The Bengal Famine of 1943: Amartya Sen and Satayajit Ray
Distant Thunder

- A movie made by Satyajit Ray
- A young priest and his family move into a new village. He has the good life of a brahmin: neither of them works, he does a puja for a cholera epidemics (and tell people to avoid drinking from the river) then he sets up a school. People feed them. Then prices start to increase
- Chapters 8, 11, 12, 13, 18, 19, 20, 21
Few questions on movie

- What (is) are the main reason(s) why the price of rice increases in the village, according to the movie?
- Why is he distraught when she husks the rice?
- Why does her friend say hat “people like you don’t eat such things”
- Why doesn’t she touch the dying woman?
- Where does shukhti go? And why? Is it an isolated case? What do they hope to find?
- Why is it remarkable that they decide to cremate the dead woman?
- Why does she say 11?
- What are the different moments where the movies hints at how the famine breaks the traditional caste/class relations?
The Bengal Famine in Perspective

- Last real large-scale "famine": Ethiopia, 84-85: 600-1 million death
- Niger, 2005: Almost no extra death
- Malawi 2002: A few thousand.
- Sudan 1998: 70,000 people died
- China 59-61: 15 million
- Bengal 43: 2-3 million
- Ukraine 32-33: 5-6 million
The Facts of the Famine

- How many deaths?
  - There is some controversy
  - 1.5 million according to a commission convened just after the report
  - Most people believe the figure is much higher: the movie says 5 million
  - Recent estimates: 6-7 million including neighboring states
  - Even according to the report's own calculations, at least 3 million Bengali died
The chronology

- Phase I: 1942-march 1943
- Phase II: March 1943- November 1943
- Phase III: November 1943-1944
Some reasons for the decline in Food availability

- Burma was taken by the Japanese in 42
- There was a cyclone in October 42
- There was a panic among administrators, that the Japanese would take over the Bay of Bengal.
- “scorched earth” policy” destroy foodstocks in case the Japanese took over
Sen: A “man-made famine”

- The rice availability was higher in 1943 than 1941, *despite* the cyclone and the drop in imports.

- A “boom” famine:
  - War time inflation+ increase in income for those related to war time production: increased in demand for food and price increases for rice
  - Wage in rural areas did not follow the price trend: the “entitlement” of farm laborer in term of food decreased drastically: they became destitutes or “paddy huskers

- Government’s miss-management:
  - Government at the center had prevented trade between States
  - Population of Calcutta must be covered: rice must increase at all prices
A Man-made famine

- Hoarding:
  - You see that in the movie: farmers see the price increase continuously.
  - Rational reaction in the part of growers: given that the price was expected to continue to increase was to hoard the rice.

- Mass migration into the urban areas on the (mistaken) presumption that relief would be provided in the city.
Famine and Democracy

- Sen: famines should be easy to prevent
- The government in Bengal made a number of mistakes, particularly continued to export late in the day, and there was no import till the autumn of 1943.
- Churchill “The Indian people brought this upon themselves by breeding like rabbits”; “why isn’t Gandhi dead if the famine is so bad?”
  - Sen contends that the 1943 famine was the last full scale famine of India, and in fact that there are no famines in democracies.
  - Paper by Besley and Burgess: Indian Government reacts faster to natural disaster in area where the local press is more active.