The 1943 Bengal Famine and the Re-Enactment of Memory: A Study of *Ashani Sanket* (*Distant Thunder*, 1973) and *Akaler Sandhane* (*In Search of a Famine*, 1980)

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the cinematic memorialization of the disastrous 1943 famine in Bengal in colonial Indian subcontinent. Even though many critics have pointed out the systematic nature of famines within the colonies under the British Raj, the grand narratives of the Second World War failed to take into consideration the crucial role the colonies played in the service of the British Army all over the world. The wartime necessities imposed on the erstwhile military headquarters in Bengal, alongside the British austerity measures and an absolute lack of empathy towards the colony, cost nearly three million lives in Bengal alone. In the absence of little reflection in history, it becomes imperative to look into the archive of cultural resources to understand the scale of the man-made famine, and its indelible impact on the shaping of social and cultural lives in the future. This paper attempts to study the contours of hunger and famine in the cultural metaphors of two films hinging on the Great Bengal Famine (1943)—*Ashani Sanket* (*Distant Thunder*, 1973) and *Akaler Sandhane* (*In Search of a Famine*, 1980)—to tease out a forgotten chapter in South Asian history. By closely analyzing these two films directed respectively by two stalwart filmmakers, Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen, this paper seeks to unpack the multiple ways in which the famine deeply affected people's lives in Bengal to create a new cultural idiom to visualize the reality of the famine. Studies in cinema, cultural and political history, and literature are used in this study to envision new ways of witnessing the 1943 famine. In foregrounding the cultural politics of memorialization through cinema, this paper seeks to highlight the dichotomy between the archive and its absence which characterizes much of South Asian history.

Keywords: famine, postcolonialism, South Asia, memory, India, empire

For a generation that has not directly witnessed particular "horrors of history," revisiting events of collective disaster or historical traumatic events often demands emotional involvement, beyond an engagement with its historical accuracies. Probing into the event of the 1943 Bengal Famine (*Panchasher Manwantar*), therefore, involves concerns both political and personal. There has been a long history of famine and hunger in South Asia, especially under the various periods of colonial rule. The undivided Bengal in British India also faced its share of famines that wreaked havoc on its urban and rural spaces. These famines left their scathing impact on the social and political lives in Bengal; the cultural productions in Bengal including literature, art, and cinema reflected the famines in their own idiosyncratic ways. This study examines the 1943 famine in pre-Partition Bengal, in and through the cultural responses to which it gave birth, in order to explore the faultlines in the "collective memory" (Halbwachs 78) of the event. The 1943 famine in Bengal, which resulted in over five million people dying of hunger and related epidemics, led to many cultural responses in its aftermath. The disaster remained a consistent topic in popular and art-house films like K.A. Abbas's *Dharti ke Lal* (*Sons of the Soil,* 1946), Satyajit Ray's *Ashani Sanket* (*Distant Thunder*, 1973), and Mrinal Sen's *Akaler Sandhane* (*In Search of a Famine*, 1980). It appeared in literary works such as Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyaya's *Ashani Sanket* (1959) and Abu Ishak'r *Surya-Dighal Bari* (*The Ill-Omened House*, 1955) in print literature; in theater such as Tulsi Lahiri's *Chhnera Taar* (*The Broken String*, 1952), Bijan Bhattacharya's *Agun* (*Fire*, 1943) and *Nabanna* (*New Rice*, 1944), and Shachindranath Sengupta's *Matir Maya* (*The Affection of Home,* 1943); and in visual arts such as the incisive works of Chittaprosad Bhattacharya, Zainul Abedin, and Sunil Janah.

In the absence of adequate documentation in existent historiography, the collective memory of the realities of the famine continued to find its presence in family lore, popular folklore and songs, political activism, and popular cultural productions. Many of such works attempted to revisit the devastation of the famine through means of fiction, dramatization, and re-enactment as potential tools toward an alternative retelling of the event. The larger aim of this paper is to take the medium of cinema as its field of study into memory and history to reflect on the complexities related to the cultural processes of memorializing the 1943 Bengal Famine. Cinema, with its audio-visual sensorium and the collective nature of the medium, has been the subject of many debates regarding the nature of expression it generates and its ability to impact the audience. This paper will take the two films *Ashani Sanket* and *Akaler Sandhane* as emblematic of cultural responses, to locate and problematize memorialization and its interrelation with history. This study is situated within the interdisciplinary fields of cultural studies, memory studies, and discourse analysis in cinema. This inquiry will attempt to see *hunger* as intricately related to the memorialization of famine, and how the distinctive characteristics of the cinematic medium discreetly capture the famine in its aftermath.

