

From the noble word root “anthropo”, meaning human, spring a delightful, diverse tree of words spring: Anthropocene. Anthropology. Philanthropy. Anthropomorphism. And even lycanthropy. But there’s a lesser known branch of this tree, a less pleasant one, anthropogenic- caused by human actions.

The Bengal famine of 1943 was anthropogenic- that is the consensus that we, the people, after 80 long years, have come to accept. The Bengal famine was not the caused by drought, that disaster that strikes parts of the earth year and year again, that devastates millions. It was not caused by shortage of food- the crop harvest of 1934 was sufficient to feed all the souls in Bengal.

The story can be told in facts and figures
The Bengal famine of 1943 killed 3 million people, nearly one in every seven people of the population of the time.

The story can be told in pictures.
Endless lines of men, women and children curled along streets that could hardly fit all of them, waiting for rations, desperation revealing itself in the set of their gaunt shoulders, the fear in their eyes.
Children, their faces lacking any of the round-cheeked, wide-eyed innocence of childhood, stood by trains carrying grain, ineffectually stabbing at the carts with sticks and wires, trying to scavenge whatever grain they could.
Skeletal bodies, miraculously still breathing, still moving their nightmarishly emaciated limbs, from door to door, from city to city, for that necessity of basic humanity that they had been denied- food.

But the story is the same, and the story goes like this:
This famine was caused by a colonial government that prioritised the hypothetical needs of its army over millions of starving people, that asked the press to stop printing pictures of dying to “prevent hysteria”.
It was caused by an unfair economic system, as when food prices rose, the poor were not even able to afford a meagre subsistence diet.
It was caused by a deep class divisions, a system of powerful zamindars, or landlords, and poor labourers who were worst affected by any crises
It was caused by a lack of empathy, division and callousness, and is a scar on humanity’s conscience.

Today Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal, is a city rich in art, culture and sheer beauty. It is one of the most diverse states, culturally, in a country already famed for its diversity, with people from different religions. Every street is full of quaint, eclectic charm, chipped cobblestones, fading into tar, elegant Victorian-style lampposts with neon signs pinned to them.
English monuments stand elegantly on the street, alongside traditional temples, street side markets and much more.

In bitterly ironic fashion, Bengal today is famous for its cuisine. It is also one of the states most dedicated to economic equality, and class barriers have eroded significantly, and land reform has been implemented greatly. Kolkata is a city that celebrates every festival, that appreciates Tagore and Shakespeare and that welcomes every stranger.

But despite its present beauty, the past still remains. It's past is unforgivable and unforgettable, is etched in every grand colonial government building, in every street, is scrawled in big black letters over the word "Justice" on the Writer's building, built by the British. Kolkata, like innumerable other cities, is built over the graves of so many. But despite that past, and perhaps because of it there has never been a famine like the one in Bengal again. The population of Bengal has more than doubled. Why?- Improvements in agriculture, improvements in yield, improvements in seed quality. But primarily, the construction of a system that is empathetic to the needs of the people. The construction of a system where people unite to work for the common good.

It is said that it is wrong to build on cracked foundations. But that is the most human of things to do. It is humanity's way to construct our wonders on flawed bases, build our monuments, institutions, and delicate lives on shifting tectonic plates that can quake any second. To make amends, even though the slate can never quite be rubbed clean. To live bright lives, even with the promise of death at the end. To walk past the battlefields together, into a better future.