7th Grade Lesson

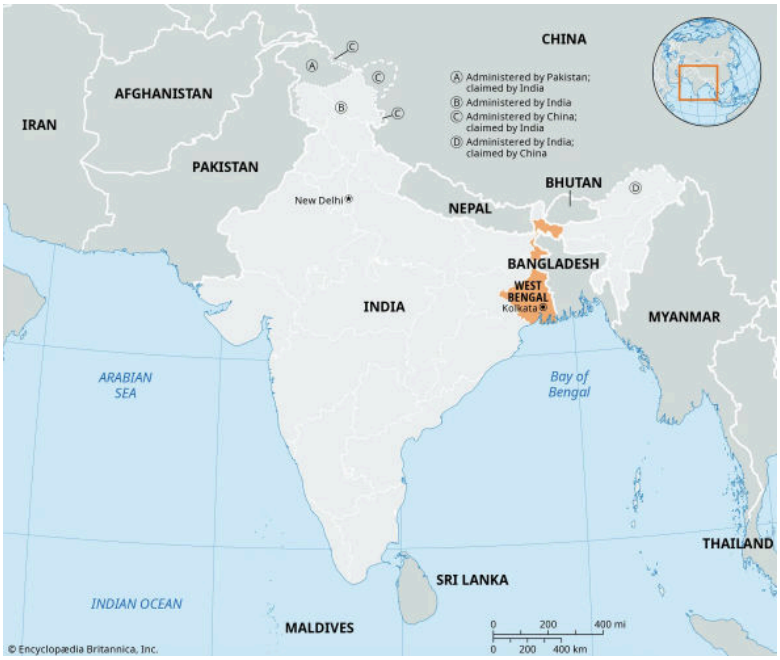
The 1943 Bengal Famine — When War, Policy, and Environment Collide
Created by Sohyun An

Standards

- SS7G10: Explain the impact of environmental issues across Southern and Eastern Asia.
- SS7H3: Analyze continuity and change in Southern and Eastern Asia (specifically focusing on British colonial rule vs. India's path to independence).

Background Information

In 1943, the Bengal region of British-ruled India (today divided between Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal) suffered a catastrophic famine that resulted in the deaths of an estimated 2 to 3 million people.



This event serves as a powerful case study for 7th graders as it demonstrates that historical crises are rarely caused by a single factor; rather, they are a "perfect storm" where natural disasters collide with human political systems, wartime logistics, and racism.

The Environmental Trigger (SS7G10)

Southern and Eastern Asia's geography and agriculture rely heavily on weather patterns like the monsoon cycle. In late 1942, a triple environmental disaster struck the coastal regions of Bengal:

1. A massive cyclone ripped through the coast, destroying thousands of homes.
2. Storm surges and flooding contaminated freshwater sources and rice paddies with saltwater.
3. A fungal crop disease (brown spot disease) spread rapidly across the remaining winter harvest due to the unusually warm, humid weather.

