Chhatrakhia* Community an important impact of the great Orissa famine of 1866 and its presence to this day in Orissa. This was one of the many currents triggered by the famine which had long term impact on every aspect of life and society in Orissa . In my recent book, *A Haunting Tragedy: Gender, Caste and Class in the 1866 Famine of Orissa* I have not only gone into the economic aspects using available

statistical data, but also examined the social consequences in some detail. One aspect, namely the emergence of the Chhatrakhia community dealt there, I would like to further examine and make an argument about the operation of caste-class dynamics in relation to economic, social and political power. This has some relevance to the contemporary times.

Due to deficit rainfall in 1865 and excessive rains in 1866 and the faulty grain export policy of the British government among other factors, like poverty the highly stratified society of Orissa suffered from severe food shortage and famine in 1866 leading to the death of an estimated one million people, nearly one third of the population of the Orissa division. During the famine various agencies of government, private companies, missionaries, temples and charitable organisations set up relief centres to feed the starving poor. Absolute shortage compelled people of poorer community as well as relatively poorer farmers, especially people from the lower, servicing castes among them vast number of Dalits, came to the relief centers in large scale. Very often the supply of food in the relief centres was far less than the demand. The managers of the relief centers tried to control the situation by adopting different kinds of measures and sometimes drove away many needy relief seekers particularly women and small children. Many were left to die in harness. The official reports as well as local press were full of those descriptions reporting on the torturing of the crowd, quality of the food, living conditions and so on.

When conditions became slightly normal and people started returning to their villages, they were branded as people who had eaten in *Chhara* or public relief centres. Since they ate along with people from various castes and ate food cooked by people not belonging to their own castes, they were accused of violating their caste norms. Since most of the big relief centres were run by government or the Christian missionaries or a British Company like the East India Irrigation Company

they had lost the supposed ‘purity’ of their caste. The branding was mostly done on the initiative of the upper caste landlords and priests and the big *zamindars*. As the number of such people swelled the group was identified as *Chhatrakhia* (those who ate in relief centres).

Three distinct features should be noticed in case of such people. First, they originally came from a number of different castes, though the bulk of them were from the chasha (farming caste) and service castes or Dalits. Undoubtedly there were also some from poor sections of the middle and upper castes. Second, many of them not only ate at the centres, but also got exposed to missionary preaching. In the process some adopted Christianity, their children and orphans stayed on and joined schools. Some settlements came up consisting of Christian households. Third, they married among themselves – though maintaining caste hierarchy among themselves. Over time many clusters of *chhatrakhia* habitats sprang up in different areas. Many of them joined construction work as daily wagers and other petty jobs such as selling vegetables in urban areas and canal side strips. In such circumstances some young women also engaged in sex work. Thus, during the famine period, the interplay of caste, religion, occupation and actual livelihood challenges produced new socio-economic formations in the emerging political economy shaped directly or indirectly by the state and the powerful social forces during the colonial era. The new caste-class experience that subverted the prevailing norms was unacceptable to the established elite and the colonial state acquiesced with it.

That the *Chhatrakhias* were a deprived section of society was recognized by the social reformers who appealed to the government, Brahmin Pundits in big temples and also to the zaminadars to take back these people to their village community and readmit them to their original castes. Except for stray cases, this effort fell flat.

While reading those reports on the relief work one always

remembers the experience of Irish Famine where dreaded Typhus epidemic decimated the relief seekers in large scale. In Orissa cholera and fever took a very heavy toll. The vivid descriptions of the sufferings stirred the consciousness of the intellectuals then and even now. The writers, politicians and playwrights produced much creative and soul-stirring literature. Oriya nationalism grew out of this process demanding recognition of Odia identity and formation of a separate province of Orissa. Radical consciousness was manifest in several writings which showed how famine victims such as **Sanatan** became rebels calling for overthrow of the colonial regime and got transported to *Kalapaani*.

An interesting set of cultural developments was in the realm of religion. Some of the members of relief seekers became Christians. Some of the members of the Chhatrakhia community became the followers Mahima Dharam, a rising movement against idol worship and Brhminism while many others joined the Brahmo Samaj. All new converts had an eclectic orientation respecting the prevailing Hindu practices continuing the syncretic tradition of Vaishnavism and Sufism in Orissa.

In Orissa's language and culture the famine's imprint remained in the use of many terms such as Na'ankia referring to the hungry and starving, *chhatrakhia* as an abuse for violator of social norms and many others. The cuisine of the Oriya people changed drastically with many new recipes from the scarcity period entering the kitchen. That they were still struggling to overcome the scar of the famine from the Odia psyche was evident whenever the famine conditions of Kalahandi or Nagada come to the public discourse.

I may add that not all this could be discerned only from the government records. Besides the study of the press and a large body of literature, one had to interview *chhatrakhias* in their habitats and follow their activities over a period of time to be able to construct this story.

In 2016, during the 150th year of the Orissa Famine of 1866 many issues were debated reflecting diverse vantage points demonstrating the continuing interplay of the caste-class, religion and politics. Now as Orissa prepares to celebrate the centenary of the formation of the linguistic province in 2036 these issues are likely to acquire even more salience as the elite wish to forget the scar of the Great Famine and build a prosperous state. *Chhtrakhias* of today should be a stark reminder to this history where many old problems of poverty, malnutrition, distress migration caste, class and gender inequities still persist in today's Orissa. The challenge of that history has to be met.

Prof. Sachidananda Mohanty (Former Vice-Chancellor, Central University of Odisha)

"The Odisha Famine of 1866 and the Birth of a New Province"

During the famine, a correspondent had said that henceforth there would be no problem to fill in the pages of the newspapers. For, there would be a surfeit of news regarding flood and famine.

Utkal Dipika , 4 Sept. 1869

The epigraph above sums up the nightmare of all editors: how to fill up the pages of a periodical week after week? Such anxieties, unknown hitherto to a primarily agrarian social order in colonial India, would become increasingly dominant in a knowledge society, governed by the desire for information literacy. And yet, as events were to prove soon, the claims of the anonymous correspondent of *Utkal Dipika* would be superseded by the demands of the colonial subjects for a distinct cultural identity for a separate province called Orissa in 1936.

Begun primarily as a popular medium for discussion and

dissemination of news related to the devastating Odisha Famine of 1866, *Utkal Dipika* soon outgrew its primary objective and became a carrier and compendium of news and views from far and near that few newspaper-periodicals of the region could surpass then and now. Further, from the beginning till the death of its founder, the journal championed the linguistic, cultural and economic interests of the Odias. It spearheaded a powerful regional cultural movement.

Based on archival research, this talk would explore the interface between Famine Studies and identity formations in Colonial India. It will chronicle the fascinating manner in which the Victorian Periodical Press arose in Eastern India against the larger backdrop of the Great Odisha Famine of 1866.

Dr. Tirthankar Ghosh (Kazi Nazrul University)

"Disaster, Ecology and State: A Cyclonic Approach to Famines of Colonial Bengal"

The present study intends to examine Bengal famines in the backdrop of cyclones which occurred in colonial Bengal since the second half of the nineteenth century. I would argue that famine can be also studied in relation with other natural disasters, such as cyclones. Although famine studies have emerged as a distinctive discipline within the broader spectrum of environmental history, famines in colonial India or Bengal still deserve adequate historical investigation from the perspective of history of natural disasters. Hence, the present study intends to offer a cyclonic analysis of famines of colonial Bengal. The famines of 1866 (Bengal-Orissa Famine), 1873-74 (Bihar-Bengal Famine), 1896-97 and the 1942 (the Great Bengal Famine) can be re-examined with their extended connection with the cyclones which had taken place in Bengal in 1867, 1874, 1897 and 1942 respectively. The famine-period which was marked by deficiency of rainfall and widespread crop failure had witnessed sudden increase in

rainfall and floods as a result of cyclonic visitation that further caused severe destruction of human lives, cattle and commodities. Hence, the two extreme weather events had not only aggravated vulnerability of the poor, they further intensified the crisis which was already caused by hunger, homelessness and death. The cyclones, by killing people and destroying houses and property, had not only contributed to the extension of the period of distress, but had also called for renewal of relief operations, for which the colonial government was reluctant. The government, which had already spent money and deployed its administration for famine-relief, was reluctant to continue relief operations exclusively for the cyclones, especially at a time when famine-relief was about to be ended (especially for 1867, 1874, and 1897 cyclones). Therefore, relief for the cyclones, which occurred in 1867, 1874 and 1897, were merged with the famines, and the Cyclone Relief Funds were constituted under the supervision of the Famine Relief Funds. The question is that whether famine-relief had contradicted with cyclone relief or vice-versa? On the other hand, the cyclone of 1942 had provided a major blow to the official understanding that cyclonic impact was temporary. The causes of the Great Bengal famine of 1943 can be thus traced from the disastrous impact of the 1942 Midnapur cyclone. Hence, the present paper intends to critically evaluate the inter-relatedness of famines and cyclones in nineteenth and twentieth century Bengal.

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2.15 PM – 3.45 PM: PARALLEL SESSIONS

Panel 3: *Bengal Famine: Memories of Hunger*

Chair: Dr Dhurjjati Sarma

Venue: Board Room

Deepawali Mitra (Jadavpur University)

“Remembering the 1943 Bengal Famine through Children’s Literature”

This article will attempt to understand how the 1943 Bengal Famine is memorialised in the short stories and editorials that were written during that time for the young readers. The famine of 1943, also known as ‘panchaser manvantar’ in reference to its Bengali year 1350, was the last major historical event of horrific deaths in undivided Bengal resulting from hunger and starvation. Drawing upon writings that were published in periodicals for children – *Shishu Sathi* and *Mouchak*– the article will focus on how these contributed to the shaping of the minds of young readers, who are thought to be powerless and helpless in this social and political world. By close reading of the short stories like *Bhag-er Aalo*, *Lakshmi Narayan’s Puja*, *Ei Prithibir*, *Lesson Learnt By Adults From Kids*, the article will show how these texts educated the young readers about the British imperialist policies,the suffering of the people and the divisions in the society, as well as inspired them to be transformative agents of change. Children’s literature is one of the ways that helps children and young readers to learn about emotions and develop an ethical and empathic understanding of society and its people. It was such a time that there was nothing much to expect from the adults, so the writers addressed the younger generation who are the inheritors of the future. This encouraged them to create literary memories and ensure that the children have a memory of the dark chapter in history, even though they may not have experienced it firsthand. The lessons in history will hopefully make them more socially responsible as adults and will ensure “never again” that there will be a repetition of such a disaster.

