How I came to write Churchill's Secret War

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I was born in independent India to a middle-class family. Attending an elite school in Calcutta where all the subjects were taught in English, I took to science and was baffled by history. All that I absorbed about the colonial period was the Bengal Renaissance, a 19th-century flowering of intellectual and social reform that was inspired by contact with the West. Clearly it had blessed me. I memorized key events of the Indian freedom movement without getting a sense of why such passion drove our heroes. Was it really so bad to be ruled by foreigners?

At other times, I wondered why I couldn't peel a banana in the bazaar for fear of hungry eyes focused on it. One morning, being driven to school after a stormy night, I stared out of the car window at shacks on the pavement whose plastic and tarpaulin covers had been ripped off by the wind. Shivering children stood around; I wondered how they'd spent the night. Clearly none would be going to school.

While I focused on geometry and geography my bed was made, my floors mopped and my vegetables sliced by men, women and children who came from Bengal's villages. The servants never ate at the family table, nor sat on the sofa; they slept on the floor in a corner of the apartment, kept their few things in a bundle, and used a separate, dingy toilet somewhere in the building. I learned nothing of their lives and barely remember the names of a twentieth of them. Surely their poverty wasn't due to laziness, I figured as I grew older: even the children among them rose before I did and went to bed after I was asleep. Another common charge, dullness, stood refuted by a beggar boy my mother once brought home to work for us. Having taught him to subtract, I found him the next day subtracting faster than I. As I imbibed it, Indian poverty was as intrinsic as it was ancient. Somehow we'd missed the boat on the industrial revolution, and the West had left us far behind.

When twelve years old, I acquired an unusual friend: a neighbor in his seventies. Dadu, as I called him (for grandfather), had been a senior civil servant in his youth—

quite an achievement, my mother said, for an Indian in British times. I'd visit him in his room, where he lay propped up on pillows, reading a volume of Gibbons' *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*–the forbidding set stood on a desk by his bed—or an issue of *The Economist*, which came from London. Dadu taught bridge to his granddaughter and I, and the three of us would play while a servant brought in cookies thickly spread with butter or an occasional, delicious clear soup.

Dadu had been to university in England, and had found even the food to his liking. He admired Winston Churchill as a "self-made genius"—a man who, Dadu said, had found himself born without innate talent but had turned himself into a force by sheer willpower. (I wonder if Dadu hoped I'd take this metamorphosis to heart, for he had me read Churchill's writings about his unhappy school years.) Dadu also talked to me about politics, read me a letter he'd composed critiquing the autocracy of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, and once, when I came upon him immersed in *The Gulag Archipelago*, told me that I should read it too, but after I was fifteen. I did, acquiring a lifelong abhorrence of totalitarianism.

Inadvertently, Dadu once mentioned a famine he'd seen. It was "man made," he said—or rather whispered, as if it were a secret. A war was on, and grain was taken away so the Japanese wouldn't get it, and so troops could use it… that much he related, if my memory serves. It seemed to mean more than he wanted to remember, for Dadu suddenly stopped and would say no more.

Decades later, long after he was gone, the remark surfaced in my head. I had by then moved to the United States to become a scientist, changed careers to journalism and written a book about an indigenous people. Researching that book had taught me much about how the world treats aboriginals, but I'd learned nothing about the ordinary, unglamorous poor. At the same time, the colonial accounts I'd perused for that work had whetted my curiosity about the past. So I thought I'd try and find out what Dadu had meant. A famine, I figured, was poverty manifested in its most extreme form. Physicists often tease apart a complicated system by studying simplified versions of it, and I figured that understanding famine would give me insights into poverty itself. After all, famine is poverty reduced to the single dimension of food.

The search took me farther than I'd bargained for. Dadu enlarged my world, and for that I remember him fondly. But he would no doubt have been horrified at the dank and creepy caverns into which the famine trail led.

When I asked her, my mother recalled the cries for *phyan*—the starchy water in which rice had been boiled—from the starving on the streets of Calcutta. She was twelve then, being brought up by relatives, and the wails from the pavement had no doubt reminded her of her own unhappy dependence. Once, when I was teen-age, I was amazed to find my mother inviting a dusty, wild-eyed woman with matted hair into the apartment building for a full meal. The woman had been wandering along the street below, howling crazily and clutching an equally desperate-looking child upside-down. Now it seems to me that she must have reminded my mother of the famine victims.

The awful moans for *phyan* and the stares of the dying had induced the middle class to shut its doors and windows when it sat down to eat. In the city, I came across many who'd stepped around dead bodies on their way to college or work, but none who'd been begging on the streets. All of those who starved had come from villages, which they'd left when the food ran out. Why had the famine been so selective as to leave city dwellers unscathed? I wondered. And why had I to wait for a chance remark by a neighbor to learn about the death by hunger of millions of people—an event that my own mother had witnessed?

Over the next years I visited a village in Bengal, where I met a personable farmer who became my guide to famine. Thanks to him I got an inkling of how such a catastrophe tears apart families and societies: turns parents into child traffickers, women into prostitutes, and neighbors into predators. In a Calcutta brothel I met women in their eighties who told me how, as hungry children, they'd followed strangers who promised them food but instead had sold them into slavery.

I also perused volumes and volumes of history, on the economics of colonies and the logistics of war. There, between the lines of close-to-impenetrable prose, I caught glimpses of a world contrary to anything I'd previously encountered. The links between the Second World War, the Quit India rebellion and the Bengal famine were more than temporal, I became convinced: they were causal. And Winston Churchill loomed as the person who'd presided over—indeed, played the pivotal role in—a war crime of significant dimensions. Yet, amazingly, almost every one of the tens of thousands of tomes written on the Second World War had ignored the famine. The discovery led me to question my lifelong faith that the truth will ultimately prevail.