A Brief Historical Overview

The Great Bengal Famine of 1943 caused the deaths of nearly three million people (Mukherjee 83) in pre-Partition Bengal due to starvation and famine-related epidemics, reawakening the memories of the erstwhile devastating famine of 1770. One of the major causes of the famine was the British involvement in World War II and its relational effect on its colonies. India aided the British Empire by supplying millions of troops, rations, resources, money, as well as political backing during the War (Mukerjee 48). Additionally, India exported food-grains to aid the British regiments of the Allied Forces stationed worldwide even as there was existing scarcity at home. In 1940, India agreed to pay a lion's share of Britain's wartime expenses as sterling credits to be remitted by Britain after the war was over (Mukherjee 77). There was already an imminent threat of famine following a pest infestation, severe drought in Southern parts of India, and the fall of Rangoon to the Japanese ensuring the decline in supply of Burmese rice (Mukerjee 168), adding to the already existing shortage in food-grains and rice-crops. Further, thousands of soldiers of the Allied Forces were stationed in Bengal's Calcutta (the erstwhile capital of British India and the center of its military operations during the 1940s) based on a false alarm of a Japanese attack on the Bengal delta. This further increased the already existing shortage of resources.

This series of events resulted in the cataclysmic event of the 1943 Bengal Famine with acute hunger and starvation all over the undivided Bengal. Colonial attention was barely paid to the cities of Calcutta and Dhaka, which resulted in mass starvation in the cities, with outbreaks of epidemics like cholera. This devastation was neither acknowledged nor resolved by the Empire, with then British Prime Minister Winston Churchill stating that the Bengalis generated the famine by "breeding like rabbits" (then Secretary of State for India Leo Amery qtd. in Mukherjee 141). The official narrative of the Empire was that the event was not qualified to be called a famine, but merely a "scarcity verging on famine" (Amery qtd. in Gráda 37). The attitude of the Empire towards this event can be summarized in Churchill's comment, "Are we to incur hundreds of millions in debts for defending India in order to be kicked out by the Indians afterwards?" (Amery qtd. in Mukerjee 154). Thus, the Empire completely denied any supplies or resolution to this crisis, and continued to drain resources from a famine-stricken Bengal in the name of war-time necessities.

In addition to the problem of hoarding, lack of supply, and the continued depletion of sources, Amartya Sen suggests that the famine was caused primarily by the failure in supply of rice-crops—the predominant food in Bengal during the war (434). The shortfall in harvesting *aman* rice (autumn rice) additionally worsened this scarcity of the staple Bengali diet. The black market prices shot up as a result

of hoarders selling their stocks before the price control happened officially. The crisis thus reached its peak in the second half of 1943. This resulted in people going through unimaginable difficulties as a result of food scarcity. Hunger and starvation impacted the social fabric of Bengali society as rural areas experienced mass starvation, deaths, and mass migration; the cities witnessed thousands of migrants flocking to congested urban spaces in search of basic necessities. Cormac Ó Gráda reflects, "Classic symptoms of famine, such as the sale of girls and women, mass migration into urban areas and the consumption of 'unedibles and meat from dead cows', were widespread by July" (38).

Paul Greenough further elaborates on the distinct ways in which the famine affected the social fabric, in particular, the family and neighborhood structures:

> The most impecunious non-cultivating households [would] begin to starve even though they spend all their incomes and exhaust their assets buying food, and that sickness and death due to starvation will in time make such households even less able to sell their labor in the market. (206)

The starving peasants hardly had any option left other than foraging in fields and jungles, begging on the streets, migrating illegally to areas with more resources, or indulging in violent acts of looting and robbing. It also resulted in a transformation of the gendered patron-subject relationship common in rural Bengal. As everyone in the family hustled to secure food, the relationship between the head of the family (mostly male, and commonly termed as *annadata,* or 'the meal provider') and other members transformed during the famine (Greenough 207-08). Long marches of starving people begging for food-grains and dying became commonplace. The social impact of the famine left a long-lasting imprint on people's memory, as clearly indicated by the recurrence of the events and concerns of hunger and its impact on individuals, families, and society at large being captured in different cultural expressions long after the famine had subsided. The cultural expressions provided a tool for the collective memory of Bengal struck by famine to express its trauma, to come to terms with its horror and despair.

Bengal Famine in Cinema: *Ashani Sanket* (*Distant Thunder*) and *Akaler Sandhane* (*In Search of a Famine*)

Ashani Sanket is a 1973 film by Satyajit Ray based on the eponymous novel by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay which hinges upon the man-made famine of pre-Partition Bengal in 1943. Captured in the lenses of Soumendu Roy, the film sketches the event of the Bengal Famine through a fictional narrative, set in a small village in then undivided Bengal, and revolving around the lives of main protagonist

Gangacharan, a Brahmin Pundit, and his wife, settling in a new village. Fleshed out eloquently by the actors Soumitra Chatterjee, Babita, Sandhya Roy, and Nani Ganguly, the storyline illustrates the condition in rural Bengal through the characters from a village and their daily plights of compulsion and helplessness. Being the only Brahmin in the village, the shrewd Gangacharan plots to become the head priest and have his own *tol* (Bengali for a kind of rural makeshift school); Ananga, his wife, with her usual poise, builds connections with the women of the village. In the meantime, the famine breaks and Gangacharan, full of vanity as a male Brahmin, initially bars his wife from working with other women from the lower caste but ultimately allows her to do so under the acute crisis of food. The film portrays Gangacharan's various attempts to accumulate rice for his family, taking advantage of his status and, later on, making use of his belongings for various purposes. With multiple threads of storylines knit together by the event of the famine, the film ends with Gangacharan, an expecting Ananga, and other villagers leaving their village and forming an amorphous crowd, with a subtitle announcing the number of casualties in the "man-made" famine of 1943.