Shireen Sardar (Jadavpur University)

“Remembering Chiyattorer Monontor (Bengal Famine of 1769-70) – Politics of Colonial Crisis”

Bengal in the 1750s had a thriving agricultural economy that included widespread participation in rice cultivation and adequate rainfall. On one hand, Bengal’s sole focus on rice cultivation meant that when crops failed, it had no other crop to fall back on, On the other hand, reliance on rain meant that any shortfall would have a direct impact on the year’s harvest. Thus, the months of 1769-70 saw a disastrous crop failure, resulting in famine in Bengal, Orissa, and Bihar, which killed nearly one-third of the region’s population. However, severe weather constraints and a lack of rainfall cannot be held responsible exclusively for the Famine, which resulted in the deaths of up to 400,000 people. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the deeper causes of the Bengal famine of 1769-70. In doing so, this paper will attempt to demonstrate whether the Bengal Famine of 1769-70 was a man-made famine prompted by a colonial construct or a natural disaster induced by Bengal’s own economic scarcity, poor health conditions, or an absence of adequate transportation for food supply. Finally, the purpose of this paper is to remember one of colonial India’s earliest famines and its subsequent impact on colonial policies.

Srijita Biswas (IISER Bhopal)

“Writing Memory of Hunger: In Search of ‘Astonishing Smell of Rice”

The 1943 Bengal famine took place at a time when India was suffering from the aggressive consequences of World War II and Quit India agitations. Despite prolonged denial and lack of proper documentation poets, novelists, painters, and musicians of contemporary Bengal poignantly captured the violence and trauma of the tragedy. A lack of immediate documentation led many artists to take recourse to their memory for the purpose of realistic representation of the disaster. Practice of food

rationing was institutionalised and violation of rationing provisions gave rise to hoarding and speculation in food items, introducing a new term- *kalobajari* or 'black-marketing' in Bangla vocabulary. Calcutta, the Second City of the Empire, was filled with cries of destitutes and *phyan dao* or 'Give us little gruel' became a historically haunting phrase thereafter. This paper would study the formation of a collective memory arising from scarcity of food during the fag end of British rule in India through analysis of select literary and cultural texts, highlighting role of memory and experiences of migration and movement during such a major fo crisis. The paper also aims to study the direct impact of the famine on the city of Calcutta along with consequent rise of a cuisine of scanty warped up by the famine, shaping identity from traces of memory and forms of resilience rooted in the overwhelming disaster.

Panel 4: *Bengal Famine: History and Politics*

Chair: Dr. Trina Nileena Banerjee

Venue: Conference Room

Subhasis Pan (Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University)

"Look Back to Hunger: The British Empire and the Bengal Famines in the Nineteenth Century India"

India witnessed more than twenty famines during the British Rule in India, though many of them remained unacknowledged by the British government. Out of these famines, Bengal suffered seven famines alone between 1770 and 1943; and four of them occurred during the last half of the nineteenth century (in 1866, 1873-74, 1892 and 1897). Whereas, there already exist a large corpus of data and a vast number of critiques on the

great famines of 1770 (also known as *Chhiyattorer Mannontwar*, as it occurred in 1176 in the Bengali calendar year) and 1943 (that occurred during World War II), but the famines that occurred almost in subsequent decades in the nineteenth century Bengal had not gained attention to that extent.

In this paper I would try to examine the famines that had occurred in the nineteenth century Bengal and have been dealt with least attention. Again, the causes of these famines that led to the disastrous starvation of the people in Bengal would be analysed. The British policies of food and their myopic administrative exercises that failed utterly are under the scrutiny of this study, along with their callousness and indifferences to the subject people. However, the Scottish administrators who were the part of the British Empire had had a different take on the causes of the famines and policies thereof. The Scottish interventions in the study of the famines and the policies they advocated towards the remedial and preventive measures – as that of William Hunter, James Caird and others for the famines in Bengal and the neighbouring provinces create a space to form a critique on a distinctive Scottish attitude towards Bengal famines. The distinctive Scottish approaches and the Scottish principles with which they were imbibed would also be discussed in the course of this study.

Reeti Basu (Jawaharlal Nehru University)

“War, Famine and Foreign Soldiers”

During WWII, Bengal witnessed two events simultaneously, the coming of the foreign soldiers and the infamous famine of 1943. The paper explores how the Bengalis blamed the foreign soldiers for the famine and how the soldiers remembered the period. The public perception was that the government hoarded food for the soldiers while the native died of hunger. Moreover, the local society was morally degraded as impoverished women were sold to the soldiers. On the other

hand, the soldiers were tired of hearing ‘fan dao’1 and the constant presence of the native beggars. While a few soldiers criticised the colonial government for negligence, others were shocked to see the number of dead bodies during the famine. The scholars had studied the causes and impact of the famine, but none had explored the soldier’s memory of the Bengal famine. Therefore, this paper will do a comparative study of civilian and soldier narratives of 1943’s Bengal famine. Both native and soldier’s testimonies confirmed that the famine only affected the local population; the foreign soldiers lived in opulence.

Dr. Ranu Roychoudhury (Ahmedabad University)

“Bearing Witness to Mid-Twentieth Century Hunger in India” (Online)

“I don’t think anyone will be able to ignore these images of starvation,” wrote Werner Bischof before beginning his work on “Hunger in Bihar,” commissioned by *Life* magazine. As the lead story in the *Life* on June 18, 1951, Bischof’s work augmented foreign aid for the newly independent India. However, this is counterintuitive to how the Bihar government opposed austerity measures imposed by the central government through Bihar Food Economy and Guest Control Order 1951. Indeed, Bischof did not document an officially declared famine but a moment in the long history of food shortage and hunger, interspersed with famines, that accompanied India’s transition from the colonial to the postcolonial. The juxtaposition of Bischof’s work with Sunil Janah’s photographs of the great Bengal Famine of 1943 and its continued effects across the subcontinent foregrounds the shared precarity of hunger, where famine as an administrative category takes a backseat. Consequently, visual arts provide a lens for this paper to complicate the critical events of famine *per se* by thinking about how documentary photographers witnessed starvation. This paper inquires the efficacy of photography as medium to bear witness to the quotidian and the everyday experiences of hunger in mid-

twentieth century India.

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4.00 PM – 5.30 PM: PARALLEL SESSIONS

Panel 5: *The Famished Body: Visual Culture and Famine*

Chair: Dr. Srimanjari

Venue: Board Room

Seng Ong (University of Cambridge)

“The Famine Pastoral: Colonial Famine and Western Visual Culture” (online)

This paper explores the visual culture of famine in China that was produced and consumed in Europe and America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It argues that a focus on the mediatisation of famines sheds new light on the development of Western modes of visuality in China. The paper develops its argument in two sections. First, it traces the new modalities of visualisation which emerged in attempts by Western aid agencies to document the three epochal El Niño-Southern Oscillation related famines in late nineteenth-century China (1876–1878, 1896–1897, and 1899–1902). The seriousness of the famines was unprecedented, as was the intensity of foreign interest and intervention they provoked. Elucidating the grammar and protocols of looking which were utilised in these reports, I show how they drew on contemporary readings of famine whilst reformulating them in crucially divergent ways. The second section addresses the impact this mediatised disaster had on the subsequent

development of Western photography and ethnography in China. Assessing the works of several important photographers and ethnographers, I show how the scopic regime of famine exerted a ramifying if unacknowledged force on how Chinese landscape and rural life was read and understood across the period.

Sumantra Baral (Jadavpur University)

"The Artist as Reporter: 1943 Bengal Famine and Inception of Visual Reportage in Colonial Bengal"

The proposed project will engage with visual reportage, a short lived print medium of aesthetic and literary-journalistic intervention of 1940s socio-cultural public sphere of colonial Bengal, Chittaprosad's *Hungry Bengal* (1943), and Sudhir Khastagir's *Junput* (1943) being central to the study. Visual Reportage, the act of producing 'on spot' witness accounts of visual and journalistic immediacy, implemented by 'special artists' (Paul Hogarth), started in Bengal with Chittaprosad at the time of 1943 Bengal Famine. Commissioned to capture Midnapur ravaged by famine, flood and disease, *Junput* appeared in the Nationalist Magazine *Prabasi* and *Hungry Bengal* in Communist periodicals *People's war* and *Janayuddha* as illustrated travelogue reports, before published as a book. The contention here is to read these travelogue reports in the periodicals as promoters of news illustration in Bengal which introduced the era of socio-realist art, extremely different from the tradition of nationalist 'High Art'. While *Sachitra Masik Patrika* or illustrated magazines in Bengal traditionally gave attention to art, 1943 Bengal famine introduced the genre of socio-realism that valued news illustration as serious art. The image-text symbiosis of the travelogue reports offered distinct representation of the famine which indicated the new role of artists as activists and reporters.

Attrita Goswami (University of Burdwan)

“The Famine in the Frame: Studying Visual Representations of the Famished Body in India and Ireland”

19th-century British colonial food policies coupled with racial hatred inflicted a series of famines in India, Ireland, and Africa. Along with historiography and literary representations, the unsettling consequences of famine could also be traced back to the visual representation of the starving body. The emaciated beings as found in the images or photographs question the very ontology of the living and the dead and compel us to rethink the ideas of humanity, human worth and dignity. These emaciated ghostlike figures intensify both the feelings of “distant sympathy” and sadistic mirth among the colonizers. Therefore, critics have countered the ethicality behind the production of such vulnerable images.

Depictions of these “bare life” (zoe) are imbued with nuanced politics of strategic representation and are also tempered with race, religion, and body politics unique to the different topographies. Therefore, we find, along with certain commonalities, some epistemological differences in the visual representation of Irish and Indian famines. With the shared traits of exoticisation of the famished body, of skeletonic human figures in tattered clothes, subtle differences in the objectification of bare Indian physique and the Irish beings are also operative. Such differences require critical attention. The very project of colonization began with emasculation and infantilization of the colonised ‘other’ and with famine, the dehumanization was complete, of which, pregnant women and children were the worst sufferers. So, this paper will indulge in a comparative reading of the visual representations of famine (with special reference to the children’s figures) in India and Ireland by William W. Hooper, Zainul Abedin, Daniel MacDonald, James Mahony and William Balch.

Panel 6: *Various Famines*

Chair: Dr. Sourit Bhattacharya

Venue: Conference Room

Dr. Dhurjjati Sarma (Gauhati University)

“The Mizo Famine of 1959–60 and the Assamese Response”

Mizoram, a state in north-east India, has had a long ordeal with famines resulting from the peculiar phenomenon of bamboo-flowering happening in an interval of thirty–fifty years causing a growth in the population of rats which devour the foodgrains and destroy the crop fields. The state has seen two distinct varieties of bamboo, called *Mau* and *Thing*, which alternately bloom in cycles, one following the other. Colonial records list the first occurrence of *Mautam* in 1862 and of *Thingtam* in 1881 (the word *tam* referring to catastrophe or destruction caused by these twin varieties of bamboo). The present study/lecture will explore the repercussions of the famine caused by the *Mautam* variety in the year 1959–60, the first occurrence after Independence. At that time, Mizoram was a district within the state of Assam, known as the Lushai Hills District. While the colonial rulers (with the help of the missionaries) took active steps to deal with the calamity aided by its repetitive nature (Nag 1999), the post-Independence response, particularly from the Assam Government, was supposedly lacking in seriousness and urgency. An attempt will be made in this presentation to analyse the variety of responses elicited by the Mizo Famine of 1959–60 within the Assamese public sphere of the time. The 1960 was also the year in which Assam Language Act (ALA) was passed, which caused widespread consternation among the hills’ and non-Assamese-speaking population of the state. Therefore, the present study

of the Mizo famine and its repercussions will also involve engagement with the issues of identity and self-assertion vis-à-vis the hills' districts of Assam, almost all of which subsequently seceded from Assam.

