

Condition of Women in Midnapore District during the Bengal Famine of 1943: A local History Based on Nihar

Mousumi Khatun

PhD Research Scholar, Department of History, Aliah University, Kolkata, India

Abstract

The Bengal Famine of 1943 was not simply a crisis of food availability; it was a profound social disaster in which war-time policies, market disruption, natural calamities, disease, displacement and unequal access to relief combined to produce mass deprivation. The coastal subdivisions of Contai and Tamluk in the then undivided Midnapore district were among the areas most severely affected. This article examines the condition of women in Midnapore during the famine through the contemporary Bengali weekly Nihar, published from Contai. The evidence in Nihar shows that women's suffering was inseparable from the destruction of household economies after the cyclone of 16 October 1942, the disruption of riverine transport and fishing under the Boat Denial Policy, the loss of crops and livestock, the scarcity and rising price of rice, disease, homelessness and the inadequacy of relief. Women appear in the newspaper not merely as passive victims but also as workers, caregivers, petitioners, recipients and organisers of relief. References to women facing hunger with children, women found in extremely debilitated conditions, the distribution of saris, the establishment of orphanages, and women's participation in spinning and weaving reveal both the depth of gendered vulnerability and the limited spaces available for female agency. Nihar therefore provides an important local archive for reconstructing the social history of famine from below.

Keywords: Bengal Famine of 1943, Midnapore, Contai, Tamluk, Nihar, Women, Cyclone, Boat Denial Policy.

1. Introduction

The Bengal Famine of 1943 occupies a central place in the history of colonial India. Its causes and consequences have been examined through official reports, economic statistics, administrative correspondence and later historical scholarship. Yet the experience of famine was profoundly local. Different communities encountered the crisis through different combinations of crop failure, loss of assets, price inflation, transport restrictions, disease and exclusion from relief. A regional newspaper can therefore add an important dimension to the history of famine by recording events, complaints, appeals and everyday distress that may disappear from aggregate statistics¹.

This article uses Nihar, a Bengali weekly published from Contai in Midnapore, as its principal local source. The British Library's Endangered Archives Programme identifies Nihar as a weekly newspaper published from Contai, Midnapore, with a collection covering 1902–1989. The paper was associated with the Nihar Press established by Madhusudan Jana². The surviving 1943 issues cited in the source material are especially valuable because they followed the crisis almost week by week.

The central argument of this article is that the condition of women in Midnapore during the famine cannot be understood simply as a consequence of food shortage. Women's vulnerability developed through the collapse of household production and income, the absence or mobility of male earners, the destruction of homes and clothing, the burden of caring for children and sick relatives, restricted access to relief, and the spread of malaria and other diseases. At the same time, Nihar records women participating in productive activities, relief work and community initiatives. The newspaper thus reveals both gendered suffering and forms of female agency.

2. Historical Background and Geographical Setting of Midnapore

The district of Midnapore, or Midnapore, occupied a strategically important position in south-western Bengal. Its southern and south-eastern areas connected Bengal with the Bay of Bengal and the coastal and riverine networks leading towards Orissa. Contai (Kathi) and Tamluk were particularly connected with rivers, tidal waterways, agricultural production, fishing, salt-making and coastal trade. Tamluk also had a long history as a riverine and maritime centre.

The geography of the region is essential to understanding the famine. Agricultural production depended heavily on seasonal rainfall and the management of rivers, embankments and tidal waters. At the same time, coastal communities depended on boats for fishing, transport and the movement of food and other commodities. The same geographical features that supported local livelihoods also made the region vulnerable to cyclones, storm surges, floods, salinity and epidemics.

The 16 October 1942 cyclone was a decisive turning point³. Government disaster records identify the cyclone as having crossed the West Bengal coast near Contai, accompanied by a storm surge of several metres and very heavy loss of life and livestock⁴. The disaster damaged houses, standing crops, stored grain, embankments and local infrastructure. Contemporary Nihar described the coastal areas as devastated and repeatedly demanded restoration of embankments, water supplies and means of livelihood. The famine therefore developed on top of an already shattered rural economy.

3. Pre-Famine Social and Economic Conditions

Before the famine, the rural society of Midnapore was already marked by economic inequality. Cultivators, sharecroppers, agricultural labourers, fishers, artisans and small traders depended on fragile combinations of land, seasonal work and local exchange. A household could survive a bad season if it possessed grain reserves, livestock, land, tools or access to credit. The cyclone destroyed many of these forms of security simultaneously.