Akaler Sandhane is a Bengali film adapted from the eponymous novel by Amalendu Chakraborty. Directed by Mrinal Sen in 1980, it stars actors from contemporary alternative cinema: Dhritiman Chatterjee, Smita Patil, Geeta Sen, Rajen Tarafdar, and Sreela Majumdar. Sen has always been a political filmmaker, and his early career demonstrates a Brechtian strategy of pamphleteering films which are politically engaged; he had previously engaged with the 1943 famine in his earlier film *Baishey Shravana* (*Wedding Day,* 1960) too. However, *Akaler Sandhane* marks a critical juncture in Sen's journey as a filmmaker, as he was contemplating the very modes of making socially and politically conscious cinema, and his methods of film-making take a contemplative turn afterwards. Reflecting upon the deeply ironic title of the film, one sees how it uses the style of film-within-a-film and follows the journey of a crew making a film on the great famine of 1943 thirty-six years after its occurrence. This film establishes itself around the notion of being an outsider to the famine from manifold angles. Though centrally occupied with the event of the famine, *Akaler Sandhane* demonstrates a self-reflexive structure, and successfully confounds its spectator with questions regarding the very process of film-making, the divide between the urban and rural gaze, and the reality of hunger that persists in society.

Dhritiman Chatterjee, Sen's regular hero, plays the role of a socially conscious director, shooting a film on the 1943 famine in a village in Bengal. Within the film, the attitude of the urban film-crew towards rural Bengal creates a tension between the villagers and the crew as the shooting goes on. The lens captures the crew in their work and leisure, and in their interactions with the villagers, emphasizing the

rural-urban divide and scathingly showing the poverty and hunger in rural Bengal, as well as their impact on the inhabitants' social lives. Patil and Majumdar play the two women leads from the city and the village, respectively, and make the irony latent in the story come alive. As the film progresses, the persistence of hunger, poverty, and social backwardness often overlooked by a section of Bengali society becomes evident. Additionally, the film also hints at the deep hypocrisy of the film-crew that is willing to create films on a historical famine, but is oblivious to the existing predicaments of contemporary Bengal. Thus, the film creates an uneven and tenuous thread of contact between the historic event of 1943 and the 1980s. Both these films demand a consideration of the very categories of experience, history, and memorialization of the famine.

The Paradox of Memory: Navigating Fact and Truth of History

Especially since the Holocaust, there have been contestations between the official, impersonal historiography and the personal, collective memory of historical events with a mass impact. Many have pointed out how official versions of history often speak in broad strokes, or champion only one side of the story, and thus fail to capture the lived experiences of people. Collective memory, oral history, personal narratives—strategies of recounting historical events—have been hailed as alternatives that can counter the master narratives of history and its erasures. Talking about Auschwitz, Giorgio Agamben explores this problematic of historiography through his conceptualizations of fact, truth, and witnessing. Talking about the horrors of Auschwitz, he comments, "The aporia of Auschwitz is, indeed, the very aporia of historical knowledge: a non-coincidence between facts and truth, between verification and comprehension" (12). The paradox latent in historical knowledge of such events is that the survivors bore witness to an experience impossible to bear witness to—the reality that was Auschwitz. All witness accounts were, in a sense, incomplete accounts. Conversely, the possibility of the complete account of the experience only lay with those who were killed. Since no one returns from the dead to narrate their experiences, the survivors of Auschwitz—the "true" witnesses—are not the "complete" witnesses, and therefore, "the value of [their] testimony lies essentially in what it lacks; at the center it contains something that cannot be borne witness to and that discharges the survivors of authority" (34). The witnesses to a horrific turn of history are always the people who were saved by chance, and thereby can speak only "by proxy," on behalf of others who shared the horror in some ways and could not evade it in the end (33).

Such an understanding of history-writing and historical experience destabilizes the often-trusted resources which form the very foundation of history: facts. Agamben's understanding hints at the contingent nature of facts, and by extension of history

itself, and makes us ask whether knowing the facts of an event necessarily translates into knowing the truth, especially about historical events of collective impact. Agamben's proposition helps in understanding the phenomenon of witnessing itself—its correlations with fact and truth, especially addressed in the context of the Bengal Famine of 1943. Not only was the famine-stricken population denied any assistance by the British, but the event of the famine remained largely absent from popular British historiography, with only a passing reference in national agricultural history. How does one attempt to know a historical event such as this? If witness accounts of the event are necessarily incomplete as Agamben suggests, how is one to voice the deep impact the event has had on generations after generations of people? How does one understand the persistent centrality of the famine in cultural expressions in its aftermath that attempted to capture its horror? What are the facts and the truths of the 1943 Bengal Famine?

