

'Bengal Famine' And A Forgotten Author **Abhijit Guha**

In the year 2009 sixty years of an outstanding book was completed. No book lover, no publishing company recollected the name of *Bengal Famine* which was written by Tarak Chandra Das and was published by Calcutta University in 1949. Every year, Calcutta University puts up a stall at the Kolkata Book Fair but *Bengal Famine* is no more available at the stall since long. *Bengal Famine* is a remarkable book for which the Anthropology Department of Calcutta University, which is the oldest of all the Anthropology Departments in Asia, can really feel proud, since the book was the result of a painstaking survey conducted by a group of dedicated teachers and students of the Department of Anthropology at Calcutta on the extreme wretchedness, misery and death of thousands of men, women and children affected by the Great Bengal Famine of 1943 in the streets of Calcutta. The idea of conducting an anthropological survey on the famine affected people was planned and executed by a teacher named Tarak Chandra Das who was not a member of any political party nor did he promote any NGO, is again a forgotten personality in the history of Indian anthropology despite his original and ground breaking contributions in the fields of social anthropology and sociology. The historiographers and encyclopaedia writers of Indian anthropology have simply forgotten the name of T C Das.

The recently published *Routledge Dictionary of Anthropologists* by a French scholar Gerald Gaillard(first published in 1997 in French and translated in English in 2004) in the sub-section named *India* under the chapter *Asia* mentioned the name of T C Das only in passing to narrate the formation of the first Anthropology Department in India at Calcutta University in 1921. The 7-page entry on India in the *Routledge Dictionary* contains short life-sketches and works of 12 eminent Indian anthropologists which includes B S Guha, K P Chattopadhyay, N K Bose, D N Majumdar, and Irawati Karve but alas, not T C Das. Much more revealing are the two Directories of Indian Anthropologists, one compiled and edited by Dr Sachin Roy (an early student of T C Das and former Director of the Indian Museum in Calcutta) and published in 1970 from the Indian Anthropological Association and the other edited by A Basu, M P Basu and A K Adhikary in 1981 published by the Anthropological Survey of India. In none of the Directories the name of T C Das appeared.

The only comprehensive available account of the list of publications of T C Das including a short life-sketch was prepared not by an anthropologist or a sociologist but by the Reference Librarian in the Central Library of the Anthropological Survey of India, Shyamal Kumar Ray, in his invaluable book *Bibliographies of Eminent Indian Anthropologists (with Life-Sketches)* published by the Anthropological Survey of India in July, 1974. The volume contains the list of publications and short life-sketches of 12 eminent Indian anthropologists including Tarak Chandra Das.

From the short life-sketch of T C Das people came to know that he earned his MA degree from Calcutta University in 'Ancient Indian History and Culture' and joined the

newly founded Department of Anthropology at Calcutta University in 1921 as a research scholar and then he became a lecturer in 1923 and finally retired from the rank of Reader in the Department in 1963. Das conducted extensive field works in Chotanagpur in the then Bihar and in Assam. He also conducted field works to assess the impact of industrialization in Birlapur in West Bengal, wrote thought provoking articles containing anthropological and sociological analyses on Bengal dowry restriction bill of 1940 and Hindu code bill in the years 1940 and 1944 along with articles on the practical suggestions for the improvement of museums in India and an empirical article on the fish-gorge in Bengal in the prestigious journals like *Modern Review*, *Calcutta Review* and *Ethnos*. He was very much interested in the application of Anthropology and had a great reputation as a teacher and trainer in field methods.

The publications of T C Das spanned over a period of 41 years from 1922-1963. He began to write academic articles in Anthropology when he was 24 and wrote his last article in 1963, a year before his death. Bibliographical records of T C Das show that he had 42 publications that is one in every year of his academic career. He published 31 full-length articles, 2 books, 6 abstracts, two jointly authored books and one joint article (Ray 1974 : 56-60). The national and international journals in which he published were prestigious and they included *Man*, *Anthropos*, *Ethnos*, *Calcutta Review*, *Modern Review*, *Sociological Bulletin*, *Journal of Social Research*, *Journal of the Department of Letters and Anthropological Papers* of the University of Calcutta. Apart from kinship and social organization, his areas of research interest display remarkable diversity which ranged between sun-worship (Das 1924), the disposal of dead among the tribals (Das 1940), improvement of museums (Das 1943), scheme for tribal welfare (Das 1960a), impact of industrialization on peasantry (Das 1960b) to an anthropological analysis of Bengal dowry restriction bill (1941).

From 1922 to 1940, that is about 18 years of his active academic life Das did not venture to write any significant article on the application of social anthropology for the welfare and improvement of the communities and cultures he had studied. His main research interest during this period was to record and study the different aspects of culture and social organization of the tribal and non-tribal communities of the eastern and northeastern parts of India. In this period he conducted field work and published reports on the Ho, Bhumij, Kharia, Chiru, Bathuri and Purum Kuki. His paper in prestigious international journals of Anthropology like *Anthropos*, *Man*, and *Ethnos* had been published during this period.

