

Right to Clothing and the Clothing Crisis during the Bengal Famine of 1943–44

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Clothing is a basic need for human development. Although the right to clothing is recognised as a human right, violations have occurred. This historical study examines the possibility of future shortages by analysing a past clothing crisis. During World War II, British India faced the Bengal famine of 1943–44 and a parallel “cloth famine.” Starving homeless people were forced to remain half-naked during a relatively harsh winter. The crisis stemmed from military priorities in textiles, halted Japanese imports, and rising Indian exports, showing clothing scarcity can reappear in wartime conditions.

The right to clothing has been internationally recognised as a fundamental human right.¹ The lack of adequate clothing undermines physical health, human dignity, and deprives people of opportunities to go out. In cultural terms, clothing expresses personalities and identities. Clothing shortages have happened at different points in human history and this paper brings attention to one such instance from India, currently one of the leading textile producers globally. During World War II, India experienced a devastating famine known as the Bengal famine of 1943–44, which killed between two and three million people. Alongside the famine, a serious shortage of cotton cloth, which was dubbed the “cloth famine,” caused a lack of clothing in India.

Little attention has been paid by researchers of the Bengal famine to the clothing problem. Major studies have focused on the food problems, especially the issue of food availability (Sen 1981; Goswami 1990), food administration (Knight 1954), and food importation from the United Kingdom (UK) (Mukerjee 2010). In other words, the social strata of famine victims (Greenough 1982), wartime international circumstances (Kamtekar 2002), and the link between the famine and communal conflicts (Mukherjee 2015; Sarkar 2020) have been researched. Only a few studies offer a descriptive picture, but they too do not investigate the causes of the lack of clothing (Khan 2015: 297–98; Mukherjee 2015: 142, 199, 276; Mukerjee 2010: 174, 180, 221–22). One recent study does examine the clothing shortages in a comparative perspective on Bengal and Burma, but this does not offer an Indian political and economic perspective (Matsumoto 2025). We investigate three aspects of the clothing crisis in India, particularly during the Bengal famine: (i) the situation of the lack of clothing; (ii) the responses of the government, political leaders, and intellectuals to the crisis; and (iii) the causes of the clothing crisis. The scholarly significance of this study is to explore the causes of cotton cloth price inflation. From a humanitarian perspective, the right to clothing is too important a fundamental human right to be ignored.

The main materials of this study are various discourses and statistical data on the clothing crisis. The sources for empirical descriptions include reportage (Santhanam 1943; Ghosh 1944), legislative records (GOI-CSD), periodicals (ABP), photographs (Janah 2013), and memoirs and correspondences (Mansergh 1971, 1973, 1974; Wavell 1973). The sources for numerical statistics include India’s trade reviews (GOI-RTI 1940–46), reports on India’s wartime economy (GOI-SWE 1947), reports on the

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famine (FIC 1945; Mahalanobis et al 1946), and Japanese documents on Japan's trade (Okura-syou 1942–43; Osaka-furitsu Boeki-kan 1927).

Situation in 1943–44

The clothing crisis: The Bengal famine of 1943–44 occurred in British India's eastern province of the same name. Starving Bengalis in rural areas migrated into cities searching for food, and facing a lack of shelter, many of these homeless lost their lives in the cold in the winter of 1943–44, which contributed to the increase in the famine's death toll. The colonial government appeared to treat famine victims as a problem of public order rather than one of destitute people requiring aid. Calcutta, the largest city in Bengal, accommodated about 92,000 destitutes who were fed from the free kitchen till October 1943. The number declined to about 40,000 by mid-November. The reason is that the government forcibly removed about 700–1,000 destitute people a day from Calcutta to outside "camps" (Rahim and Rahim 1999: 254).