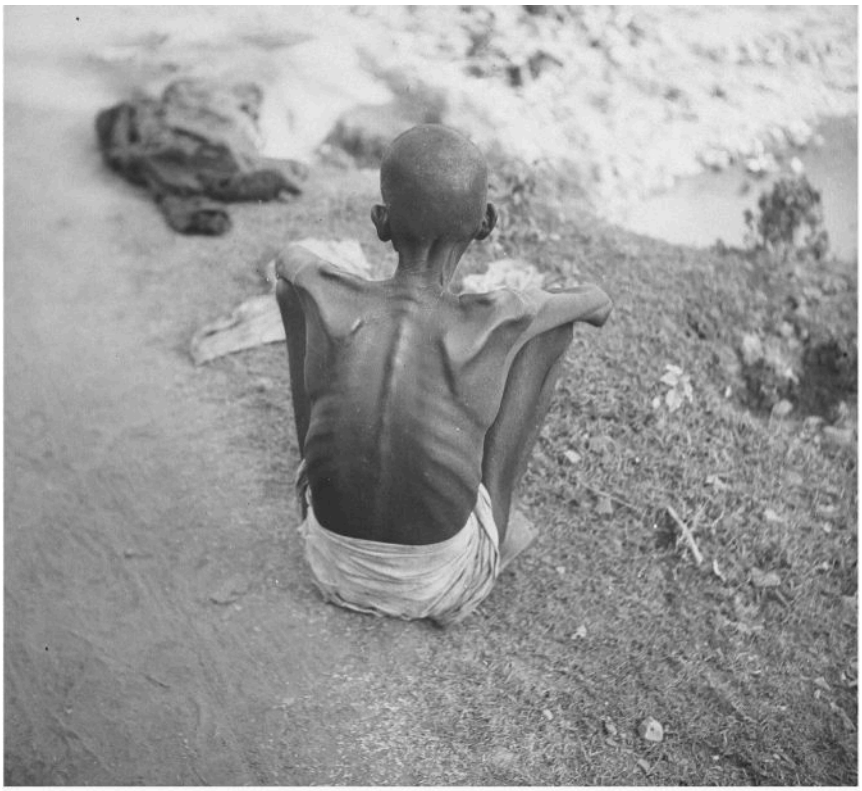
This environmental shock created an immediate, severe shortage of local food and destroyed the livelihoods of millions of subsistence farmers.

Colonial Continuity and Wartime Decisions (SS7H3)

By 1943, India had been under British rule (the British Raj) for nearly two centuries. This system was historically built on prioritizing the economic and military needs of the United Kingdom over local populations—a continuity that intensified during World War II.

When Imperial Japan conquered neighboring Burma (Myanmar) in 1942, Bengal suddenly became a frontline military zone. Fearing a Japanese invasion of India, Prime Minister Winston Churchill's government implemented scorched-earth "Denial Policies" that paralyzed the region before the famine even peaked:

- The Boat Denial Policy: The British military confiscated or destroyed over 45,000 local riverboats. Because Bengal's delta geography relies entirely on waterways for trade, this completely shattered the internal system for transporting food to rural villages.
- The Rice Denial Policy: The government seized and removed "surplus" rice from coastal districts to prevent it from falling into Japanese hands, artificially creating an immediate local shortage and driving up prices out of reach for the poor.



A starving Bengali man, photographed by William Vandivert for LIFE magazine, c. 1943.

Churchill's Policies and Personal Biases

The primary controversy surrounding British Prime Minister Winston Churchill is his administration's refusal to divert vital resources to save starving colonial subjects. As the famine peaked, India's local British leaders sent urgent pleas to London requesting 1 million tons of emergency wheat.

Churchill and his chief advisors routinely blocked or slashed these requests, prioritizing European theaters of war. Churchill argued that merchant shipping vessels could not be spared from the Atlantic and Mediterranean, where they were needed to transport Allied troops or stockpile food for the future liberation of Europe. Furthermore, India was forced to continue exporting grain to feed British soldiers fighting overseas, and Churchill's cabinet repeatedly declined foreign aid offers from the US, Canada, and Australia, citing a lack of shipping slots.

Historians often point to Churchill's personal diaries and War Cabinet records to show how his deep-seated racial prejudices influenced this administrative neglect. An ardent imperialist, Churchill famously remarked to Secretary of State Leo Amery that he "hated Indians" and called them "a beastly people with a beastly religion." He routinely dismissed the urgency of the famine by stating it was the Indians' own fault for "breeding like rabbits." When British administrators sent a desperate telegram describing the scale of the horror, Churchill reportedly wrote back with a cynical note asking: "If food is so scarce, why hasn't Gandhi died yet?"

The Legacy of Change

While apologists argue Churchill was operating under the immense stress of a global war for survival against Nazi Germany, the modern consensus views the famine as a structural failure of British imperialism. This tragedy severely shattered Indian trust in the British Empire. It heavily energized the Indian Independence Movement, proving to millions that India needed to rule itself to protect its own people. Just four years later, in 1947, British rule ended, and India gained its independence.