This curious paradox of witnessing historical events of collective trauma perhaps can be extended following Marianne Hirsch, who terms the condition of memorializing an event without directly witnessing it as "post-memory" (103). The generation not having access to the events imbibes the experiences of such events almost as a form of memory through the complex processes of their socialization. For this generation, the task to keep alive the trauma is through constructing post-memorial work on such events to re-activate a collective memory of the event, and to constitute an archive of such experiences even when all the witnesses of such events are no longer present (106). Although the question of the "incomplete witness" is conceptualized here in different ways, this question remains at the heart of the debate. However, what Hirsch succeeds at doing is to work through the impossibility of such conditions to understand such historical events. Invoking Thomas Elsaesser's work here can aid in further understanding the possibilities of engagement with such horrors of history in its aftermath. Elsaesser expounds on the possibilities of works of mourning that Hirsch proposes. He suggests that experiences of trauma are always already placed in a shifted spatio-temporal juncture; the task of reflecting on and re-activating such events always happens from a delayed perspective (199-200). This delayed perspective does not only mean a time lapse, but a deferred action which involves re-working through the experiences as well, while engaging in such "post-memorial" work (200). Thus, even though the reality of an impossible complete witness account remains at the heart of this question of writing history of mass horror, the probability of a deferred action that attempts to understand the past by a difficult engagement with it as "post-memorial" work initiates a possibility of understanding the reality of the event, beyond the question of factuality.

Cinema as Post-Memorial Work: The Re-Enactment of the Bengal Famine

History, as we understand it, has a complex and tenuous relationship with memory. Paul Ricoeur believes memory to be the "womb of history," suggesting how the writing of history is heavily dependent on witness-accounts, testimonies, and narration of past events (78). As per Agamben's proposition discussed earlier, the complexity of the testimony is rooted in the impossibility of there being a complete witness to a past event of collective horror. To revisit Elsaesser, the testimonies are already framed in a temporal distance to the event in focus. This raises the question of "post-memorial" works such as cinematic expressions which engage with the existing historiography of such events, and also work through its realities as a means of revisiting that history, of representing that past. In the case of exceptional events of history, the prevailing methods of historiography often fail to capture the living memories, the pain and devastation, or the stories of suffering. For the event of Partition for example, scholars like Gyanendra Pandey have commented on how fiction can be more authentic processes of memorializing the event than its popular historiography (62). Even though scarcity and starvation were common realities in the colonies, what made the 1943 famine truly an "exceptional" event was not merely the extent of the devastation, but also its continued presence in cultural productions where the famine is represented through "[i]mages of skeletons in lush paddy fields, tales of hoarders secreting away vast reserves of grain, of an inhuman colonial administration burning standing crops, capsizing fishing boats, and seizing the regular stocks of rice in agrarian households, and above all the sharp disparity between the fates of city and country" (Das Gupta 169).

It is here that the cinematic medium demands consideration regarding its interrelation with history, memory, and the process of representation. The medium of cinema has been hailed as the most popular mode of storytelling for centuries now, and there are many reasons for this, the discussion of which is beyond the scope of this paper. However, in the two films discussed in this paper, the medium of cinema engenders a certain re-telling or re-enactment of the past that attempts to represent the pain inflicted in the collective memory of the famine. The narration, the music, the combination of silence, sound and noise, flashbacks, insertion of documentary resources all carve a space for the sensorium of the famine as featured in collective memory, and which has found little space in dominant histories. Moreover, the palpability of hunger through images, orations, and sequences of starvation, begging, and death exhibit how the cinema medium accentuates the visceral element of the famine. As the famine slowly spread across Bengal, the rural regions were the worst hit. The villagers en masse traveled to the cities in search

of food-grains for their survival. The city-people who were relatively unaware of the realities of the famine came to grasp its reality through the changing "visual" dimension of the city. "Seeing" became the means of "knowing" for the urban middle-class gentry as the famine caused "a dramatic transformation beyond the usual sights of urban poverty" (Sunderason 5). Thus, the aspect of visuality was strongly rooted in the experience of the famine from its very onset.