The destitute suffered from a lack of clothing. The Famine Inquiry Commission (FIC), appointed by the Government of India (GoI) to investigate the Bengal famine, described the clothing crisis as follows: "Some of the destitutes were clothed in rags. Others had no clothes at all. The majority of destitute children were naked" (FIC 1945: 70). In the second half of 1943, journalists and researchers visited famine-affected areas to survey the devastation. First, Tushar Kanti Ghosh (1898–1994), editor of *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (ABP), a daily English newspaper in India, reported a scene in Calcutta in his book published in April 1944:

In this dark crowded atmosphere all eyes were suddenly turned towards the cries of a destitute woman, half-naked, with a small torn piece of *Dhoti*, sufficient only to cover her most secret and sacred organs, bare-footed with her unruly, undressed and uncared dirty long hair, young in age but old and worn-out in appearance (...) Families of villagers, unfed or semi-fed, lying on the roadside platforms, in the corners of some streets on the bridges or near the railway station without any protection, without any cloth even to cover themselves and their small babies during the winter nights, has been a common sight in Calcutta for a fairly long time. (Ghosh 1944: 9–10)

In another instance, J K Bose, an anthropologist from University of Calcutta, reported on a homeless woman in Calcutta. She had once lived in Midnapore district with her children and her husband, who was a tenant-cultivator. When a cyclone devastated Midnapore in October 1942, floodwater washed her house away, killing her husband and most of her children. For several months after the cyclone, she had managed to live in a small hut with her only remaining child. However, "lastly when it was impossible for her to get even one meal a day," she left her village and came to Calcutta. While living under the veranda of someone's house, she took her meal in the free kitchen but "she [was] in great difficulty as she [had] only one piece of cloth which [was] also torn in several places" (Bose 1944: 429).

Cold-related deaths: The cold threatened the lives of the half-naked homeless. During the winter of 1943–44, the destitute were in peril of dying from hunger, diseases, and the cold. Before

the onset of winter in 1943, K Santhanam (1895–1980), a Congress politician from the southern Indian province of Tamil Nadu (then Madras Presidency), demanded the immediate distribution of clothing and blankets to the destitute to protect their lives (Santhanam 1943: 30). T G Narayan (1944: 174–75), a journalist, felt the looming danger of the cold winter, saying, "I saw quite a number of destitutes utterly naked, (...) I felt sure that many among those hit hard by the famine would be worse hit by the winter." Calcutta's night temperature in winter dropped to a minimum temperature of 53 degrees Fahrenheit, or 11.7 degrees Celsius, on 17 January 1944 (ABP 1944). The cold worsened the health of the destitute, leading to the spread of famine-associated epidemics, such as malaria, smallpox, and cholera.

The clothing crisis affected not only Bengal but also its neighbouring provinces of Orissa, Bihar, and parts of the Madras province. Santhanam affirmed that the cloth shortage was more serious in Orissa than in Bengal (Santhanam 1943: 57). On the other hand, H M Patel (1904–93), the cabinet secretariat of GoI, stated that Bihar was the province most affected by the cloth shortage (GoI-CSD 1945: 437). Sunil Janah (1918–2012), a photojournalist, took photographs of famines in Orissa and the Madras province in 1944–45, which illustrate the destitute wearing dingy rags (Janah 2013: 146–52).

Responses during and after Famine

Immediate responses: The foremost priority of Lord Linlithgow (1887–1952), the Viceroy of India, was to maintain political stability so as to not jeopardise India's wartime efforts. In particular, after the Quit India Movement in August 1942, stabilising public sentiment became more important in governance. Since the clothing crisis risked alienating the population, the colonial administration moved quickly to address the problem. Government officials acknowledged the serious clothing situation in the first half of 1943. Linlithgow mentioned the scarcity of cotton cloth on 27 May 1943, stating, "as regards the ordinary necessities of life such as cotton 'piecegoods,' fuel, kerosene, iron, drugs, even foodstuffs, we are approaching the scarcity limit" (Mansergh 1971: 1016). He also referred to the rising cost of clothing at the council of state in August 1943, stating, "second only to the problem of how to feed the inhabitant of this country has come the problem of how to clothe him at a cost within his means" (GoI-CSD 1944: 5).

