Bengal Famine

What is the issue?

- The Bengal famine, that began in 1943, took half as many lives as the German's holocaust did.
- Yet, it doesn't have a Remembrance Day like Jallianwala Bagh.
- It is continued to be perceived as a tragic occurrence and not an atrocity.

What were the contributory factors?

- Then U.K. Prime Minister Winston Churchill, as part of the western war effort, ordered the diversion of food from starving Indians to already well-supplied British soldiers and stockpiles in Britain and Europe.
- It is very common to hold the British government's diversion of food grains, responsible for the famine.
- But the fact that enough food was available within India to prevent its occurrence cannot be ignored.
- The Earl of Huntington in a parliamentary debate observed that losses were mainly due to exceptional crop production in Northern India in the spring of 1943.
- Then Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, acknowledged that Punjab cultivators were engaged in blackmailing the starving peasants of Bengal to make inordinate profits.
- The British government paid inflated price in the open market to ensure supplies which made grains unaffordable for ordinary Indians.
- Official records in the British Library also establish that the famine was not the outcome of a lack of food grain alone.
- Rather, political machinations, greed, hoarding and incompetent bureaucratic blocked efforts to procure and transport grain from Punjab and the United Provinces.
- The loss of Burma rice and cyclone of 1942 were other factors.

How was it handled?

- The British-Indian administration made efforts to create records rather than take resolute action.
- Everyday thousands of emaciated dead had to be removed from the streets of Calcutta by police and corpse disposal organisations.

- As more of starving people from the countryside moved into Calcutta city, then Chief Minister of Bengal, Khawaja Nazimuddin, removed them from the city by force.
- Lord Strabolgi, observed in the House of Lords that the occurrence of the disaster was mainly contributed to the ironbound bureaucracy and its procrastination.
- He quoted that “They consider too long, they set up too many Committees, they talk too long about what they are going to do, and in the meanwhile this terrible famine was galloping towards them.”
- In 1944, The Intelligence Bureau alerted about the possibility of its recurrence, if measures are not taken to prevent hoarding, control pricing and introduce rationing in the larger towns.

Source: The Hindu