The year 1941 can be regarded as a major turning point in the academic career of T C Das. In 1941, he delivered the Presidential address of the Indian Science Congress. The lecture was a 29-page full-length paper entitled 'Cultural Anthropology in the Service of the Individual and the Nation'. This paper can be regarded as one of the pioneering articles on applied anthropology in India, in which Das elaborately charted out the future path of Indian anthropology with a rich description of the social dynamics of the tribal and peasant societies in India in the context of the role of anthropologists in nation building (Das 1941 : 1-29).

The two valuable books written by T C Das bears testimony of his meticulous observation and collection of data through field work. One was his monograph *The Purums: an Old Kuki Tribe of Manipur* (1945) and the other was *Bengal Famine* (1949). The Purum monograph was one of the most comprehensive works produced by any anthropologist on the life of a small tribe and it became a major source of data for a

number of world renowned social anthropologists of Great Britain and USA in later years. Unfortunately, both the foreign and the Indian anthropologists concentrated more on the academic aspects of Das' Purum study¹ leaving aside its applied dimensions which was emphasized by him in the concluding chapter of the book (Das 1945 : 271-295). The book on the famine of Bengal which took place in 1943 was a unique and rare firsthand study done by any anthropologist or social scientist on the victims of one of the greatest tragedies of the country under the colonial rule. An earlier version of the book was discussed in the then British Parliament and some of the recommendations advanced by Das were adopted by the Famine Inquiry Commission in 1944 formed by the colonial government for the prevention of future famines in India (Das 1949 : iii-iv). Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in his book *The Discovery of India* also mentioned about the anthropological survey conducted by Das on the famine affected population of Bengal and expressed his confidence on the results of the survey in contrast to the one carried out by the government (Nehru 1946 : 495-496). Ironically enough, the Nobel Laureate economist Amartya Sen though gave reference to Das' original work several times in his famous book *Poverty and Famines*, he did not mention about the explanatory and policy dimensions of this brilliant work (Sen 1999).

The present generation of anthropologists and social scientists has a lot to learn from the works of this great anthropologist regarding methodological rigour and the applied aspects of their discipline. It is high time that the Department of Anthropology at Calcutta University should take initiatives to collect and republish the writings of T C Das which have neither been reprinted by Calcutta University nor are his books available at the sales counter of one of the oldest Universities of India.

Of all the works of T C Das *Bengal Famine* can be regarded as the most valuable and unique contribution for the following reasons.

The field based study of the Bengal famine of 1943 which was conducted by T C Das is typical anthropological study of a tribe or a caste village. Here are some facts.

First, this is the only first-hand study done by a team of trained anthropologists under the leadership of T C Das on Bengal famine.

Second, the book which was written by Das has not received any attention by the successive generation of anthropologists and sociologists in India.

Third, in this study Das and his co-fieldworkers employed traditional anthropological methods (e.g. genealogy, case history, participant observation) for the collection of data not from a specific tribe or caste in a rural setting, but from a scattered and heterogeneous group of human beings displaced from the different districts of undivided Bengal affected by the acute food shortage.

Fourth, the field work and the survey on the famine affected population were carried out mainly in the city of Calcutta.

Fifth, the report and the recommendations based on the anthropological study of the famine in Bengal were taken into consideration by the policy makers and administrators at the highest level of governance.

Sixth, the explanation provided by Das on the causes of Bengal famine surpassed the prevalent anthropological interpretations of social events. Taken together, the above facts have made *Bengal Famine* an unorthodox kind of anthropological study even by modern standards.

The subtitle of the book *Bengal Famine* is phrased in the following words : 'As revealed in a Survey of the Destitutes in Calcutta'. It is true that the book is the result of a survey undertaken by a team of anthropologists during 1943-44 in Calcutta city and also in the villages of the ten districts of undivided Bengal. The idea of conducting a survey with a team of trained anthropologists was first conceived by T C Das in July-August of 1943 when hundreds of hungry destitutes entered into the city of Calcutta in search of food. Das proposed about the survey to his colleagues and prepared a detailed questionnaire and a team was formed with eleven trained anthropologists which included the teachers and research students of the Department of Anthropology of the Calcutta University. The data thus collected was analyzed and a preliminary report was written and a major part of the report was submitted to the Famine Inquiry Commission in 1944 in the form of a memorandum. The report was later written in the form of a book by T C Das in July 1948 and was published in 1949 by the Calcutta University. *Bengal Famine*, therefore, is a unique example of team work under the leadership of T C Das by a dedicated group of university based anthropologists who were driven more by a kind of social and moral commitment than by pure academic quest. This of course does not mean that the survey was conducted in a loose manner, that methodological rigors were sacrificed in order to conduct a rapid and quick appraisal of the situation. The team had no national or international funding agency behind them; no political agenda was lying before them. The Calcutta University sanctioned a sum of Rs 500/- only to extend the survey in the rural areas of the 10 districts of erstwhile undivided Bengal. In fact, the two chapters on methodology, which are the best portions of the book, reveal its strength. The chapter XI of the book entitled 'Causes of the Famine of 1943' is another treasure-house of the book which places *Bengal Famine* far above the category of a run-of-the-mill 'sample survey'. In the words of Nehru: '*The Department of Anthropology of the Calcutta University carried out an extensive scientific survey of the sample groups in the famine areas. They arrived at the figure of about 3,400,000 total deaths by famine in Bengal... Official figures of the Bengal Government based largely on unreliable reports from village patwaris or headmen gave a much lower figure*' (Nehru 1946:495-496). It is interesting to note in this connection that another survey on Bengal famine was conducted by P C Mahalanobis and K P Chattopadhyay in 1943 which unlike Das' work was carried out by 92 volunteers and the majority of them belonged to the Provincial Kisan Sabha, a communist organization; there were also a few Congress workers among the investigators. T C Das in his book *Bengal Famine* expressed his skepticism about the reliability of the survey done by Mahalanobis and Chattopadhyay in a point blank manner. To quote Das: '*As Prof Mahalanobis has not mentioned the names and qualifications of his volunteer-workers we are not in a position to compare the results of this survey with those of ours. As far as we know most of his field-investigators did not possess any recognizable knowledge of sociology or economics and they had no previous training in field-work. Moreover, another point appears to be noteworthy in this connection. The employment of members of a particular political party is not safe in a socio-economic survey of this type which aims at scientific accuracy.*' Such was the level of academic integrity and courage of T C Das which probably acted as a sufficient cause for his marginalization in the small world of the Indian anthropologists. The findings of the anthropological study on famine was represented in Das' book not only with dry figures, tables and graphs but also with human stories of 'grim struggles between hunger