The newspapers carried photographs alongside the reportage on the devastation caused by the famine; such visual imagery became a steady reference in literature which vividly described the horrors of the social transformation caused by hunger, poverty, and death. Further, the artists inspired by leftist political ideology in Bengal attempted to create a visual reportage of the tragedy in their bulletins, organized traveling exhibitions of famine-sketches, and staged performances enacting the horrors of the famine. Not only did the famine leave a scathing visual impact on the collective memory of Bengal, but it also made its visual horror a key attribute of the future cultural productions on the famine. Cinema, which adapted earlier literary works into the audio-visual medium in the 1970s and 1980s, was caught in a duality: the literature itself engendered a vivid representation of the famine through its language, and all the existing expressions on the famine represented a strong visuality of hunger and devastation. The cinema produced in the aftermath of the famine was not merely a reaction to the realities of the famine, but an attempt to work through it by methods of re-enacting history. Although the existing cultural methods provided a language for these works, they failed to provide a "fitting" image or method for its "representation or resolution" (Kaplan and Wang 14). As the two films try to capture the truth of the famine in the absence of either a robust pool of factual resources or a set paradigm of representations, they envisage new ways of engaging with the famine.

Ashani Sanket starts with a succession of scenes framing a quintessentially Bengali landscape, against the backdrop of a storm. The title flashes on the screen immediately before the camera captures the storm again, with a silhouette of dark trees against water-colored clouds. The focus of the camera then moves towards a woman: Ananga playing with water. The film crafts its subject carefully, with a group of warplanes flying overhead, leading Ananga to exclaim, "How beautiful! Like a flight of cranes!" Not only do the dialogues remind an aware spectator of the situations to follow, but they also depict the innocent oblivion to World War II prevalent among people long-removed from the political hustle and bustle of the cities. On the other hand, Ray as a screenwriter, is careful in handling the minute details of elements related to rural life in Bengal: landscapes, butterflies, colloquial expressions and accents, as well as the existing social structures of caste, class, and gender. As the main actor Soumitra Chatterjee recounts, "Ray tries to capture not an

individual, neither a familial, but a social reality in Bengal. A reality which has now achieved a sort of permanence–the reality of famine" (43). He adds that Ray tries to capture the struggles of the peasants and the poor, not consolidated in a partisan struggle, but fighting in their own ways in their everyday lives (43).

What is striking, as concordant with the theme, is the recurrent trope of food as emblematic of the situation of scarcity and the imminent famine. The villagers in their idle gathering passingly discuss the war at Medinipur (a rural district in Bengal known for its large paddy production) as responsible for the price hike of rice-crops. However, one of the participants in the discussion, the villager, Kundu, dismisses these concerns as rumors since he has a granary full of rice, and hence contends that the famine cannot be a reality for others either. The hoarding, the social hierarchies which were exacerbated by the advent of famine, and the backdrop of the war all set the tone for the future turn of events in the film. Later, Kundu, the patron, becomes the one left without food for his own family, his shop having been raided by angry village-men in search of basic sustenance. Ray, deeply influenced by the realist mode, keeps the movement of the film congruous with its title—always hinting at impending danger.

The novel *Ashani Sanket* depicts the reality of the famine, contrasting life before and after the event. The cinematic adaptation, too, heightens the impact of the famine by creating this contrast simultaneously through its visual imagery, poignant conversations, and music. When an old man visits their household, one of Gangacharan's foremost reactions to the situation is to ask Ananga if he was provided with food—rice and fish. With Ananga nodding positively, Gangacharan inquires whether he has taken a portion from hers. She, in turn, convinces him that that is the way to treat any visitor. The irony heightens when later in the film, there is a huge queue of widowed Bengali women in their customary plain white fabrics calling out, "*Fan daao*"[1] ("Fan" being the Bengali word for "rice-stock"), to be refused in silence by Ananga. The conditions which enabled one to welcome guests were no longer present in the emergency situation caused by the scarcity of food and hunger during the famine. People en masse asking for the rice-stock renders the pathos of this situation even more piercingly as it represents the shortage of the staple food, rice, and poses a certain centrality on the demand for rice-crops prevalent during the famine.

The film further comments on the existing gender dynamic in the village spaces and their transformation due to the famine. In the beginning, Gangacharan looks at Ananga's soft palms and prohibits her from taking part in odd jobs outside the home. However, due to the crisis, Ananga is compelled to venture out of her household to join Chhutki and the other village women in their search for alternative food

options by foraging pond-snails, wild potatoes, and herbs. When she and her group were forced to go to the jungle to collect wild potatoes, Ananga gets assaulted by a man. She and the other women fight the assaulter. His fate is not clearly depicted, but the camera captures his legs lying still against the marshland water. This incident, while portraying that women did have the agency and courage to fight back, does justify Gangacharan's earlier suggestion (and the contemporary societal mindset) of the outside world as being perilous for women. In a survey conducted by the Indian Institute of Statistics, the number of women's deaths were far higher than the number of men in the 1943 famine (Mahalanobis 2). Such deaths occurred ostensibly due to women's dependence on the male providers in their families, with the former having no access to alternative means of sustenance and being forced to navigate the hazards of the outside world to avoid starvation. Even though the gender roles are not portrayed in the film in an entirely subversive manner, the plotline highlights the complex re-calibration of societal norms that took place in the emergency of the famine. In another instance, during the acute rice shortage, Ananga's friend Chhutki decides to elope with the man from a kiln factory whose advances she used to vehemently refuse. This is the same man who, in an earlier scene, had given her a mound of rice she later threw away. Chhutki's dilemma, sculpted sharply by the unfolding of events, further captures the complexity of choices and compulsions engendered by the crisis of the famine. The movie thereby, in its attempt to find a new language to recount the event of the famine, uses several subplots to draw the contour of the murky reality of social life in rural Bengal, fueled by hunger and scarcity.