Nihar's early 1943 reports describe shortages of drinking and cooking water, the damaging effects of salt water on cultivation, and difficulties in washing clothes in saline water⁵. Such reports are important for a gender history of famine. Water, cooking, washing, food preparation and care work were disproportionately located within the domestic sphere. When wells and ponds were contaminated and freshwater became scarce, the burden did not fall equally on all members of the household. Women, who were commonly responsible for domestic water and food management, had to perform these tasks under increasingly difficult conditions.

The scarcity of kerosene also affected everyday life. Nihar reported hardship caused by the shortage of kerosene and the absence of adequate medical facilities for diseases such as cholera and dysentery⁶. The crisis therefore affected not only food consumption but the entire reproduction of household life.

The newspaper also reported that rice had become scarce and expensive while large quantities of paddy were moving out of the affected region. It criticised hoarding, speculation and black marketing and repeatedly called for imports and for restrictions on the outward movement of grain⁷. For poor households, particularly those without secure male earnings, the gap between market prices and purchasing power was critical.

4. The Cyclone, Displacement and the Collapse of Household Security

The cyclone of October 1942 must be treated as the immediate prehistory of the famine in coastal Midnapore. Nihar's reports depict a landscape in which houses had disappeared, fields had been flooded, dead livestock and human bodies had contaminated the environment, and salt water had damaged agricultural land. The newspaper repeatedly appealed for the reconstruction of embankments and houses and for loans to people who had lost their homes⁸.

Women experienced the destruction of the household in a particularly direct way. A rural household was simultaneously a residence, a place of food storage, a site of production and a centre of child care. When the house was destroyed and utensils, clothing, grain and other assets were lost, women's ability to perform basic domestic responsibilities was undermined. The loss of clothing was also repeatedly noted by Nihar. Later in the famine, the paper described the shortage of clothing and the destruction of garments in saline water and floods⁹.

The cyclone also weakened the local labour economy. Men who had lost employment or agricultural resources increasingly travelled in search of work. Nihar's evidence, read alongside the wider famine context, suggests that this mobility intensified women's responsibilities within villages. Women were left to care for children, sick relatives and whatever remained of the household, often without adequate food or income.

5. The Boat Denial Policy and the Coastal Economy

The Boat Denial Policy formed an important part of the war-time disruption of coastal Bengal. Fearing a Japanese advance after the fall of Burma, the colonial authorities treated parts of coastal Bengal as vulnerable to invasion and adopted measures intended to deny transport resources to a possible enemy. Boats were removed or destroyed and petrol supplies were restricted. Iftikhar Iqbal has shown how the policy disrupted the riverine economy and contributed to the wider crisis of the Bengal Famine¹⁰.

The effects were especially serious in places where fishing and water transport were central to livelihood. Research on the region notes that in Nandigram and adjoining coastal areas large numbers of boats were destroyed or removed, severely disrupting transport and fishing¹¹. The loss of boats was therefore not simply a transport problem. It affected the fishing community's productive capacity, the movement of food, access to markets, communication between villages and the possibility of earning cash.

For women in fishing households, the destruction of boats had indirect but severe consequences. The loss of a family fishing asset meant the loss of household income. Women who depended on the earnings of fishers had fewer resources for purchasing rice, salt, oil and clothing. At the same time, the disruption of water transport made it more difficult to obtain relief and essential commodities.

Nihar repeatedly referred to the demand for changes in boat regulations and the restoration of boats. One issue in June 1943 recorded governmental consideration of changes to boat rules in order to improve trade and commerce, while the newspaper continued to describe the scarcity of essential goods¹². The evidence demonstrates that transport policy and famine vulnerability were closely connected.

6. The Great Famine in Midnapore

By 1943, the crisis had developed into a famine characterised by food scarcity, extreme price inflation, unemployment, disease and mass displacement. The Famine Inquiry Commission later recorded the terrible situation in Contai and Tamluk and noted the difficulty of disposing of dead bodies in Contai by September 1943¹³. Modern scholarship similarly identifies Contai and Tamluk as among the most severely affected subdivisions in Bengal¹⁴.

Nihar provides a striking local chronology of this deterioration. In February it reported rising rice prices, shortages of imported commodities and severe transport difficulties. By May it was reporting the cries of starving people and urging the government to import food. In June and July, it increasingly described starvation, malaria, homelessness, theft and the failure of agricultural recovery. By August and September the paper was portraying the coastal subdivisions as devastated areas in which large numbers of people were dying.