Nilanjana Chatterjee (Durgapur Government College)

"Indigenous Naga Famine"

Serious academic works on food crises in India during the pre-colonial and colonial era seem to undernotice the food crises of Northeast India. Battles create famine conditions and Nagaland alone has faced three consecutive battles from 1879 to 1944 – the Battle of Khonoma, Naga participation in World War I, and the Battle of Kohima. In *Walking the Roadless Road: Exploring the Tribes of Nagaland* (2019), though Kire alludes to the mythical (inter-tribal or intra-tribal) and historical wars, she does not refer to any famine situation. However, a symptomatic reading of her Naga Folktales and Peoplestories could explicate the anxiety of food crises wherein representation of indigenous wisdom of food security is perhaps a more productive response to individual and community starvation driven by war and environmental uncertainties. The present study, therefore, intends to adumbrate the indigenous Naga famine foods and their ways of growing, gathering, preserving, and fermenting, as represented in Kire's fiction texts. In so doing, the study aims at restoring traditional knowledge and techniques of food security during food crises – passed down through the ages in the forms of lived knowledge or/and cultural practices – to suggest meaningful ways of sustenance during starvation.

Dr. Upal Chakrabarti (Presidency University)

"Sites of Death as Fields of Labor and Improvement: Famine Relief in British India" online

This paper is primarily based on the Famine Commission reports of late-nineteenth century British India. Famine Commission

reports can be considered as the most systematized set of governmental responses to the series of famines which ravaged India in the nineteenth century. The report on the Orissa famine of 1866 laid the framework for a Famine Commission. The Commission, which was subsequently established, produced reports in the aftermath of famines in different parts of the country. In this paper, I specifically examine the measures of famine relief, as they were elaborated in the reports of 1880, 1898, and 1901. The famine relief measures were about providing, as *relief* to the famine-stricken famished agricultural population, *work* in the public works projects of the government. These public works projects were aimed mainly at building infrastructures for improved agricultural cultivation, like construction of canals, building of wells, or even making of roads. An army of hungry agriculturalists were engaged in these projects at the aftermath of famines, in order to produce means of 'improvement' for their precarious and poverty-ridden lives. The government was of the opinion that the famine-stricken masses could be suitably helped only if they were offered relief as work, as self-help, as the route to their self-improvement. If they did not earn their relief, and were simply offered charity, their lives would become indolent and unproductive. Their miseries would be compounded, as they would become incapacitated and wasteful. This homeless, impoverished and dying population could only return to life through labor and improvement. The reports argued that these agriculturalists were generally averse to hard labor, and were affected by deep-rooted conditions of poverty which could be relieved only by turning to the virtues of labor. Thus, in the area of famine relief, these reports became texts articulating an ideology of labor/productivity, which directly contributed to the newly-inaugurated program of 'improvement' through public works in British India. This paper carefully reflects on this paradoxical condition where sites of death get converted to fields of labor and improvement. It examines how in colonial-modern thought how the category of labor is born at the limit-experience of

life—that of death by hunger. It suggests that life, improvement and labor—the defining categories of colonial-modern thought, forged significant relations between themselves at the camps of death in British India. Existing historical literature on famines in British India have looked at various material and cultural aspects of the colonial famines, but have not yet turned their attention to the relation between labor and famine. While Sanjay Sharma's work on the history of public works in colonial India refers to this relation as being borne out of the ideology of labor produced by the debates on 'poor laws' in contemporary Britain, this paper argues that a deeper reading of the leading abstractions of colonial modernity can generate better insights into this relation.

DAY TWO: SUNDAY, JANUARY 8, 2023

9.00am – 10.30am

Panel 7: *Famines – Moral Responses*

Chair: Prof. Sanjay K Sharma

Venue: Board Room

Dr. Tanuja Kothiyal (Ambedkar University, Delhi)

"The Moral Economy of Distress: Famine and Negotiations in the Thar Desert in the 18th and 19th Centuries"

In a popular saying in the Thar desert, famine posits itself as a permanent resident of the region. While the agropastoral landscape of the Thar was adaptive to the paucity of rainfall, in some years the longstanding mechanisms fell inadequate in the face of the severity of the droughts. In such times, communities employed multiple strategies within frameworks of

mutual expectations between state and society. As the Rajput princely states came to administered indirectly by the British in the early 19th century, some of these expectations were reframed by the emerging norms of governance. Based on precolonial and colonial records of native states of Rajputana, I explore the shifts in famine response in the region. In the presentation I explore how famine response emerged as yet another negotiatory space between the British administrators and the native princes, while impacting the capacities of the local communities to negotiate with the state, as was possible earlier.

Dr. Trina Nileena Banerjee (Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta)

"Scenes from the Famine: Chittoprasad, the IPTA and the Art of Visual Reportage"

As many observers have noted, a sense of immediacy and urgency characterises Chittoprasad's drawings from the famine of 1943-1944 in Bengal. In *Hungry Bengal*, Chittoprasad's collection of paintings and notes from his journeys through the Contai subdivision of the Midnapore district, we get a sense of an artiste running against time in order to capture what he can of the depth and magnitude of the misery he is held witness to. In this sense, Chittoprasad's paintings from this era are certainly visual reportage, an urgent recording of immediate reality: for a wide array of readers and spectators, who were kept oblivious of the harsh reality and extent of the ongoing famine by the mainstream media. In shaping the "Bhukha Hai Bangal" campaign of the Indian People's Theatre Association Puran Chand Joshi, the then General Secretary of the Communist Party of India who had also recruited young Chittoprasad for the cause, had envisioned for the organisation a two-fold role: urgent reportage of the reality of the famine that the mainstream media was actively suppressing and the collection of funds for the People's

Relief Committee through travelling shows in aid of those most severely affected by the famine. In this sense, the IPTA's role – even in its production of the celebrated Bengali play *Nabanna* – was a kind of dramatic reportage. It was the act of bearing witness – '*staging the immediate*' – in a way that could intervene directly and critically in the social and political circumstances of the day. This paper will attempt to unravel the interface between the visual and the performative in this work of bearing witness, the implications of reporting on an ongoing crisis of unprecedented proportions through art, the aesthetic temporalities it unleashes, how the 'people' are imagined in such a project and what it makes of the artiste when the urgency has passed.

Dr. Peter Schmitthenner (Virginia Tech)

"Water on the brain": Arthur T. Cotton and Debates about Famine in Late 19th Century India"

Arthur T. Cotton (1803-99) became distinguished for designing pioneering works of irrigation in south India. In particular, the Godavari Anicut, which he designed and was completed in 1852, was an unprecedented massive undertaking which transformed the Godavari delta, a previously famine-prone region into a permanent famine-free region. A fierce critic of the colonial government's handling of famine prevention and relief, Cotton's solutions seemed simple and sensible: enhance India's water infrastructure so regions of plenty could share with regions of drought; this could double as a cheaper means of transit compared to railroads, which Cotton viewed as an economic drain. He argued that investing in water infrastructure was not only a moral obligation of a "Christian" government but was ultimately more profitable and beneficial to Indians. Although he gained some prominent support for his ideas (e.g., Florence Nightingale), he was largely dismissed as having "water on the brain," particularly by proponents of railway expansion. Cotton's ideas ultimately influenced improved policies toward famine following the

Indian Famine Commission Report of 1901, and his ideas continue to inspire advocates for massive water schemes in contemporary India. This paper assesses Cotton's role in contemporaneous debates about famine and his influence in contemporary India.

10.45 AM – 12.15 PM: PARALLEL SESSIONS

Panel 8: *Famine, Migration and Imperial Response*

Chair: Dr. Tanuja Kothiyal

Venue: Board Room

Sagarika Naik (Princeton University)

"Famine, Empire and Migration in South Asia"

In 1878, William Digby, a British author, and journalist noted that the Indian emigration was a famine panacea. Famine victims with no prospects of reinsertion into labour markets or social position loomed large as a reservoir for labour across the British Empire. There is inadequate scholarly consideration for the research on famine of the latter half of the 19th and early part of the 20th century, but famine studies have been adequately economic perspectives. From a socio-cultural point of view, famine has not received significant attention from scholars. Therefore, I am trying to investigate the socio-cultural as well as the historical aspects of famine especially the diverse aspects of human existences notably the subordinate classes' material conditions, socio-cultural ideas, and beliefs. Here I am trying to critically identify the interconnection between the famine and starvation and how that was responsible for the

overwhelming migration to South Asia and around the Indian Ocean.

Ayan Das (Vidyasagar University)

"'Famine, Migration, and Demographic Change: Analysis of Relation between Famine of the Chota Nagpur and Demographic Change in the Brahmaputra Valley under the Colonial Regime."

In 1897, the Chota Nagpur region faced massive famine that affected the life of the indigenous population. In the government record, we see mention of the scarcity of food in this region. In the colonial records, the condition of the weather was blamed for this situation, but recently, scholars like Vinita Damodaran questioned colonial forest policy for this reason. To control this situation, the colonial authority recruited labourers for infrastructure development and gave subsidies to import food from outside. But it ultimately led to failure and from the Chota Nagpur region, a huge number of people migrated to other regions like Assam for livelihood. In this context, the number of collies in tea gardens, who migrated from the Chota Nagpur region to the Brahmaputra Valley increased between 1895 and 1901 which is reflected in the census report of Assam of 1901 as well as the reports of Labour Immigration into Assam from 1896 to 1898. In this situation, tea planters and colonial administration preferred collies from Chota Nagpur due to their capability. But in tea gardens, migrated labourers faced several atrocities under planters and lived in deprived situations. Besides, the immigration of huge numbers of collie changed the demography of the Brahmaputra Valley which shaped the formation of the identity of the Assamese people in the later period.