Fig. 1. Sandhya Roy, in the character of Chhutki, venturing into the dilapidated house in assurance of rice. *Ashani Sanket* (*Distant Thunder*). Directed by Satyajit Ray, performed by Soumitra Chattopadhyay, Babita, and Sandhya Roy, Balaka Movies, 1973. DVD.

Ray is most ardent in illustrating human behavior in trying situations, and in turn, communicating the nature of the crises through the film's characters. Gangacharan's job as a Brahmin priest as well as his social "respect" depended on his caste privileges

which he was proud of. Towards the end of the story, however, he waits on a desolate woman from a dominated caste-group, and does not shy away from performing her cremation rituals—acts conventionally considered blasphemous and impure for Brahmins. The caste-structure, which is based on the exploitation and appropriation of dominated caste groups by Brahmins like Gangacharan, towards the end of the film gets destabilized under the weight of the famine. Through Gangacharan's expressions, the scene vividly captures his moral crisis as he crosses the boundaries sanctioned by his caste identity. This moral crisis is a signature of Ray's films, as he attempts to capture the disruption of existing moral ethos in rural society.

Framing a discussion on the issues of memory and witnessing is multilayered in *Ashani Sanket*. The realist novel does not refrain from representing a reality of the Bengal Famine through Gangacharan's story, and the cinematic devices add to the layers of complexity experienced by the helpless populace. In a sudden rupture of the plot, a countdown of numbers flashes on the screen to represent the increasing count of deaths and to bring back the film to reality. Likewise, toward the end of the film, when a series of photos and newspaper clippings is flashed on the screen in succession, the factual horror of the famine is emphasized. As the photos enter and dissolve into the fictional depiction of the realities of the famine, the audience is able to place the truth of the famine within a historical context. The array of authentic (i.e., real) historical images juxtaposed with the cinematic depiction of the famine helps the audience recognize the factual reality of the famine, and accentuate how close to reality the film's story is.

Mrinal Sen, on the other hand, aspires to ask a more politically loaded question: Has the famine ever really ended? As Janam Mukherjee comments, Sen attacks the presumption of a prosperous Bengal by showing that the "ghosts" of famine, starvation, and hunger were "never quite dead" (258). Sen is also concerned with the very process of making socially conscious films on villages and rural life by urban middle-class directors who might be far removed from the realities they are aiming to capture. According to Sen, by making films which capture the social and political sufferings of society, these directors indirectly assert their moral superiority. He hints that there is no acknowledgement of the power dynamics latent in such patron-client relationships between these directors and the subjects of choice in their films (Sarkar 99).

In an interesting turn of events, the crew in *Akaler Sandhane,* confined by heavy rain, starts playing a spot-the-famine game. The director provides them with a stack of photographs gathered from newspaper clippings, archives and personal collections, and asks the crew to chronologically arrange them according to the three famines in Bengal in 1943, 1959, and 1971. The process of guessing the dates and erring

quite often elicits complex responses from viewers through forms of "associative memory" (Turim 207). This seemingly casual game played by the crew becomes a powerful tool to illustrate the long persistence of famine-like situations in Bengal. This sequence also makes the viewer aware of the crew's lack of awareness of the events and issues the film tries to capture. Unlike the previously discussed film, *Akaler Sandhane* embodies post-memorial work in order to illustrate the banality of capturing historic events while being completely oblivious to their continuity in contemporary times. Similarly, the character of the villager Haren, an erstwhile theater professional and the village schoolmaster, gives his intellectual input regarding the events of the famine to which the crew was oblivious. He also exposes the hypocrisy latent in popular iterations of the famine which solely concentrate on the statistics in the grand narratives of history at the expense of lived experiences.

Sen is keen on raising ethical questions at the heart of the film-making process in the film itself. In *Akaler Sandhane,* one of the characters, the politically conscious director, Chatterjee, persistently speaks of how art is a serious matter and fiercely criticizes one of his female leads, Debika, for threading her eyebrows. Debika's attempts at refashioning herself, according to Chatterjee, fail to represent the realities and characteristics of "rural women." Seemingly trivial, this incident leads to Debika signing off from the film and the crew finding as replacement, Durga, a woman from the village. While this incident depicts the director's commitment to his craft by illustrating how seriously he takes the film's realism, the subsequent events concerning Durga's foray into acting highlight the director's lack of understanding of the realities of village women. Chatterjee asks Debika if she understands her enormous responsibility as an artist and if she understands that her character is the symbol of the many women who experienced the famine, dishonor, and death. This sequence of scenes comes full circle with Durga's storyline in the latter part of the movie as her abusive husband accuses her of being in the flesh trade because of her participation in the film. Durga's dishonor and plight hint at the persistence of hunger long after the famine, of which the director is ignorant. It characterizes the limits of political awareness of the director by highlighting his ironic lack of understanding of realities in rural Bengal—the very subject that he tries to foreground in his film. This event also points to how, even if one is aware of the historical accuracies of the famine, there is sheer inadequacy in probing into the conditions of famine which persist in contemporary society.

