Teaching history from
DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

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Asian American Voices for Education

7th Grade Lesson Plan on
The 1943 Bengal Famine — When War, Policy, and Environment Collide

Georgia Social Studies Standards

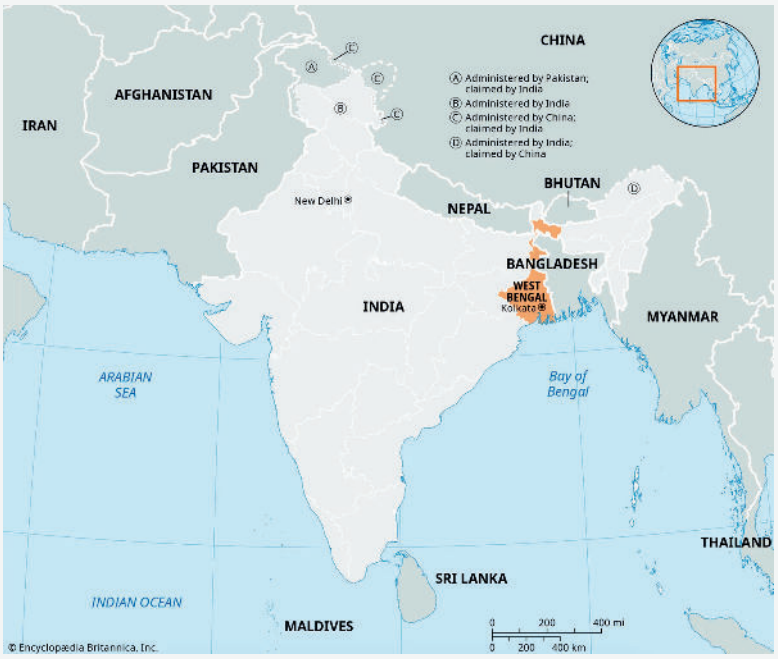
SS7G10 Explain the impact of environmental issues across Southern and Eastern Asia.
SS7H3 Analyze continuity and change in Southern and Eastern Asia (specifically focusing on British colonial rule vs. India's path to independence).

In 1943, the Bengal region of British-ruled India (now divided between Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal) experienced a devastating famine that killed an estimated **2–3 million people**. The Bengal Famine illustrates how historical crises often result from a combination of environmental disasters, political decisions, and war rather than a single cause.

Environmental Trigger

Bengal's agriculture depended on the annual monsoon cycle. In late 1942, a series of environmental disasters devastated the region. A powerful cyclone destroyed homes and crops, flooding contaminated rice fields with saltwater, and a fungal disease known as **brown spot** damaged much of the remaining rice harvest. Together, these events caused severe food shortages and left millions of farming families without livelihoods.





Colonial Rule and Wartime Decisions

By 1943, India had been under British colonial rule for nearly 200 years. During World War II, Japan's conquest of neighboring Burma (Myanmar) made Bengal a strategic military region. Fearing a Japanese invasion, the British government implemented **Denial Policies** that worsened the crisis.



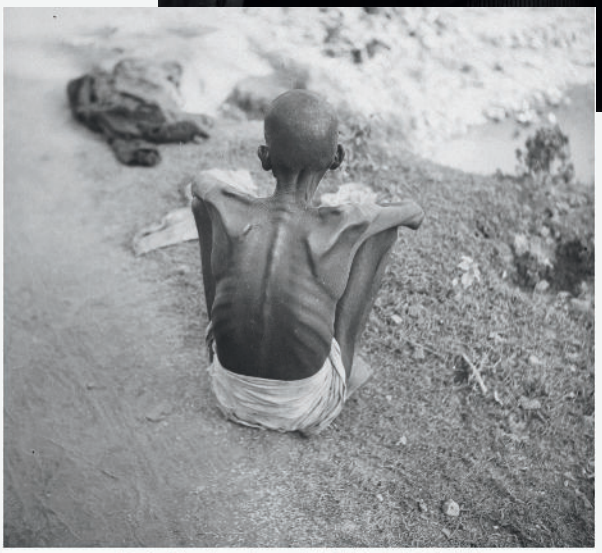
The **Boat Denial Policy** confiscated or destroyed thousands of riverboats, disrupting food transportation across Bengal's river network. The **Rice Denial Policy** removed rice from coastal districts to keep supplies from Japanese forces, reducing local food availability and driving prices beyond the reach of many families.



Churchill and the Famine

As the famine worsened, officials in India repeatedly requested emergency grain shipments from Britain. Prime Minister **Winston Churchill's** government declined many requests, arguing that shipping and food supplies were needed for the Allied war effort in Europe. India also continued exporting grain for British troops, while offers of food aid from other Allied nations were largely rejected because of shipping priorities.

Many historians argue that Churchill's racial prejudice toward Indians contributed to these decisions, citing statements recorded in wartime correspondence alongside broader imperial policies.



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

Legacy

The Bengal Famine became a powerful symbol of the failures of British colonial rule. It strengthened support for the Indian Independence Movement and deepened demands for self-government. Just four years later, in **1947**, British rule ended, and India achieved independence.

Complete Article and Lesson Plan

Photo Credit:
(Top to Bottom, Left to Right)

1. Symptoms of Cochliobolus miyabeanus, the causal agent of brown spot, on rice. Donald Groth, Louisiana State University AgCenter, Bugwood.org
2. Map of West Bengal via Encyclopedia Britannica.
3. Winston Churchill photographed by Yousuf Karsh, 1941. Public domain via Wikimedia commons.
4. William Vandivert, Life Magazine, 1943. A man suffering from famine, causing his bones to seep through his skin.

Contact us at
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History is the context of "**now**", "**why**", and "**how**".

Teach interwoven history.



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