Dr. D. Sathya (KL University)

“Imperial railways and alleviation of famine distress in colonial South India (special reference to the great famine of 1876-78)”

The introduction and expansion of Imperial railways created the notion that the railway schemes in India were dominated by the requirements of Imperial benefits. Colonial officials and imperial scholars claimed that the construction of the railway was highly beneficial for the Indigenous people. But their claims have been opposed by many nationalists and recent works of historians. They opined that the railway itself caused many hardships in the subcontinent including a series of famines across the region. At the same time, there has been some research particularly done on the eastern province of Bihar which shows that railway successfully facilitated the movement of aids to the famine-stricken districts (Pushpa Kumari (2007)). Drawing on this idea, the present work seeks to critically investigate the role of railways in mitigating the famine crisis in south Indian districts. In the second half of the nineteenth century, South India confronted a series of famines including the great famine of 1876- 1878. It witnessed heavy catastrophe majorly due to the failure of the monsoon. The colonial government enacted various policies to address the famine distress. In these circumstances, the paper argues that the railway remained as an important medium of transport in famine relief activities, especially during the great famine of 1876-78. In its discussion on railways and famines in south India, the paper seeks to look beyond the very imperial nature of railways as a tool of colonial exploitation; instead, it focuses on the effectiveness of railways in battling calamities with a far-reaching effect in the subcontinent under the colonial rule.

Panel 9: *Famine: Representation and Beyond*

Chair: Dr. Binayak Bhattacharya

Venue: Conference Room

Dr. Avishek Ray (National Institute of Technology Silchar)

“Testimonial Evidentialism and (Anti-)Colonial Aesthetics Documenting the 1943 Bengal Famine”

In 1943, Bengal witnessed one of its foundational tragedies: the fifteenth and the deadliest famine in colonial India. This famine was man-made, and for quite some time, passed off as ‘food shortage’. In 1944, the Famine Inquiry Commission, recorded on camera 130 witnesses to study them impersonally ‘in a calm and dispassionate atmosphere’. Meanwhile, Chittaprosad (1915-1978) made impromptu sketches and lithographs of the famine, which were soon to be banned by the Government of (British) India. In a way, he documented what the Famine Commission recorded – just that he used pen-and-ink and lithographs rather than the camera.

Why were his documentations then banned? What is the ‘order of things’ based on which one form of documentation is valued and the other devalued? The Christian missionaries, if one recalls, during the Great Famine of Madras (1876-78), exhibited and sold paintings and sketches of the famine to raise funds for charity. What needs to be asked then is: why is pictorial documentation of the famine valued in one time, but banned in another? How is the ‘value’ of the aesthetic gaze, characterized by Chittaprosad, determined within the matrix of colonial power, archival truth, cultural memory and testimonial evidentialism?

Dr. Jati Shankar Mondal (Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University)

“Colonial Brutality, Artistic Sensibility and Cultural Codes: Reinterrogating (the Fall of) Empire through Famine Sketches

of Bengal Famine (1943) and related writings”

The rise of Communist Party of India (CPI) in 1930s and subsequent rise of “People’s Art” mark a significant departure from capitalist and bourgeoisie aesthetics in favour of common man’s life and their needs. The Marxist Cultural movement in Bengal gave rise to so many groups of artists, as well as so many controversies, which bear witness of “ideological history of social progress” (Pradhan ii) resulting into “human brotherhood, or universal fraternity, and ……a growing demand for the right of national self-determination (ii). Groups like Progressive Writers’ Association (1936), Indian People’s Theatre Association (1943), Antifascist Writers’ and Artists’ Association (1944) are the most illustrious example of the case and their outputs can be seen as a form of protest – “popular pressure from below in shaping the nature of national outbursts” (Das 58) which “enriched our understanding of regional variations in nationalist agitations and radicalization of mainstream nationalism at critical juncture.” (Das 58)

Bengal Famine of 1943, which takes a toll of almost 3 million lives, is one of the most fatal blows and significant incidents that exposes the brutal nature of the empire, as well as instigate many socio-economic inquiries. The phenomenon also appeals to the sensibilities of contemporary artists, writers and poets, to react through their creation, thereby, exposed the ruthless nature of socio-political and economic condition of the empire. The focus of my intended paper is the famine sketches and paintings made by a group of young artists, namely Somnath Hore (1921 – 2006), Chittaprasad Bhattacharya (1915 – 78), Zainul Abedin (1914 – 76), Gobardhan Ash (1907 – 96) and others, their personal recollections of famine in forms of writings related to these sketches and reports mainly published in different newspapers and periodicals.

Primary target of the paper is to analyze the cultural codes

of the predominant sense of ‘national self-determination’ and identity, as expressed through the paintings and sketches and in writings by the group of artists mentioned earlier, that led to “radicalization of mainstream nationalism”. The analysis aims to be a helpful tool to understand the newly acquired consciousness, a key factor for the fall of the British Empire.

Dr. Umasankar Patra (National Institute of Technology, Tiruchirappalli)

“Hunger, Precarity, and Belonging: Reading Ananta Das’ Representation of Famine in Odisha”

This paper will focus on a relatively unknown verse autobiography of Ananta Das, “Ananta Das’ Autobiography” (1937) that captures the story of a Christian convert who was forced to relinquish his caste identity during the devastating famine in Odisha in 1866. Juxtaposing more prominent narratives about the 1866 famine such as Fakir Mohan Senapati’s autobiography *Atmacharita* (1918) and commentary by Gourishankar Ray in the pages of the periodical *Utkal Dipika,* I will argue that whereas Senapati’s autobiography and Ray’s journalistic commentary through administrative, social and political discourses forge an Odia national imaginary, Das’ poignant narrative articulates the precarity of social formations as caste markers as well as religious symbols lose their sanctity. Furthermore, Das’ autobiography embodies the intergenerational religious-social-moral trauma of the famine that forms the crux of many other famine narratives in Odia. To elucidate, this paper will study the legacy of Das in Kanhu Charan Mohanty’s *Ha Anna,* a novel written in 1938 and modelled on the 1866 famine, that not only reprises the horrors of 1866 but also situates the famine as part of Odia racial memory, and an unlikely site of solidarity, belonging and identity formation.

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2.15 PM – 3.45 PM: PARALLEL SESSIONS

Panel 10: *Famine Region: South India*

Chair: Dr. Rajarshi Mitra

Venue: Board Room

Rahul Vijayan & Prof. Nagendra Kumar (IIT Roorkee)

“Revisiting the Madras Famine: The Politics of Caste, Hunger and Protests”

The article attempts to read select narratives of the Madras Famine of 1876-78 that reveal the lesser-known aspects of the disaster, focusing on the city of Madras, presently called Chennai. The city of Madras in Tamil Nadu was a central spot for the British Raj for both their administrative and economic activity. Throughout its development under the Raj, Madras witnessed various social demarcations, labour movements and migrations that defined its identity. The article will look at how caste played a crucial role in magnifying the disaster for certain underprivileged sections of the already famine-affected society. To this end, the article attempts to closely read Jeyamohan’s Tamil novel *Vellai Yanai* (2013), which imagines a famine-stricken Madras through the eyes of an Irish Officer of the Raj, thus accounting for an untold perspective of the famine. The descriptions of the emaciated bodies in the novel draw similarities with the photographs of dying people in the famine by Willoughby Wallace Hooper. The article also

examines how the then prevailing socio-political conditions and the Raj's dismal relief measures aggravated the famine deaths in Madras.

Dr. C. Chandra Sekhar (SRR & CVR Government Degree College, Vijayawada)

"Burning Hunger: The Great Famine, Caste Differences and Missionary Christianity in Colonial India"

This paper sheds light on the conditions of Dalits, their experience of caste differences, discrimination and destitution during the Great Famine of 1876-78 in Rayalaseema, one of the Telugu speaking regions of the Madras Presidency. The article highlights how existing caste practices not only defined and shaped the famine relief measures but how these measures re-entrenched caste hierarchies. Problems of hunger, migration, epidemics and deaths are universal during famines but the dimension of caste relations was also a significant factor during a famine in Rayalaseema. The caste location of Dalits aggravated the severity of their living conditions and social life in the space of the village and in relief works organised by the colonial government. The colonial state was expected to help them, but its relief activities reinforced caste inequalities and institutionalised social distancing. Consequently, Dalits experienced hunger, and destitution, and were subjected to further marginalization in society. During such conditions, missionaries rethought their purely religious notion of Christianity and redefined its social function. Their humanitarian concern and charitable activities had a profound impact on Dalits.

Swathilekha Thampy (Kannur University)

"Analysis of Famine of Travancore Princely State; 1860 to 1878"

The current paper proposes to take forward the history of Famine occurred in India, specifically to the Travancore

Princely State at the time of British Colonial rule. The Kingdom of Travancore is from c. 1729 until 1949 and this paper investigates the great famine that occurred in Travancore during the reign of Ayilyam Thirunal Rama (1860-1880) and Vishakam Thirunal Ramavarma (1880-1885). The paper also envisages the role of Travancore becoming a food supplying aid during the Great Famine of Madras(1876-1878). Nevertheless, there are countable documents and references are provided on the famines of Travancore during 1860 to 1878, there are not many consolidated forms of evidence available and scarcely academic works published out of this area. The thesis, on this note, expects to provide an exploration of the relief policies implemented by the administration during the Famine and how they worked with the Indian Government (British Raj) during this time. Drawing from archival material- including government manuscripts, census reports, colonial and missionary reports, newspaper articles, the paper attempts to create a database on the Famine of Travancore.

Panel 11: *Bengal Famine Revisited*

Chair: Dr. Avishek Ray

Venue: Conference Room

Sourapravo Chatterjee (University of Calcutta)

"Framing Famine: A Socio-Semiotic Analysis of Mrinal Sen's *Akaler Sandhane*"

Mrinal Sen, the maverick Bengali filmmaker remains one of the most acclaimed cinematic auteurs of Indian cinema. Dismantling the conventional constructs of commercial cinema, Sen along with Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak laid the foundation of the alternative or parallel cinema in Bengal. This paper attempts

to semiologically study the multiple layers of meanings and functions in his 1980 film, Akaler Sandhane, where a smart, middle-class film crew from Calcutta descends on a self-effacing Bengali village to shoot a movie on the Bengal Famine of 1943. However, the underlying theme behind the prime narrative is that the famine that the crew has come "in search of" is everywhere to be found. The old shriveled peasant in the opening shot says: the famine is "all over" the people of the village, and recurrently resists the narrative in which the director tries to contain it. Having ventured to represent the 1943 famine as a circumscribed "event", these well-meaning intellectuals from Calcutta only succeed in reproducing the famine in telling ways.

Dr. Dipanjan Ghosh (Nabadwip Vidyasagar College)

"The Politics of the Great Bengal Famine through the Lens of the Famine Trilogy of Gopal Halder"

The Great Bengal Famine of 1943 has been looked at from different perspective by the historians and economists. The possible reasons behind the disaster and the documented number of casualty were the primary concern of the historiographers of the Famine. But so far as the causes of famine were concerned, the official records and reports were questioned and reassessed by the later social theorists, historians and economists. The official 'narrative' of history of the Famine was politically manipulated and the 'master narrative' had suppressed the voice of the affected but invisible people were the focus of later theorists. Literature contributed to this process of rewriting history by foregrounding the hitherto neglected voice of the 'wretched'. The objective of this paper is to review the 'grand narrative' of the history of the Great Bengal Famine of 1943 with the help of the famine trilogy of Gopal Halder, a Bengali novelist, and see how fiction can help in reviewing the official historiography of the Famine. Another focus of this paper is to see whether the fictional texts converge into validating any particular school of

thought regarding the reason of famine and death of millions or foreground many “histories”.