The penultimate instance of self-reflexivity happens in the sequence with Durga. In the film-within-a-film, Sabitri is a wife of a downtrodden farmer whose family has long been starving. Yet, her husband refuses to sell off his land to the village moneylender. The helpless Sabitri resorts to the only choice left to her—she brings

home rice and fuel, scarce in the market, after spending a night with a man. Sabitri comforts her infant and tries to put the essentials to use. Unable to gain any answer from Sabitri, the husband smashes all the utensils in the house and attempts to hit the baby against the ground but Sabitri's scream stops him. Her cry in the sequence during the ongoing shooting within the film dissolves with Durga's cry who was watching the shooting from the audience. Durga relives her past once again through Sabitri's character in the film-within-the-film. The film within ends with a shot of Sabitri leaving her village alone, yet marching alongside an emaciated crowd migrating towards the city hoping to find food. *Akaler Sandhane* ends with a close-up shot of Durga rapidly receding and then fading into the background, with a voice-over stating, "Durga is alone. Her infant died. Her husband cannot be found." Sen treats the debate around witnessing, collective memory, and post-memorial work from unusual edges. The crew, as a representative of the post-memory generation itself, operates as an outsider to the lived experiences of the villagers. Durga resonates with the ending sequence of the film-within-the-film by finding the historical reality of the famine close to her own contemporary reality and destabilizes such insider-outsider binaries. Thus, post-memorial cinema is able to draw forth the trauma of the past events through its iteration and re-enactment. At the same time, the spot-the-famine game and the story of Durga's husband depicted through that of Sabitri, dismantle the binaries of an authentic witness and a complete witness as Durga and Sabitri pierce each other's present existence—in and beyond the reel.

Fig. 2. Smita Patil, playing her character Sabitri, looks out into the scorching sun before marching to the city. *Akaler Sandhane* (*In Search of a Famine*). Directed by Mrinal Sen, performed by Dhritiman Chatterjee and Smita Patil. 1980. DVD.

If one looks at other films like the 1946 film *Dharti ke Lal* (*Children of the Earth*), for example, we see the crisis in Bengal captured with a more positive treatment of the future to come, emphasized in particular by Pt. Ravi Shankar's background score. The close shots of the cracked lands of Bengal against the dark clouds and the bullocks ploughing the fields deploy the same trope of contrasting realities. The emergent drought and the fertile land being ploughed provide a sharp contrast, further enhanced by the promise of a monsoon in order to render the pathos of the famine that is to follow. Dialogues in this film again pivot around food and food habits, with the protagonist Ramu, in a feud with his wife, refusing to eat. The film shows a mass exodus of people to Kolkata through sequences of people's footsteps against changing numbers on milestones on the road as they travel from the rural districts to the city in search of food. The film also passingly reflects on the Hindu-Muslim communal divide during the famine. Further, in one sequence outside The Grand Hotel of Kolkata, Tripti Mitra, playing the role of Radhika, walks around singing, looking at the starved hundreds lying on footpaths under trees. She then looks through the glass of The Grand toward people enjoying their lavish meals while the famine is wreaking havoc on countless lives outside. This scene further illustrates the stark binaries of lives and their complexities, even with the overshadowing menace of the famine, and complicates the question of who witnessed the Great Bengal Famine and how.

If one compares *Akaler Sandhane* with the other cinematic productions on the 1943 famine, there are certain convergences and ruptures which come to the fore. While Ray uses an exuberance of color, a celebratory view of the beauty of nature to depict the horror of the famine, Sen's outlook is rather concentrated on the reality of the village space in its past and present. The devastation of the famine is re-enacted in Ray's film particularly through the "formal choices" of his cinematic craft, such as the beautiful nature tainted by the corpses of starved humans (Sarkar 100). Ray's representation of the famine is essentially from an urban gaze directed at village-life, and intended for an urban audience, while Sen completely overturns such a gaze by demonstrating its perils as he films the very process of filmmaking involving the famine. As Sarkar has pointed out, perhaps Ray's representation of the famine would be hailed as more authentic representation of rural life than Sen's; however, such an understanding is influenced by the canonical realist genre Ray follows in the film as well as by his audience's location in the urban centers (100). On the other hand, Sen constructs a new cinematic language of representing the famine by questioning the power-dynamic latent in the cultural productions. As pointed out by many, the cultural productions were primarily made by the urban middle-class gentry who were morally disturbed by the scale of devastation, and yet none of them had to directly face the horrors of the famine.