The famine was not only a shortage of rice. It was a crisis of entitlement and purchasing power. Even where grain existed somewhere in the wider region, many households could no longer obtain it. Nihar complained that paddy was being exported while local people suffered scarcity and repeatedly demanded that food be imported and that exports be restricted¹⁵. The paper also criticised merchants and moneylenders for speculation and hoarding.

The situation was further aggravated by disease. Malaria, cholera and dysentery spread in the wake of flooding, stagnant water, weakened bodies and inadequate medical facilities. Nihar reported calls for dispensaries, medicines and malaria-control measures and noted that many people were too sick to work¹⁶. This is particularly significant for women because illness within a household increased the burden of unpaid care at precisely the moment when food and fuel were scarce.

7. Women under Famine: Hunger, Care and the Breakdown of the Family

The most important contribution of Nihar to the social history of the famine is its direct depiction of women among the starving population. The paper's reports suggest that women were frequently visible at the point where household resources had almost completely collapsed.

One July 1943 report described two women who appeared with children before the subdivisional magistrate's residence in the hope of obtaining food; another woman was found in an extremely weakened condition near a bamboo grove¹⁷. These episodes reveal a crucial feature of famine experience: women often approached administrative or charitable institutions not as independent economic actors with stable incomes but as representatives of households in extreme distress.

Another Nihar report stated that women were found on roads in conditions comparable to the dead or dying and that families were selling land, ornaments and household utensils in the search for food¹⁸. The sale of jewellery is particularly revealing. Ornaments could function as one of the few forms of movable household wealth available to women. Their disposal indicates the conversion of accumulated family assets into food during the final stages of economic distress.

The famine also exposed the fragility of family relationships under extreme deprivation. In September Nihar described a case in which a husband left his wife and children because of hunger and another in which a mother abandoned a sick daughter¹⁹. Such reports should not be interpreted simply as evidence of individual moral failure. They show the destructive pressure created when households lost food, income, shelter and the physical capacity to care.

The newspaper also recorded an especially distressing incident involving a woman from a village in the Contai area and her young child, followed by her placement under the supervision of a female worker associated with a Hindu Mission orphanage²⁰. The incident demonstrates how famine could produce situations in which maternal care itself became impossible and charitable institutions became substitutes for the family.

8. Clothing, Shelter and Women's Bodily Vulnerability

Famine history is often written through grain prices and mortality statistics, but Nihar makes clear that clothing and shelter were also essential components of survival. The newspaper described the shortage of clothing and the destruction of garments by flood and saline water. It used striking language to describe women who, because of the lack of clothes, were exposed to extreme indignity²¹.

For women, clothing had social, cultural and practical significance. The loss of clothing could restrict mobility, public participation and access to relief spaces. A woman who had no adequate garment might be reluctant or unable to appear in public, travel to a relief centre or seek work. Thus, the clothing crisis could deepen food insecurity.

The destruction of houses created another gendered vulnerability. Homeless women, especially those accompanied by children, were exposed to disease, insecurity and dependence on relatives or charitable organisations. Nihar's repeated calls for house-building loans and assistance for the displaced indicate that shelter was recognised as an urgent part of recovery²².

9. Women's Work and Limited Agency

Although famine made women extremely vulnerable, Nihar does not portray them only as helpless victims. It also records women's participation in economic and relief activities. In June 1943, the paper reported a meeting at the Contai Khadi School in which Kiranprabha Chowdhury, described as a prominent woman worker, encouraged spinning and weaving. Materials and spinning equipment were distributed to promote productive work²³.

This evidence is important for understanding the relationship between famine and women's labour. When agricultural and fishing economies collapsed, spinning and weaving could provide a small supplementary source of income that could be carried out within or near the household. The promotion of charkha and handloom production therefore represented an attempt to create alternative livelihood opportunities.

Women's participation also appeared in relief and charitable work. Nihar mentioned women associated with relief activities and recorded the role of a female worker, Sarojini Devi, in supervising a vulnerable child placed in an orphanage²⁴. Such evidence suggests that women occupied multiple positions in the famine economy: starving dependants, caregivers, wage earners, relief recipients and relief workers.

The distinction between victimhood and agency is therefore important. Women's agency during the famine was constrained by structural inequality, but it was not absent. Some women organised, worked, sought relief, participated in charitable institutions and helped sustain community networks.