Aryama Bej (Jadavpur University)

“Spectacle of ‘Hunger’: Socio-Realist Dance in 1943 Bengal Famine”

In this project, I intend to study ‘dance’ both as discipline and as representative medium of 1943 Bengal Famine, understudied as a cultural intervention in the dominant cultural- theatrical public sphere of Indian People Theatre’s Association (IPTA), Shanti Bardhan’s dance ballet Bhookha Hain Bengal (1944) being central to the study. Commissioned to perform in Charni Road Station in Bombay, as a means for relief fund, Bardhan’s choreography of ‘Skeleton dance’ represented the ghastliness of the famine and plight of the exploited peasants which shifted the mode of dance from the pleasure of display to an act of agitation and protest. The discourse of representing disaster(famine) in dance emerged as an alternative modernism against the dominant nationalistic agenda of reviving Bharatanatyam dance—strictly religious and transcendental. Bardhan’s emphasis over realist content rather than traditional adherence to form announced socio-realism and Agit-prop intervention in the cultural sphere resembling the communist ideology of American leftwing New Dance Group (1932) after World War-I. I enquire how famine birthed the socio-realist dance in colonial Bengal where dancers became activist by taking dance to the mass which produced an ‘affect’ (Mark Franko) in the audience in a unique way.

The British Empire and Colonial Famines: History, Culture, Critique

First Conference

University of Edinburgh

Sep 8-9, 2022

Thursday, Sep 8

9.00am – 9.30am: Registration and Welcome

9.30am – 11.00am: Panel 1 Irish Famine (Chair: Prof Peter Gray)

- Prof Marguérite Corporaal (Radboud University): "Intersectional Heritages of Hunger: The Great Irish Famine, India and Scotland"
- Prof Melissa Fegan (University of Chester): "How to Survive a Famine: Lessons from Irish Literature"
- Dr Emily Mark-Fitzgerald (University College Dublin): "Irish Famine Commemoration in Scotland and Beyond: 1990s – Present"

11.00am- 11.15am: Break

11.15am – 12.45pm: Panel 2 Indian Famines 1 (Chair: Prof Bashabi Fraser)

- Prof Chandrika Kaul (University of St Andrews): "The BBC and the Great Bengal Famine"
- Dr Priyanka Basu (Kings College London): "Choreographies of Famine: Embodiment, Protest, and Intermediality in Dance"

- Dr Sanjukta Sunderason (University of Amsterdam): “Hunger & Historiography in Indian Modernism” (Zoom presentation)

12.45pm – 2.15pm: Lunch

2.15pm – 3.45pm: Panel 3 Scottish Famines (Chair: Prof Nigel Leask)

- Prof Ewen Cameron (University of Edinburgh): “Famine and Land Reform in the Scottish Highlands, 1836 to 1939”
- Prof Marjory Harper (University of Aberdeen): “Fleeing Famine: Emigration as a Response to Subsistence Crises in Scotland”
- Prof Alan Riach (University of Glasgow): “‘Oran a’ Bhuntàta’ / ‘Song on the Potato’ by Niall Moireasdan (Bhàrd Pabbaidh)”

3.45pm – 4.00pm: Break

4.00pm – 5.30pm: Panel 4 Famine Relief (Chair: Dr Priyanka Basu)

- Dr Abhijit Sarkar (University of Oxford): “Beyond Neo-nationalist Frames: Hindutva and the History of the Bengal Famine of 1943-1944”
- Emma Wordsworth (University of Cambridge): “The Global Politics of Humanitarianism: British Famine Relief Discourses in the Empire and Beyond, 1873–1879”
- Joseph Manock (University of Manchester): “Famine Relief, Activism and Philanthropy: The Servants of India

Society and Voluntary Aid, 1906-1921”

5.30pm: Close of Day 1

6.00pm: Conference Dinner

Friday, Sep 9

9.00am – 10.30am: Panel 5 Famines in India and Hong Kong (Chair: Dr Abhijit Sarkar)

- Dr Justyna Kurowska (University of Heidelberg): “Abjectification of the ‘Other’ in the Representations of the Bengal Famine in Hindi-Urdu Prose”
- Sindhu Rajasekaran (University of Strathclyde): “Reimagining the Past, Or How I Tell Queer (Her)stories”
- Cheung Wai Chung (University of Hong Kong): “‘Rice famine’ and British Colonialism: The Importance of Rice Supply in the British Restoration of Power in Hong Kong throughout 1945-1950”

10.30am – 130.45am: Break

10.45am – 12.15pm: Panel 7 Scottish, Indian, and Irish Famines in Context (Chair: Prof Ewen Cameron)

- Prof Willy Maley (University of Glasgow): “Hungry Scots: From Famine to Food Banks”
- Prof Peter Gray (Queens University Belfast): “‘Trevelyanism’, the State and Famine in Ireland and British India, 1845-80”
- Dr Andrew Mackillop (University of Glasgow): “Critiquing Corporate Empire: Scottish Society and the Bengal Famine of 1769-70”

12.15pm -1.30pm: Lunch & Vote of thanks!

Conference ends.

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Conference Abstracts (in order of presentation)

Prof Marguérite Corporaal (Radboud University): “Intersectional Heritages of Hunger: The Great Irish Famine, India and Scotland”

Abstract: John Mitchel’s *Jail Journal* (1854) incorporates a discussion between “The Ego” and “Doppelgänger” which unravels how the London government’s policies help to uphold its imperial supremacy. Reflecting on the recent Irish famine and similar atrocities in colonial India, Mitchel evokes an analogy between the “yellow chapless skulls of Skibbereen” that represent the Famine past and the “the ghosts of starved Hindoos” –an image that appears to allude to one of the many famines that took place in India under the British Raj, and that is represented as equally evocative of willful misgovernment as well as troubled famine pasts that will not

be put to rest (106-7).

Mitchel's radical nationalist treatise is by no means unique in comparing Ireland's recent plight as a famine-stricken colony with miseries in regions in British India which were affected by wide-scale starvation as well as imperial suppression. Indeed William Gorman Wills's threedecker *The Love that Kills* suggests connections between the Great Famine and the Indian mutiny as two instances of colonial suffering and catastrophe, for the narrator remarks that the "foul, pale form of the Famine" rises behind "the massacre of India" as a landmark of mass mortality (II, 265). In fact, one can argue that the years of mass starvation in Ireland were often remembered in comparison with other food crises that took place in the empire during the long nineteenth century; in particular famines in Scotland that followed from the Highland Clearances (1750-1860) and the same potato blight that had caused Ireland's famine (Devine 1988; Richards 2012).

These recurrent analogies between the Great Irish Famine and periods of widespread hunger in India and Scotland as instances of what David Lloyd calls "colonial catastrophe" (2008: 31) cannot only be found in writings from the Victorian age. Actually, recent cultural expressions which remember the Great Irish Famine do so in ways which often imply dynamic intersections with colonial pasts of former British India and Scotland, and in particular their famine legacies. This paper will address these forms of "competitive" as well as "multidirectional" (Rothberg 2009: 19) postcolonial memory that emerged during the past decades. It will do so by analysing recent fiction by, amongst others, Kalyan Raj (2014), Paul Lynch (2017), Lea Wait (2018) and Marita Conlon McKenna (2020). Furthermore, this paper will examine monuments which integrate Irish famine memory with Scottish and Indian colonial pasts, such as Glasgow's Irish and Highland Famine memorial (2018) and Swinford's Famine monument (1994). As will be demonstrated, the multidirectionality of imperiaal famine

legacies often takes on the form of direct references and comparisons, it also manifests itself through recurrent iconologies as well as "schematic narrative templates" (Wertsch 2002: 57) that organize past experiences.

Bio: Marguérite Corporaal is Full Professor of Irish Literature in Transnational Contexts at Radboud University, the Netherlands. She was the principal investigator of *Relocated Remembrance: The Great Famine in Irish (Diaspora) Fiction, 1847–1921*, for which she obtained a Starting Grant for Consolidators from the European Research Council (2010–15). Corporaal was awarded an NWO- VICI grant for her project *Redefining the Region* (2019-24). Furthermore, Corporaal is the PI of *Heritages of Hunger*, which is funded as part of the Dutch research council NWO's NWA programme (2019-24). Among Corporaal's recent international publications are her monograph *Relocated Memories of the Great Famine in Irish and Diaspora Fiction, 1847–70* (Syracuse University Press, 2017); and *The Great Irish Famine: Visual and Material Culture* (co-edited, Liverpool UP, 2018).

Prof Melissa Fegan (University of Chester): "How to Survive a Famine: Lessons from Irish Literature"

Abstract: According to Margaret Kelleher, in writing about the Irish Famine there are real difficulties for both historians and writers of fiction in mediating the relationship of the past to the present without either 'an excessive emphasis on victimisation', or a shallow indulgence in a 'survivor guilt'

that acknowledges ‘we are all descendants of survivors’ without requiring critical examination or action. Famine fiction also reflects an impulse to focus on protagonists not as victims but as indomitable survivors against the odds, who guarantee the pride and future success of the Irish at home or abroad. Brendan Graham says of the heroine of his Famine novel *The Whitest Flower* (1998) that ‘ultimately she represents an Ireland that survived both here and through its people in other countries’, while the then Taoiseach Bertie Ahern endorsed her as ‘the resurrection of the new Ireland rising out of starvation and disease, the embodiment of the hope that kept our people going’. However, as Cormac Ó Grada has observed, ‘All famines bring out the best and the worst in people’, frequently exposing ‘the dark, ordinarily hidden side of human nature’. In this paper I will consider the ways Irish fiction, often drawing on folklore or historical accounts, has represented Famine survivors and the various strategies they employ or are driven to use for surviving the Famine, including emigration, reliance on charity, stealing, sex-work, rioting, land-grabbing, murder, conversion, cannibalism, the abandonment of family members, or rejection of friends and neighbours.

Bio: Melissa Fegan is Professor of Irish and Victorian Literature at the University of Chester. Her publications on the Irish Famine include *Literature and the Irish Famine 1845-1919* (Clarendon Press, 2002) and book chapters and journal articles on the works of nineteenth-century Irish writers such as William Carleton, James Clarence Mangan, and Aubrey de Vere; representations of the Famine in nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first-century literature; female philanthropy and the development of the lace industry during the Famine; the Young Irelanders; nineteenth-century travel writing about Ireland; and the moral economy of the Irish hotel from the Union to the Famine.