and finer sentiments of love, affection and kindness'. In Das' book one finds description of a hungry father pouncing upon a bowl of *phan* (rice-gruel) which his wife had brought for their child on a street of south Calcutta. In another situation Das described how a mother mercilessly beat up his son for taking a piece of potato from her share. The author had to intervene to save the child from being severely injured by his mother. This memorable book contains eleven heart-breaking photographs of famine victims, six of which were reproduced from *The Statesman*, the newspaper which was quoted by T C Das quite often in his book as one of the most reliable sources. One only wonders why such a remarkable work which was full of scientific rigor, human elements, social commitment and policy implications has been put into oblivion by Calcutta University.

DAS, SEN AND THE CAUSES OF BENGAL FAMINE

In his book *Poverty and Famines* (1981), the Nobel Laureate economist Amartya Sen has referred to the survey done by T C Das ten times in the chapter entitled 'The Great Bengal Famine'. But nowhere in his book Sen has discussed about the most important chapter in Das' book, the chapter on the 'Causes of the Famine of 1943'. If one carefully goes through the chapter in Das' book one will be surprised to find some of striking similarities between the explanations given by both the authors regarding the causes of the Bengal Famine. Sen in his book opposed the official view regarding the main cause of famine. According to the official view the famine was caused by an acute shortage of food while Sen with the help of a huge amount of secondary data argued that the real cause of the famine was to be found in the loss of entitlement of the affected people. In other words, the production and supply of the major food crop in Bengal before the famine did not decline but the prices of the same suddenly soared very high which made most of the rural population victims since they lost their purchasing power.

Like Sen Das also considered the question of the availability of rice vis-a-vis consumption figures in Bengal. After considering all kinds of sources of data with much rigor, as concluded : '*We have no reliable data to prove that Bengal cannot feed her population with her own produce of rice*'. He stated further : '*The Bengal famine of 1943, as shown by these figures, was not much due to shortage in the production of rice by the province as to other factors*'. (Das 1949:104). What then, according to Das were the 'other factors'? Here Das' treatment of the problem seems to be more holistic than Sen and carried much contemporary relevance. With the help of massive quantitative data and based on his intimate field based knowledge about the agriculture of Bengal Das argued that the majority of Bengal's population depends on the cultivation of small and scattered pieces of land which has made the peasant families vulnerable to food crisis. In this connection, it would be worthwhile to quote from Das : '*The only point we wish to emphasize is that a very large number of persons of Bengal depend on agriculture.... it is certain that each and every one of these families could not have a sufficiently extensive farm to meet all its demands and lay something for evil days. In fact they lived on the narrow margin which separates subsistence from starvation. Whenever there was even a slight disturbance of the balance either through natural or artificial causes a large number of them fell victims of starvation.*' (Das 1949 : 105).

The suggestions which Das recommended as long-term measures to prevent the near famine scenario which prevailed among the Bengal peasantry were noteworthy. He recommended co-operative farming, revival of rural crafts and industries and spread of scientific techniques and knowledge for the improvement of agriculture. It is a real irony that the work of T C Das on Bengal famine and his suggestions towards the

improvement of the economic conditions of Bengal peasantry which is still relevant today have been totally forgotten.

1. For example, in a book entitled *Proceedings of the Symposium on Purum (Chote) Revisited* published by the Anthropological Survey of India in 1985, none of the 20 leading Indian anthropologists mentioned or discussed about the ideas of T C Das on the application of anthropological knowledge for the socio-economic improvement of the Purum tribe, who also called themselves 'Chote' (Das Gupta et.al. 1985:1-90).

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