That being said, the films attempt to capture the truth of the famine in more ways than one. While Ray's film shows women's agency being exercised amidst the harsh realities of the famine, Sen's film depicts female agency by making the three women in his film providers of the family (Sarkar 112). In both films, the erstwhile romanticized village becomes the very site of the onslaught and devastation caused by the famine. The analysis of renowned film historian and critic, Moinak Biswas is pertinent here, where he commented,

> The Famine had shocked the urban artist into a new consciousness as the villages burst upon the cityscape like a nightmare . . . the metaphor of the phantasm-people without food, without clothes, shorn almost of their very physical reality-haunts the literature of the period. . . .The theme of an overall moral crisis generated by a violent uprooting and the compulsions of survival appeared often in contemporary literature. (53)

It is through the adaptation of literary works and by using their cinematic methods that Ray and Sen try to capture the truth of the moral crisis. While for Ray, the moral crisis is demonstrated in the villagers, for Sen, this crisis continues in the present times as well. While one can contend that Sen's film offers a critique of the structural violence exposed by the famine, Ray's gaze remains on the effect of individual actions. However, the two films are not mutually exclusive as they form distinct parts of the collective memory of the famine in Bengal. The choice of the subject-matter to represent the famine, and the ways of adapting them onto the screen by methods of re-enactment, provide ways of engagement with the difficult realities of the famine and show its impact on the collective life in Bengal.

Conclusion

In Walter Benjamin's "Thesis on the Philosophy of History," the *Angelus Novus* cannot escape the ruins of the past while trying to fly toward the future; the angel is propelled toward the past as the burden of experience hangs heavy on its wings (256). For Benjamin, history is a tool to make sense of the present; it is not merely a linear chronological progression of events as the intensity of some historical events might disrupt its usual course. R. G. Collingwood, in a similar vein, states that history should represent the past by means of a "re-enactment of past thought in the historian's own mind" (83). Thus, an attempt at post-memorial work would also bear testimony to *truth*—to realizing the past through a re-enactment of it, which might not necessarily follow the facts of the past events accurately. These two films perform this task in their own ways. For both Ray and Sen, the films capture the truth of the 1943 famine as they saw it. Considering that documentary footage of those times is scarce, and reportage and official historical accounts are incomplete, the cinematic medium provides a way to re-construct the reality of

the famine as an alternative historiography. One might argue about the two films' authenticity, given they were both literary works adapted to the medium of film. However, once we see history beyond this burden of authenticity, and we question what constitutes "authenticity," we might see these films performing the difficult task of memorializing a history which was never adequately written about.

Revisiting Elsaesser, he suggests that "trauma" would be the name for a referentiality that can no longer be placed (or that no longer needs to be placed) in a particular time or place as it not only happens in the aftermath of the event but continues to affect lives in the present moment (200). As he comments further, such recounting or reinventions of the traumatic experiences do need to free themselves from the boundaries of the concept of authenticity as well as the complete reversal of the performative and thus invent new modes of narration (199). It is at this "post-memorial" juncture that the two films in focus form a contour of possible works of mourning in their varied ways of referring to the historic Famine of Bengal. Even though both do not similarly address the issues of re-enactment and revisiting, they do reflect on them, often unconsciously in their varied degrees of creatively engaging with the reality of the famine. While it is important to acknowledge the importance of archiving witness-accounts of a historic traumatic event, the characters and the subplots contribute to understanding how, in a situation of historic trauma, the dualities between victims and oppressors get blurred in such a way that there ensues the absurd task of locating any authentic witness. For tragedies such as the famine, the question of authenticity gets even more problematic as the dominant forms of historiography do not adequately capture the lived realities, or the famine's impact on the collective memory. This makes fictional narratives perhaps more capable of representing this past in a more authentic manner, by demonstrating what *essentially happened* over what *actually happened*.[2] A possible way of responding to the horrors of the famine, thereby, lies not in the confines of finding authenticities, but in engaging with such accounts and working through them in a self-reflexive way so that the essential truth of the event surfaces over its convoluted factuality in such processes of memory-making.

NOTES

1. "Fan daao" ("give me rice-stock") as a phrase has been kept intact not for parochial reasons but because this phrase in its own right forms a significant resonance across the series of Bengal famines. From stories of my grandmother to poetry to films and newspaper clips, the phrase remains one epitomizing the famines, where people, so fond of rice in their daily meals, would not even ask for rice, but for the stock-water in which rice is boiled, in their attempt to quench hunger.
2. I've borrowed the two conceptualisations of history from Leopold von Ranke's "On the Character of Historical Science" (2011) and R. G. Collingwood's *The Idea of History* (1946). Similar ideas can be found in Gyanendra Pandey's *Remembering Partition* (2004) on the history of the British India Partition (1947). Here he has commented on how fiction can produce more authentic processes of memorialising the event than its popular historiography (62).

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