10. Relief, Orphanages and the Problem of Access

Nihar repeatedly criticised the inadequacy of relief. It reported the establishment of gruel kitchens, orphanages, charitable medical services and relief centres, while also noting shortages and administrative problems. In June the paper described relief rules under which able-bodied men were expected to support dependants; later it reported changes in those rules²⁵.

Such rules had gendered implications. If relief was structured around the assumption that an able-bodied male worker would maintain a household, women in households without such a worker could become particularly vulnerable. Widows, abandoned women, women caring for sick family members and households where men had migrated for work could fall outside conventional assumptions about the family wage.

The creation of orphanages was therefore significant. Nihar reported the establishment of an orphanage in Contai and later described the work of Hindu Mission and other organisations in assisting children²⁶. These institutions responded to the breakdown of family structures but could not replace the scale of support required by the population.

The paper also reported the distribution of saris, dhotis and other clothing by relief organisations. One November report described substantial distributions of rice, pulses and clothing to thousands of adults and children in a relief centre in the Contai area²⁷. Such distributions are especially relevant to women's history because saris were among the essential commodities distributed.

11. Disease and the Feminisation of Care

The spread of malaria, cholera and dysentery compounded the famine. Nihar repeatedly reported the scarcity of medicines and medical facilities and argued for village dispensaries and low-cost medicines²⁸. When illness became widespread, the distinction between famine and epidemic became blurred.

Women frequently carried the burden of caring for sick children, husbands and elderly relatives. Although the newspaper does not quantify this unpaid labour, its descriptions of sick households and women appearing with children for relief make the burden visible indirectly. The exhaustion of household caregivers also affected the capacity to cook, collect water, obtain food and maintain sanitation.

The relationship between disease and women's vulnerability was therefore circular. Malnutrition weakened bodies; disease reduced the capacity to work; illness increased care responsibilities; and care responsibilities reduced women's ability to seek income or relief.

12. A Local Newspaper as a Source for Women's History

Nihar's value lies partly in its immediacy. Unlike later statistical surveys, it records the language of contemporary crisis: appeals, complaints, descriptions of starving people, demands for imports, criticism of authorities and reports of local initiatives. It therefore allows historians to reconstruct the social texture of famine.

At the same time, the source must be used critically. Nihar was a regional newspaper with its own political and social outlook. Its descriptions are not a neutral statistical record. Some statements are rhetorical, some figures require corroboration, and some reports reflect the newspaper's criticism of government policy. Consequently, Nihar should be read alongside official reports, famine surveys, demographic studies and other contemporary newspapers.

Nevertheless, its local perspective is precisely what makes it valuable. National accounts can show the scale of the Bengal famine, but Nihar shows how that crisis was experienced in villages, markets, roads, relief centres and households in coastal Midnapore. Most importantly for women's history, it captures episodes that conventional administrative records often reduce to categories such as “destitute,” “dependent” or “relief recipient.”

13. Conclusion

The condition of women in Midnapore during the Bengal Famine of 1943 was shaped by a chain of interconnected disasters. The cyclone of October 1942 destroyed homes, crops, livestock and food reserves. Salinity and floods damaged agricultural land. The Boat Denial Policy disrupted fishing and river transport. Food prices rose while purchasing power declined. Disease spread through weakened and displaced populations. Relief remained inadequate and difficult to access.

Women experienced these processes through the collapse of household security. They faced hunger, homelessness, loss of clothing, disease, separation from male earners, the burden of caring for children and sick relatives, and the breakdown of family structures. Nihar's reports of women arriving with children in search of food, women found in severely weakened conditions, women deprived of clothing, and families forced to sell their assets provide powerful evidence of this gendered experience.

Yet the history is not solely one of victimhood. Women also participated in spinning, weaving, charitable work, orphanage care and relief activities. Their labour became part of attempts to reconstruct household and community survival. Nihar therefore reveals a complex history in which women were simultaneously among the most vulnerable victims of famine and important participants in strategies of survival and relief. The history of the Bengal Famine in Midnapore should consequently be written not only through crop statistics, prices and mortality, but also through the history of households, care, clothing, work, mobility and gender. Alongside various official records and scholarly sources, literary sources, Nihar provides a valuable local window into this neglected dimension of the 1943 famine based on Midnapore district of Bengal Province.