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Dr Emily Mark-FitzGerald (University College Dublin): "Irish Famine Commemoration in Scotland and Beyond: 1990s – Present"

Abstract: TBA

Bio: Dr Emily Mark-FitzGerald is Associate Professor in the School of Art History and Cultural Policy, where her research concerns the art history and visual culture of Irish famine, poverty, and migration. Previous publications include *Commemorating the Irish Famine: Memory and the Monument* (Liverpool UP, 2013); co-editor of *The Great Irish Famine: Visual and Material Culture* (Liverpool UP, 2018); and co- editor of the forthcoming *Dublin and the Great Irish Famine* (UCD Press, 2022). Her current monograph in progress – *Virtual Realities: Poverty, Spectacle, and Reform in 19th-century Ireland* – examines the parallel development of the illustrated press, photography, stereoscopy, magic lanterns, optical devices, and early cinema from the mid-19th – early 20th century, and their 'picturing' of Irish poverty for domestic and diasporic audiences.

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Prof Chandrika Kaul (University of St Andrews): "The BBC and the Great Bengal Famine"

Abstract: This paper forms part of my forthcoming book on the BBC (OUP). As I argue in the book, the BBC's reputation for truth telling was severely tested when it came to reporting on the Raj. Events like the Great Bengal Famine help us to gauge how media control worked in practise. As a public corporation, the BBC had, especially during the Second World War, an obligation to serve the national and Allied cause. But how far did that obligation stretch to a news cover up when it came to the Indian empire? And did the deaths of millions of Indians from starvation and disease count for less than the Allied soldiers fighting and dying in battlefields?

Bio: Chandrika Kaul is Professor of Modern History, at the University of St Andrews, Scotland. She is founding co-editor of the book series, *Palgrave Studies in the History of the Media*. Her monographs include *Reporting the Raj, the British Press and India, and, Communications, Media and the Imperial Experience: Britain and India in the Twentieth Century*. She has also edited or co-edited several volumes: *Media and the British Empire; Explorations in Modern Indian History and the Media; International Communications and Global News Networks; News of the World and the British Press 1843–2011; Media and the Portuguese Empire;* and, *M.K. Gandhi, Media, Politics and Society: New Perspectives*.

Dr Priyanka Basu (Kings College London): "Choreographies of Famine: Embodiment, Protest, and Intermediality in Dance"

Abstract: The artistic responses to the Bengal Famine of 1943

spanned over multiple media including visual arts, theatre, films, and dance. This paper looks at the relatively less-discussed medium of dance as expressive of the choreographies of famine and underlining its intermediality with other visual and performative arts. I focus on the choreographies of IPTA artists and associates such as Shanti Bardhan and Bulbul Chowdhury, such as *Bhukha Hai Bangal* (Hungry Bengal) and *Jeno Bhule Naa Jaayi* (Lest We Forget). In the context of cinema and stage, too, as Usha Iyer (2020) has recently shown actress Shadhona Bose's stage-ballet choreography *Bhookh* (Hunger) based on the Bengal Famine 'broke fresh ground by being the first Indian ballet to deal with a contemporary theme.' (134) Recent scholarship around IPTA's dance vocabularies of protest by Prarthana Purkayastha (2014) and Sanjukta Sunderason's (2020) foray in the partisan aesthetics of Chittoprasad, Zainul Abedin and Somnath Hore have stoked the possibilities of fresh probes into the intermediality of art forms, artistic exchanges shaping visual/performative practices and the afterlives of the famine in decolonial endeavours. Here, I particularly consider Bulbul Chowdhury's choreography of *Lest We Forget* which he staged in England and Ireland in 1953, during Elizabeth II's coronation week. Extending dance scholar Susan Leigh Foster's analysis of 'choreographies of protest', I explore 'choreographies of famine' as artistic critiques of the man-made catastrophes and their place within larger colonial ravages. Moreover, considering other colonial Asian performances on the themes of drought and famine, such as the Japanese 'The Tenth Sun' (1935), I propose an understanding of these choreographies and their legacies in an 'Asia-as-method' framework (Kuan-Hsing Chen, 2010) and the implications that such reading has within the current global discourse around climate crisis.

Bio: Dr Priyanka Basu is a Lecturer in Performing Arts in the Department of Culture, Media, and Creative Industries, King's

College London. She is a Visiting Fellow at the Institute of Advanced Studies, UCL. She has previously worked as the Curator of the 'Two Centuries of Indian Print' project at the British Library. Her research interests include cultural histories of performances and relationships between print, performance and intermediality. She is currently finishing her monograph, *The Cultural Politics of Folk: Transnational Histories in India and Bangladesh* (Routledge UK). She is a trained *Odissi* dancer and has performed in Japan, UK, and India.

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Dr Sanjukta Sunderason (University of Amsterdam): "Hunger & Historiography in Indian Modernism"

Abstract: In this paper, I will reflect on some of the methodological questions – and difficulties – that emerged in my book, *Partisan Aesthetics: Modern Art and India's Long Decolonization* (2020) when I used the Bengal Famine of 1943 as an entry point to understand post/colonial modernism in India. The talk will address questions of hunger and depletion as aesthetics, politics, and art historiography. I will argue that while these form textures of postcolonial modernity in South Asia, they remain unaddressed often, in a wider historiographical obsession with writing histories of postcolonial transition as affirmative or celebratory histories of arrival and freedom.

Bio: Sanjukta Sunderason is Senior Lecturer (UD1) in History of Art in the Department of Arts and Culture at the University

of Amsterdam. A historian of 20th-century aesthetics, she researches interfaces of visual art, (left-wing) political thought, and historical transition during 20th-century decolonization in South Asia and across transnational formations in the Global South. She is the author of *Partisan Aesthetics: Modern Art and India's Long Decolonization* (Stanford University Press, 2020) and co-editor (with Lotte Hoek, University of Edinburgh) of *Forms of the Left in Postcolonial South Asia: Aesthetics, Networks, and Connected Histories* (Bloomsbury, 2021). Her writings have appeared across multiple peer-reviewed journals including *Third Text, British Art Studies, South Asian Studies,* etc. She is currently working on a second monograph on transnational conceptualizations of art and liberation across 20th-century decolonization, thinking from the locational scales of South Asia.

Prof Ewen Cameron (University of Edinburgh): "Famine and Land Reform in the Scottish Highlands, 1836 to 1939"

Abstract: This speculative paper seeks to explore the relationship between the history and memory of famine and the incidences of protest and land reform that occurred from the 1880s. Historians disagree about the effect of developments between the famine of the late 1840s and 1850s and the Land War of the 1880s. Some argue for a 'revolution of rising expectations' other for a period of continuing coercion, as explanations for the protests. The memory of the famine of the 1840s and 50s was mobilised by the land reformers, crofters and cottars who gave evidence to the Napier Commission in

1883. This was good politics and had a profound effect on government policy. The paper will note that although famine conditions did not recur in the highlands after the 1850s there were periods during which there were very profound crises – in the early 1860s, in the late 1870s, in the early 1920s and, of course, in the 1930s – and these have the capacity to disturb the existing explanations and disrupt the chronology.

Bio: Ewen A. Cameron is Professor of Scottish History at the University of Edinburgh, where he has taught since 1993. He has been interested in these questions since he was an undergraduate student in the 1980s. He has published widely on government policy in the highlands and land reform in Scotland – notably *Land for the People? The British Government and the Scottish Highlands, 1880-1925* published in 1996, as well as on more general Scottish political history. Despite constant attempts to move his research and writing on to other fields, he keeps being drawn back to these questions.

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Prof Marjory Harper (University of Aberdeen): "Fleeing Famine: Emigration as a Response to Subsistence Crises in Scotland"

Abstract: This paper focuses primarily on the deployment of emigration as a response to famine in the Highlands in the mid-1800s with particular reference to continuities and changes in objectives and outcomes. It therefore begins by rooting nineteenth-century policies and practices in a wider chronological context of subsistence crises in Scotland in the

seventeenth, eighteenth and twentieth centuries. It considers similarities and differences between those examples and the exodus triggered by the Great Highland Famine, evaluating and comparing the attitudes and actions of governments, various estate managements and individuals. Key questions include the extent of agency exercised by participants; the practical impact of Malthusian theory; the relationship between coercion and choice; the outcomes for those who emigrated to Canada and Australia; and the response to famine made by Scots in the diaspora. Key sources in addressing these issues include the Select Committee into the Expediency of Encouraging Emigration from the UK (1826-7); the Select Committee on Emigration, Scotland (1841); the Royal Commission into the Administration and Operation of the Poor Laws in Scotland (1844); and the records of the Highland and Island Emigration Society.

Bio: Marjory Harper is Professor of History at the University of Aberdeen, and Visiting Professor at the Centre for History, University of the Highlands and Islands. Her research focuses on British (particularly Scottish) emigration since 1800. Two of her monographs have won international prizes, and she has published around 100 articles. She edited *Migration and Mental Health: Past and Present* (2016). Her latest monograph, *Testimonies of Transition* (an oral history of twentieth-century Scottish emigration) was published in 2018, and a revised version was published as an audio book in 2020. She directs an award-winning online Master's Programme in Scottish Heritage.

Prof Alan Riach (University of Glasgow): "'Oran a' Bhuntàta' / 'Song on the Potato' by Niall Moireasdan (Bhàrd Pabbaidh)"

Abstract: In his notes, Professor Meek says this: ‘The Potato Famine of 1846, known as *a’ bhliadhna a dh’fhailbh am buntàta* (‘the year the potato departed’), is one of the great social watersheds of the nineteenth-century Highlands and Islands. By creating a subsistence crisis, the famine made an immense impact on the population, and precipitated migration and emigration on a considerable scale. Yet, although the catastrophe itself was long remembered, hardly any traditional tales or songs about the famine have been preserved in Gaelic. This may be partly due to the consequence of the dislocation of the people and subsequent emigration […] or it may reflect a corporate desire not to dwell too much on such a terrible experience. The present song is the only known piece of verse on this theme.’ This paper presents a new version of this song with commentary on the relation between ‘song’ and ‘poetry’, including the relations of factual detail and moral indignation, material and physical well-being and the dignity inherent in literary enunciation, challenged by both the mundane reality of what is described, dark humour as one response to the circumstance, and the horrific personal and social effects of deprivation and starvation. Degradation and dignity are at stake here. How the poem balances their evocation and enactment in its verses is the focus of the presentation.

Bio: Alan Riach (b.1957) Poet and Professor of Scottish Literature, Glasgow University. Born Airdrie, Lanarkshire, studied at Cambridge and Glasgow, worked at the University of Waikato, New Zealand, 1986-2000, returned to Scotland 2001. Books include poetry: *The Winter Book* (2017), *Homecoming* (2009) and *Wild Blue: Selected Poems* (2014); criticism: *Representing Scotland* (2005), *Hugh MacDiarmid’s Epic Poetry* (1991), and co-authored with Alexander Moffat, *Arts of Resistance: Poets, Portraits and*

Landscapes of Modern Scotland (2008), described in the *TLS* as ‘a landmark book’. His 734-page *Scottish Literature: An Introduction* was published in 2022 and described in *The Times* as ‘magisterial’.