Suggested Teaching Activity

Students will analyze sources and data to construct a "Cause-and-Effect Web," analyzing how environmental factors and political/wartime decisions combined to cause the famine, and how it sparked historical change.

Evidence Card A: The Environment (SS7G10)

- Fact 1: In October 1942, a massive cyclone hit the coast of Bengal with winds over 140 mph.
- Fact 2: The cyclone pushed a wall of saltwater (storm surge) miles inland, drowning rice fields and killing 14,500 people instantly.
- Fact 3: Unusually humid weather allowed a fungus called "Brown Spot Disease" to infect the remaining crops, causing up to 90% crop failure in some areas.

Evidence Card B: The Government Policies (SS7H3)

- The Boat Confiscation: The British army took away 45,000 local riverboats so the Japanese army couldn't use them. This meant farmers could no longer float food down rivers to starving villages.
- The Shipping Refusal: British leaders in India begged London for 1 million tons of emergency grain. Prime Minister Winston Churchill's cabinet refused, saying all ships were needed to carry weapons and food to soldiers in Europe.
- Churchill's Words: In government meetings, Churchill said he *"hated Indians"* and called them a *"beastly people."* When told about the millions dying, he claimed it was their fault for *"breeding like rabbits"* and asked, *"If food is so scarce, why hasn't Gandhi died yet?"*

Evidence Card C: The Aftermath & Change (SS7H3)

- The Toll: Between 2 and 3 million Indian civilians died of starvation and diseases during 1943.
- The Reaction: Indian citizens realized the British government prioritized European lives over Indian lives during the war.
- The Result: Angered by the famine, millions of Indians joined Mahatma Gandhi's "Quit India" movement, demanding total independence. Great Britain left India and granted them independence four years later in 1947.

Step-by-Step Instructions

Step 1: The Hook (5–10 Minutes)

Ask the class: "If a country runs out of food, is it always because the weather was bad?" Write their answers on the board. Briefly introduce the concept that a famine is rarely just a weather issue; it is often a combination of natural disasters and human choices. Then have students read a short article where students can get to hear the direct voices of famine survivors.

Step 2: Group Investigation (20 Minutes)

Divide students into small groups of 3 or 4 and pass out the Evidence Packets. Have the groups read through the cards together and answer these three guiding questions on a scratch piece of paper:

1. What did nature do to break Bengal's food supply? (SS7G10)
2. What wartime choices did Winston Churchill's government make that made the food shortage much worse? (SS7H3)
3. How did this tragedy change the way Indian people felt about British rule? (SS7H3)

Step 3: Mapping the "Multi-Cause Web" (20 Minutes)

Have each group use a large sheet of butcher paper to draw a cause-and-effect web.

- In the center circle, they write: "The 1943 Bengal Famine."
- On the left side, they draw arrows pointing inward representing the Environmental Causes (from Card A).

- On the top and bottom, they draw arrows pointing inward representing Government & Wartime Policies (from Card B, including Churchill's shipping decisions and quotes).
- On the right side, they draw arrows pointing outward to the Long-Term Consequences and Changes (from Card C, such as mass casualties and the push for Indian Independence).

Step 4: Class Reflection & Wrap-Up (10 Minutes)

Bring the class back together to share their webs. Ask the students to observe how the continuity of British colonial policies (putting Britain first) directly triggered a massive historical change (the end of the British Empire in India).

Assessment / Exit Ticket

To evaluate student mastery of both standards, have them complete a brief, 3-sentence exit ticket before leaving:

1. Sentence 1 (SS7G10): Identify one environmental factor that devastated Bengal's rice crops in 1942.
2. Sentence 2 (SS7H3): Describe one policy decision or attitude from Winston Churchill's government that made the food shortage worse.
3. Sentence 3 (SS7H3): Explain how the Bengal Famine changed India's political future with Great Britain.

Images Used:

1. Map of West Bengal via Encyclopedia Britannica
2. William Vandivert, Life Magazine, 1943. A man suffering from famine, causing his bones to seep through his skin.