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Outlook March 20, 2019 13:06 IST Bengal famine of 1943 caused by British policy failure, not drought: IIT-Gn study 1970-01-01T05:30:00+0530

By Mohana Basu

Gandhinagar, Mar 20 The 1943 Bengal famine, which is estimated to have caused over three million deaths, resulted not from a drought as is widely thought but from the British government's policy failures, say IIT Gandhinagar scientists who have analysed 150 years of drought data.

Policy lapses such as prioritising distribution of vital supplies to the military, civil services and others as well as stopping rice imports and not declaring Bengal famine hit were among the factors that led to the magnitude of the tragedy, historians have maintained.

Now, for the first time, researchers have analysed soil moisture database from 1870 to 2016 to reconstruct agricultural droughts.

Between 1935-45, the famine-affected region, which was Bengal, had no drought, the team from the Indian Institute of Technology here found.

"We are trying to understand the entire history of droughts in India and what is the likelihood they will occur in future," said Vimal Mishra, assistant professor at the institute.

"Famines that occurred during the British period caused the deaths of millions. We investigated the factors behind the causes of these deaths -- droughts or policy failures," he told .

The Bengal famine of 1943 was "completely because of policy failure", he said.

Aside from the 1943 Bengal famine, all other famines during 1870 and 2016, appear to be related, at least in part, to widespread soil moisture droughts, Mishra said.

While historians have documented policy failures that led to the Bengal famine, this is the first time scientists have used soil moisture data to show there was no drought in Bengal during the period preceding the famine.

After analysing over 150 years of data for the study published in the journal Geophysical Research Letters, researchers identified seven major droughts and six major famines in India.

"Out of six major famines (1873–74, 1876, 1877, 1896–97, 1899, and 1943) that occurred during 1870–2016, five are linked to soil moisture drought, and one (1943) was not," researchers wrote in the study.

"At the time, there was not much irrigation, groundwater pumping was not happening because electricity or mechanical pumps were not available," Mishra said.

The last major famine in the British era occurred in 1943, which is also known as the Bengal famine. The famine resulted in two-three million deaths.

"We identified 1935-45 as a period under drought, but the famine-affected region, which was Bengal, had no drought during this period," said Mishra.

"We find that the Bengal famine was likely caused by other factors related at least in part to the ongoing threat of World War II -- including malaria, starvation and malnutrition," he added.

Previous research has shown that in early 1943, military and other political events adversely affected Bengal economy.

"We did a very solid diagnosis for each famine that happened in Bengal and Bihar -- which was part of the northeastern province of Awadh in the British period,"

Mishra said.

"What was unique in the 1873-74 famine was that there were 25 million people affected but low mortality due to famine," he added.

According to Mishra, this low mortality was due to food imports from Burma, and timely relief aid provided by the British government. Then Bengal lieutenant governor Richard Temple imported, distributed food and relief money and that saved a lot of lives, he said.

"The famine was over in 1874, with 17 per cent surplus monsoon rainfall and good food production. But Temple was heavily criticised by the British for over expenditure," said Mishra.

In the 1876-77 famine, which affected south India in 1876 and north India in 1877, over 30 million people were impacted. The study suggests that at least six-10 million people died, because measures to provide relief and employment were not taken at the time.

According to the study, the expansion of irrigation, better public distribution system, rural employment, and transportation reduced the impact of drought on the lives of people after Independence.

Mishra expressed the hope that a comprehensive analysis of the history of droughts and famines in the country can help prepare for such disasters in the future.

According to experts, following the Japanese occupation of Burma in 1942, rice imports stopped, and Bengal's market supplies and transport systems were disrupted. The British government also prioritised distribution of vital supplies to the military, civil servants and other "priority classes".

The policy failures began with the provincial government's denial that a famine existed. Humanitarian aid was ineffective through the worst months of the food crisis, and the government never formally declared a state of famine.

It first attempted to influence the price of rice, but these measures created a black market and encouraged sellers to withhold stocks. MHN MIN MIN