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Dr Abhijit Sarkar (University of Oxford): “Beyond Neo-nationalist Frames: Hindutva and the History of the Bengal Famine of 1943-1944”

Abstract: This paper challenges the currently dominant neo-nationalist history of the Bengal Famine of 1943-1944 by revealing the politics of Hindutva (different from mere Hinduism) in the famine and demonstrating how exclusion from food-relief based on the victims’ religion and caste increased mortality. It introduces hitherto-unused papers from the archives of the Hindu Mahasabha, a Right-wing Hindu nationalist party, to demonstrate the caste-based and religion-based discrimination in the party’s relief activism. It explores how the party labelled Muslim food officials as ‘saboteurs’ in the food administration and trumpeted the failure of the provincial Muslim League government to avert the famine to “prove” the economic “unviability” of the demand for the creation of Pakistan. In this connection, the paper also examines allegations by the League leaders that Hindu leaders in the neighboring provinces were purposefully blocking food supply to Muslim-majority Bengal in the hope that starvation would compel the Muslim majority of Bengal to surrender their demand for Pakistan. At the neighbourhood level, the politics of religious conversion played out blatantly when the Mahasabha accused Muslim volunteers of converting starving Hindus to Islam in exchange for food and

subsequently demanded religiously segregated orphanages for Hindu and Muslim famine orphans. Finally, this paper demonstrates that even during mass starvation, Hindutva's perennial hatred for beef eaters did not subside, as the Mahasabha kept dwelling on beef consumption by the Indian army during the famine, evidently to incite religious animosity between communities at a time when obtaining any food was a matter of life-and-death.

Bio: Dr Abhijit Sarkar teaches and researches history at the University of Oxford. He is also a Visiting Associate in the history of science at Harvard University (Cambridge, Massachusetts) as well as at Georgetown University (Washington DC). Previously his doctoral thesis, also at Oxford University, won the Best Doctoral Thesis Award from the British International History Group. Dr Sarkar is currently researching the socio-political history of natural and human disasters in Asia. His recent publication was on the history of plague hospitals in colonial Bombay (https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-72304-0_6).

Emma Wordsworth (University of Cambridge): "The Global Politics of Humanitarianism: British Famine Relief Discourses in the Empire and Beyond, 1873–1879"

Abstract: The 1870s was a decade of famine, exacerbated by the consolidation of the global market economy and environmental degradation. My paper compares British state and non-state actors' debates about how to relieve famines that occurred

both within and beyond the British Empire in the 1870s. I compare British discourses about four famines, each of which solicited state or private famine relief efforts in Britain: namely, the Bengal and Anatolian famines of 1873–1875 and the megadrought famines in Madras and North China from 1876–1879. In all four cases, a range of British interest groups—including philanthropists, politicians, colonial officials, missionaries, intellectuals, and businessmen—relied on specific discourses, emotional registers, and donor interests to mobilise famine relief efforts. This paper explores some of these discourses, most specifically how the Victorians constructed a global hierarchy of suffering which valued some famine victims' lives above others'. In the process, I consider how Britain's politicoeconomic interests and global governance strategies informed which communities received famine relief, and on what terms. By situating British famine relief responses within a global, rather than solely imperial context, I aim to historicise the contingencies and inequalities that informed British humanitarian assistance in different contexts.

Bio: Emma Wordsworth is a first year PhD student in History at the University of Cambridge under *the supervision of Professor Samita Sen and Dr Bronwen Everill, and a co-convenor of the Cambridge World History Workshop. Emma researches British famine relief discourses in response to famines in India, China, and the Ottoman Empire in the 1870s. More broadly, she has a working interest in food security, humanitarianism, global history, empire, race, gender, and the history of emotions. She earned her BA, BA (Hons), and Master's degrees in History from Waipapa Taumata Rau, the University of Auckland.*

Joseph Manock (University of Manchester): Famine Relief, Activism and Philanthropy: The Servants of India Society and Voluntary Aid, 1906-1921

Abstract: This paper will examine the non-official famine relief of the Servants of India Society (SIS) in early twentieth-century South Asia. Despite the SIS's wide gamut of activities, relief organisation was always one of its most crucial operations in times of calamity. This focus will open questions about the meanings of philanthropy, service and giving during famine years. The relationship between the SIS, colonial structures, famine relief legislation and other social reform organisations will be illuminated through the prism of liberalism. The ambiguities of liberal politics manifested in multiple ways within the domain of voluntary famine relief. For instance, the SIS simultaneously obeyed the limitations on Indian volunteerism dictated by government famine codes and evoked strategies of appropriation by critiquing state famine policy and limiting state functions. Further, the SIS's influence in famine relief spread far beyond its official remit due to its collaboration with related organisations, such as the Social Service League, Seva Samiti and the Seva Sadan. This intervention is paramount because famine relief in India beyond 1901 remains curiously underexplored. By examining a later period, this paper interrogates why some famines are prioritised over others, how non-official relief was envisioned and implemented, and philanthropy's meaning within a liberal framework.

Bio: Joseph Manock is a History MA student at the University of Manchester, interested in famine, disease, philanthropy and emotion in South Asia. His undergraduate thesis, "Nationalist sentiment and the South Indian Famine of 1876-1878", traced the links between the collective experience of famine and the

economic discourse of nationalism by introducing ‘affective nationalism’. He is currently writing a dissertation on the Servants of India Society that examines its philanthropic involvement in famine relief. In October, he will start a fully-funded History PhD under the supervision of Professor Anindita Ghosh and Dr Aditya Ramesh entitled ‘Famines, Epidemics and Emotions in Colonial India, 1871-1921’.

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Dr Justyna Kurowska (University of Heidelberg, Germany): “Disgusting Hunger: Abjectification of the ‘Other’ in the Representations of the Bengal Famine in Hindi-Urdu Prose”

Abstract: The paper will investigate narratives on the Bengal famine of 1943 and their aesthetic ideology, focusing on the abjectification of famished bodies in the literary accounts of so-called ‘survivors’. These texts (by K. Chandar, A. Nagar, R. Raghav, and R. Tiwari), written immediately after the catastrophic event explore the moment of crisis, albeit without attempting to offer any significant critical insights. Instead, they deploy an emotive perspective, probing the feelings of disgust, and fear as experienced by their male, upper caste protagonists. Disgust unfolds through the normative gaze of outsiders on famished bodies, depicted as an expendable and poor mass of walking skeletons, or as beastly figures feasting on animal carcasses, fellow humans, and waste. The narratives represent the latter as symbols of the total collapse of morality, and the degeneration of life into pure biological survival. Hunger is shown to turn them into murderers, cannibals, and resentful creatures reduced to mere gaping mouths. Disgust becomes here an ambivalent zone, leaving the reader to wonder whether the narratorial critique

is directed at the abjection of the ‘other’ or at the ‘other’ itself.

Bio: Dr. Justyna Kurowska works as an assistant professor at the Department of Modern South Asian Languages and Literatures, South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University. She received her PhD in 2019 from the Institute of Oriental Studies, Warsaw University on the *Aesthetics of Death and Dying in Modern Hindi Novel*. She was a lecturer at the Department of Linguistics and Philology, Uppsala University, and worked as a research assistant at Bonn University. Her research interests include prison writing, memory studies, food cultures, and written and oral narratives of convicts from the penal colony in the Andaman Islands.

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Sindhu Rajasekaran (University of Strathclyde): “Reimagining the Past, Or How I Tell Queer (Her)stories”

Abstract: To tell queer (her)stories of my marginalized Tamil foremothers from late 19th century British India, I refer to the colonial archive, oral histories and folk literature. Through a queer feminist anti-caste lens, I critically reflect on archival logic and the ethics of producing knowledge. My aim is to decolonize notions of subaltern sexuality and reimagine queer brown woman against a history of shame and invisibility. The Madras Famine (1876-78) is central to my project as it displaced Dalit women and shifted their life trajectories, sending some to Lock Hospitals in Madras ~ where sex-workers and suspected sex-workers were forcibly

incarcerated to prevent the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. I examine the glaring race-sex nexus that played out in Lock Hospitals during the famine; the diseased bodies of (queer) women inmates were pathologized based on their sexuality, often marked as hypersexualized or as sexual deviants. I recount how Tamil women wielded their agency despite facing the brunt of institutional captivity – unpacking power relations within this space and looking at it as part of feminist history. Further, I critically engage with the dehumanizing anthropological photographs and texts recording the famine that reduce marginalized subjectivities and lives to colonial tropes. An inter-caste woman with Dalit ancestry, I want to create revisionist myths – reimagine my queer foremothers' lives and centre the narrative around their experiences.

Bio: Sindhu Rajasekaran is an author and researcher. Her debut novel *Kaleidoscopic Reflections* was nominated for the Crossword Book Award. It told the tale of an inter-caste Tamil family. Her collection of short stories, *So I Let It Be*, explored love, loss and female sexuality. Her latest book of non-fiction is titled *Smashing the Patriarchy*, published by the reputed Aleph Book Company. Sindhu graduated with a master's in creative writing from the University of Edinburgh. Currently, she is a PhD researcher at the University of Strathclyde and a recipient of the Dean's Global Research Studentship Award.

Seng Ong (University of Cambridge/Japan): "The Famine Pastoral: Colonial Famine and Western Visual Culture in China, 1876-1930"

Abstract: This paper explores the visual culture of famine in China that was produced and consumed in Europe and America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It argues that a focus on the mediatisation of famines sheds new light on the development of Western modes of visuality in China. The paper develops its argument in two sections. First, it traces the new modalities of visualisation which emerged in attempts by Western aid agencies to document the three epochal El Niño-Southern Oscillation related famines in late nineteenth-century China (1876–1878, 1896–1897, and 1899–1902). The seriousness of the famines was unprecedented, as was the intensity of foreign interest and intervention they provoked. Elucidating the grammar and protocols of looking which were utilised in these reports, I show how they drew on contemporary readings of famine whilst reformulating them in crucially divergent ways. The second section addresses the impact this mediatised disaster had on the subsequent development of Western photography and ethnography in China. Assessing the works of several important photographers and ethnographers, I show how the scopic regime of famine exerted a ramifying if unacknowledged force on how Chinese landscape and rural life was read and understood across the period.

Bio: Seng Ong ('SP') graduated from the University of York, and won a scholarship to pursue a Masters and Ph.D. at the University of Cambridge. His work has been published in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*—a leading journal in the field of Asian Studies—and was recognized as the best by a young scholar. His research and writing centres on the problem of Sino-Western relations, on its historiography in particular, and its continuing impact on contemporary global discourse on China. He has related interests in colonial and postcolonial histories; theories of race and cultural difference; and the politics and cultures of empire and

globalisation.

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Cheung Wai Chung (University of Hong Kong): "'Rice Famine' and Political Reconstruction: The Importance of Rice Supply on Hong Kong Reconstruction throughout 1945-1950.