References

1. Goswami, Omkar. "The Bengal famine of 1943: re-examining the data." *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 27, no. 4 (1990): 445-463.
2. British Library, Endangered Archives Programme, EAP921/3, "Nihar weekly newspaper, Contai, Midnapore, West Bengal," collection description; the collection covers 1902–1989 and identifies Nihar as a weekly Bengali newspaper published from Contai.
3. De, Shyamaprasad. "The 1942 cyclone and the colonial administration: A story of imperial revenge against the rebellious Midnapore." *Journal of People's History and Culture* 8, no. 2 (2022).
4. Government of West Bengal, Disaster Management & Civil Defence Department, historical cyclone record: the 14–16 October 1942 severe cyclonic storm crossed the West Bengal coast near Contai and caused major loss of life and livestock
5. Nihar, Vol. 42, No. 18, 5 January 1943.
6. Nihar, 12 January 1943.
7. Nihar, January–May 1943.
8. Nihar, June 1943 issues, especially Vol. 42, Nos. 39–43.
9. Nihar, Vol. 42, No. 42, 22 June 1943.
10. Iftekhhar Iqbal, "The Boat Denial Policy and the Great Bengal Famine," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh (Humanities)*, vol. 56, nos. 1–2 (2011), pp. 271–282.
11. Senjuti Mallik, Colonial Biopolitics and the Great Bengal Famine of 1943, *GeoJournal* (2023) 88:3205–3221 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-022-10803-4>; Iftekhhar Iqbal, "The Boat Denial Policy and the Great Bengal Famine," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh (Humanities)*, vol. 56, nos. 1–2 (2011), pp. 271–282.

12. Nihar, Vol. 42, No. 40, 8 June 1943.
13. Famine Inquiry Commission, Report on Bengal, Government of India, 1945, especially the entries concerning Contai and Tamluk during July–October 1943.
14. Cormac Ó Gráda, *Eating People Is Wrong, and Other Essays on Famine, Its Past, and Its Future* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), discussion of the regional geography of the Bengal famine; see also Mahalanobis, Mukherjea and Ghose, *A Sample Survey of the Bengal Famine of 1943*
15. Nihar, February–September 1943.
16. Nihar, Vol. 42, Nos. 39–45, June–July 1943.
17. Nihar, Vol. 42, No. 44, 6 July 1943.
18. Nihar, Vol. 42, No. 46, 20 July 1943.
19. Nihar, Vol. 43, No. 5, 21 September 1943, “Maraner Dak” (The Call of Death).
20. Nihar, Vol. 43, No. 5, 21 September 1943.
21. Nihar, Vol. 42, No. 41, 15 June 1943, and Vol. 42, No. 42, 22 June 1943.
22. Nihar, June–July 1943.
23. Nihar, Vol. 42, No. 41, 15 June 1943.
24. Nihar, Vol. 43, No. 5, 21 September 1943; see also Vol. 42, No. 46, 20 July 1943.
25. Nihar, Vol. 42, No. 42, 22 June 1943 and subsequent June–August issues, discussion of relief rules and their effects.
26. Nihar, Vol. 42, Nos. 46–47, July 1943.
27. Nihar, Vol. 43, No. 9, 16 November 1943.
28. Nihar, Vol. 42, Nos. 44–49, July–August 1943.

Selected Bibliography

1. British Library. Endangered Archives Programme. EAP921/3, Nihar Weekly Newspaper, Contai, Midnapore, West Bengal, 1902–1989.
2. Famine Inquiry Commission. Report on Bengal. Government of India, 1945.
3. Government of West Bengal, Disaster Management & Civil Defence Department. Historical Cyclone Records and District Disaster Management materials relating to the 1942 cyclone and coastal Midnapore.
4. Iqbal, Iftekhhar. “The Boat Denial Policy and the Great Bengal Famine.” *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh (Humanities)* 56, nos. 1–2 (2011): 271–282.
5. Mahalanobis, P. C., R. Mukerjea, and J. C. Ghose. *A Sample Survey of the Bengal Famine of 1943*. Calcutta, 1946.
6. Nihar. Various issues, Vols. 42–43, 1943. Contai: Nihar Press.
7. Ó Gráda, Cormac. *Eating People Is Wrong, and Other Essays on Famine, Its Past, and Its Future*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.
8. Senjuti Mallik, Colonial Biopolitics and the Great Bengal Famine of 1943, *GeoJournal* (2023) 88:3205–3221 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-022-10803-4>