Abstract: The Second World War "proliferated" famines across the world. Hong Kong was not an exception, unfortunately. Hence, remediating famines became necessary because famines might threaten social order and hamper public confidence to the British governance. Despite fruitful research on how the Hong Kong government survived from economic downturn after the WWII, scholars have ignored the importance of rice supply throughout the British restoration of power in Hong Kong during 1945-1950. It is noteworthy that, apart from the economic stabilization policies, a stable supply of rice also prompted British restoration in Hong Kong because it guaranteed social stability. Therefore, this paper is pioneering in exploring the relationship between rice, famine-mediation policies and colonialism in Hong Kong history. According to the documents of the Colonial Office, newspapers and departmental reports, both the British and the Hong Kong government utilized their "colonial network" to ensure a sufficient supply of rice to remediate immediate famine left by the Japanese Occupation of Hong Kong. Thus, mediating the "rice famine" in Hong Kong was not only a socio-economic process. It was also political in nature, which rice was a political capital utilized by the British to maintain colonial rule in Hong Kong after 1945.

Bio: I am a final year undergraduate majoring in Chinese history and History in the University of Hong Kong. I delivered an on-demand talk in the *2021 Oxford Hong Kong Forum* about the correlations between education, nationalism and global exchanges with reference to the case of Sun Yi-xian. I also acquired pre-approval to present in the *2022 Oxford Hong Kong Forum.* I am currently a participant of the *Undergraduate Research Fellowship Programme* (URFP) 2022-23, a prestigious program initiated by the University of Hong Kong to nurture potential scholars. I also publish short articles in newspapers such as the *Singtao Daily* and *Ming Pao*.

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Prof Willy Maley (University of Glasgow): "Hungry Scots: From Famine to Food Banks"

Abstract: Scotland's famine history has been overshadowed by that of Ireland, and in Ireland the Great Hunger, An Gorta Mór, has blotted out earlier episodes in that country. Comparative studies of famine in Ireland and Scotland are complicated by the fact that Scotland, through the Ulster Plantation, was complicit with the British colonial project. Historically, Scotland did not suffer in the same way as Ireland in spite of arguments for a comparison based on the shared experiences of agricultural communities impacted by dramatic developments in industry and empire. When it was proposed a few years ago that an Irish Famine memorial be dedicated also to those who starved in the Scottish Highlands there was resistance – by the Great Hunger Memorial Committee – on the grounds that this effort at inclusion was in fact an attempt to appropriate Irish suffering in order to appease Scottish sectarianism or anti-Irish sentiment. Leading

Scottish historian Professor Tom Devine defended the Irish and Highland Famine Memorial Garden, insisting that the comparison was relevant and an indication of progress in the city's sectarian history. In this paper I argue that the Scottish famines of the 1620s and 1690s were, like earlier and later tragedies, bound up with class, climate and colonialism, and that comparison with Ireland is crucial. The Scottish famine of the 1690s propelled Scots first to Ulster, in a larger movement than any seen since the plantation was established in 1609, as part of what was for many the first stage of onward migration to British colonial America. Karen Cullen has also written on the imperial motives behind Scottish famine relief in a later period, the 1780s, when the demand for settlers to populate the colonies coincided conveniently with an impoverished population. A recent study of food bank use in Scotland shows that food poverty persists, rooted in the same capitalist-colonialist system that caused crises in the past.

Bio: Willy Maley is Professor of Renaissance Studies at the University of Glasgow. He has published widely on early modern culture, Irish studies, Scottish literature and postcolonial criticism. He is author of A Spenser Chronology (1994), Salvaging Spenser (1997), and Nation, State and Empire in English Renaissance Literature (2003). He has edited several essay collections including *Representing Ireland* (1993), *Postcolonial Criticism* (1997), *Irish Studies and Postcolonial Theory* (1999), *British Identities and English Renaissance Literature* (2002), *Shakespeare and Scotland* (2004), *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark* (2010), *Shakespeare and Wales* (Ashgate, 2010), *This England, That Shakespeare* (2010), *Celtic Connections* (2013), *Celtic Shakespeare* (2013), *Romantic Ireland* (2013), and *Scotland and the Easter Rising* (2016).

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Prof Peter Gray (Queens University Belfast): "'Trevelyanism', the State and Famine in Ireland and British India, 1845-80"

Abstract: The role of Charles Trevelyan as moulder and arbiter of famine relief policy in the Great Irish Famine of 1845-50 remains controversial, with several recent interventions (Haines 2004, Read 2016) making the case that, as a civil servant, responding to an unprecedented ecological and financial crisis, his influence and responsibility have been greatly exaggerated. This paper questions that assumption through reference to contemporary administrative records and revisits the debate on Trevelyan's contribution to the ideological constructions of the crisis. It argues that a distinctively 'Trevelyanite' response can also be identified in British administrative reactions to subsequent famine emergencies in British India, especially during the Orissa crisis of the mid-1860s and to some extent also in the great western and southern famines of 1876-79, and will suggest that Trevelyan's *The Irish Crisis* (1848) offered an apparently 'successful' model for colonial administrators to emulate.

Bio: Peter Gray is Professor of Modern Irish History and Director of the Institute of Irish Studies at Queen's University Belfast. He has published widely on the history of the Great Irish Famine and its comparative perspectives, on social welfare, land reform and British governance of Ireland in the 19th century. His most recent book is *William Sharman Crawford and Ulster Radicalism, 1780-1861* (forthcoming with UCD Press). He is a Member of the Royal Irish Academy.

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Dr Andrew Mackillop (University of Glasgow): "Critiquing Corporate Empire: Scottish society and the Bengal famine of 1769-70"

Abstract: Enlightenment-era Scotland's connections with South Asia evolved in a number of ways. These ranged from migratory links, as Scots took service in the English East India Company, increasing consumption of Indian products, and the evolution of intellectual traditions that have been identified as a distinctively Scottish variant of 'Orientalism'. This paper explores how these interactions were mediated through the lens of the Bengal famine of 1769-1770. One of the most devastating events of the early phase of the 'Company raj', the famine was exacerbated by the corporation's commercial and monetary policies. The paper explores how the event played a noticeably ambiguous role in Scottish thinking with regard to the emerging colonial order in India. In ways that were to be far less evident with respect to the nineteenth- and twentieth-century famines which punctuated Britain's later phase of control, the Bengal famine witnessed sectors of Scottish society develop deeply critical attitudes to the East India Company itself.

Bio: Dr Andrew Mackillop is an historian of early modern Scotland at the University of Glasgow. His research interests include Highland history during the long eighteenth century, the trajectory of Scotland within British state formation after 1707, and the country's disproportionate role within the British Empire. Recent publications include: *Human Capital and Empire: Scotland, Ireland, Wales and British Imperialism in Asia, 1690-1820* (Manchester, 2021); 'Gender, Race and Fortunes in the East India Companies 'Familial Proto-State': The

Evidence of Scottish Wills and Testaments, c.1740-c.1820′, *Journal of Indian Ocean World Studies* 5: 2 (2021). An article, 'Poverty, Health and Imperial Wealth in Early Modern Scotland', will appear in Gurminder K. Bhambra and Julia McClure (eds), *Imperial Inequalities The politics of economic governance across European empires* (Manchester, Nov. 2022).

Call for Papers:

We will organise four events through this Network from March 2022 till March 2024. The first two are academic conferences in Edinburgh, UK and Guwahati, India in Sep 2022 and Jan 2023. There will be a public talk and an authors' workshop at the National Library of Scotland, Sep 2023, and a public engagement event in Kolkata, Dec 2023.

Please see below a call for papers for the conferences:

'The British Empire, Scotland, and Indian Famines: A Royal Society of Edinburgh Research Network' presents two conferences on

The British Empire and Colonial Famines: History, Culture, Critique

University of Edinburgh and IIIT Guwahati

Sep 8-9, 2022 and Jan 7-8, 2023

Between 1845 and 1879, a number of devastating famines occured in Ireland, India, and Cape Colony – colonies of the British empire – killing millions of people. While the Great famines of Ireland (1845) and Bengal (1943) have received widespread scholarly and public attention, critical discussions of other

famines have not been consistent. In these two (in-person) conferences at Edinburgh, the UK, and Guwahati, India, part of our Royal Society of Edinburgh Research Network, we will bring together scholars interested in famine studies to interrogate colonial famines in the British empire – especially their history, representation, critique, policy, and debates. While in no way limited to the famines above, we look forward to papers that will read the historical, administrative, journalistic, non-fictional, literary, and cultural works of colonial famines in the British Empire with an aim to address some of the key questions of the Network which are: why did famines occur so frequently in the British Empire? How were these famines represented in literature and media and drawn upon for health, administration, empire and anti-colonialism related campaigns? How did these famines shape health and hygiene discourses in the Empire? Did the famines and their representations give birth to new literary and artistic style? How was the Famine Prevention envisioned and implemented? In what ways has postcolonial food policy drawn from colonial famine prevention? How have these famines been memorialised in the postcolonial period?

Scottish writers, administrators, and political economists such as Adam Smith, WW Hunter, George Campbell, Richard Baird Smith, James Caird, and Linlithgow, among others, played key roles in the famine debates including on famine relief, agricultural policies, and implementing prevention in the British Empire. We also look to explore, preferably in the Edinburgh iteration, Scottish roles in the British colonial famines through the following questions: Do recent experiences of scarcity and famine in the Highlands as well as the Irish famine immigration shape Scottish responses to Indian famines? How do the Scots write about famines (including genre, style, and technique)? What do we understand about imperialist ideologies, counter-ideologies, and practices from those writings? How do their work influence Indian writers and critics?

Papers may address but need not be limited to the topics below:

Colonialism, Imperialism, famines

Scotland, the British Empire, and famines

Colonial famines and their prevention

Famines and body, health, hygiene

Famines and society (race; class; caste; gender and sexuality)

Famine, hunger, poverty

Famines, famine relief, activism

Famines, anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism

Famines and food policy

Famines through literature and writing

Famines in visual and performative art

Memorialising famines

Colonial famines in comparative reading

Famines and hunger in the postcolonial period

Please send 200-word abstracts and 100-word bio-notes to the email address: indianfaminesnetworkrse@gmail.com by **Monday, May 30, 2022**. Confirmation of acceptance of papers will be sent by **Monday, June 6, 2022**. Please mention in the document which iteration of the conference (Edinburgh/Guwahati) you would like to attend. Technology permitting, we will record the conference presentations. We have a small number of partial travel bursaries available for postgraduate students. Please mention in your covering email if you would like to be considered for travel bursary.

Conference organisers:

Dr Sourit Bhattacharya, University of Edinburgh, UK

Dr Rajarshi Mitra, Indian Institute of Information Technology Guwahati, India

Dr Binayak Bhattacharya, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad University of Technology, India

Conference Registration fee: we are planning to waive the registration fee (depending on securing additional budget). In case there is a fee, it will be low and case-by-case basis.

Conference funded by: Royal Society of Edinburgh Research Network Award