The government distributed clothing and blankets to the destitute, a total of 1.6 million pieces of clothing and 6,00,000 blankets (FIC 1945: 70), although such efforts did not fully meet the demands. As of December 1943, the government sanctioned ₹4 million "for distribution of clothing and blankets" (Rahim and Rahim 1999: 258), ₹2 million for cloth, and ₹1.6 million for blankets. However, Archibald Wavell (1883–1950) who succeeded Linlithgow as the viceroy acknowledged the difficulty of distribution to rural areas in December 1943, stating, "Blankets and clothing are being distributed but supply is far below demand" (Mansergh 1973: 421, 560).

Moreover, the GoI implemented some economic policies to tackle the clothing crisis, but these measures did not work

as effectively as expected. It promulgated the Cotton Cloth and Yarn (Control) Order in June 1943 and established the position of textile commissioner to strengthen control over cloth. In 1943, the standard cloth scheme² was launched and the maximum prices of cloth were fixed. However, these policies did not solve the problem due to the inadequacy of cloth supply (Chatterjee 1948: 53–62). The price control did not lead to an increase in production, and the standardisation resulted in a loss of diversity to meet various consumer demands. The vice-roys, however, were somewhat pleased with these measures. Linlithgow expressed his satisfaction with the standard cloth scheme in September 1943 (Mansergh 1973: 355). Wavell also showed his confidence in the reduction of cloth prices in November 1943, noting, “We at the Centre have already succeeded (...) in reducing prices and making available to Provinces a considerable current supply of cloth” (Mansergh 1973: 421).

Non-governmental relief organisations, such as the Bengal Relief Committee, played a crucial role in the relief activities. This committee was led by Shyama Prasad Mookerjee (1901–53), who was the leader of the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha, a Hindu nationalist political party. His main concern was primarily to highlight the hardships of the Hindu middle class. For example, he articulated the suffering of the middle class in his speech at the Bengal legislative assembly on 17 September 1943: “people belonging to middle class families with fixed income (...) are today undergoing a tragic process of slow and painful extinction” (Mookerjee 2022: 101). At the same time, Mookerjee also made efforts to provide relief to famine victims of all creeds and classes. According to his statement, by 5 November 1943, the Bengal Relief Committee had raised ₹2 million as relief funds, and the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha nearly ₹4,00,000 (Mookerjee 2022: 132). Members of these organisations were working in at least 141 centres across 22 districts of Bengal (Santhanam 1943: 56). The committee procured clothing and blankets, such as *dhuti* (lower clothing), *sari* (upper clothing), *genji* (undervest), *markin* (simple cloth), *sujni* (warm sheet), and *kambal* (blanket) (Mookerjee 2022: 239–40; Sarkar 2020: 2056–59).

Between April 1943 and March 1945, the Bengal government was headed by Khawaja Nazimuddin (1894–1964) of the Muslim League, thus making this administration the target of criticism for its response to the clothing crisis. As a Hindu nationalist opposition leader, Mookerjee directed his criticism against the Muslim League-led government. He claimed in his statement on 24 August 1943 that the government needed to make arrangements for cloth distribution, voicing

Innumerable people, including women, are without clothes. They are at sea not knowing how to protect their dignity. (Mookerjee 2022: 83)

Most leaders of the Indian National Congress, including M K Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, were arrested on the eve of the Quit India Movement in August 1942. As a result, they remained in prison throughout the Bengal famine of 1943–44. Those nationalists who were not imprisoned criticised the govt's effectiveness. For example, the Indian Association, the oldest Indian nationalist organisation founded in 1876, accused

the government of “callousness and incompetence” (Indian Association 1945: 9) in handling the clothing crisis in its annual report for 1944.

After the food famine: The clothing crisis persisted longer than the food famine. The end of the war in August 1945 did not end the cloth scarcity. Meanwhile, the Bengal famine peaked around the end of 1943. In 1944, the death toll from hunger declined steadily, although the death rates from diseases remained high. This means that the food supply recovered faster than the cloth supply. Government officials recognised the severe shortage of cloth in 1945. John Colville (1894–1954), the acting Viceroy of India, acknowledged the scarcity of cloth on 27 March 1945, expressing his concern about the fact that “the shortage of cloth in Bengal has been causing a good deal of criticism” (Mansergh 1974: 756). Richard Casey (1890–1976), the Governor of Bengal, described the cloth situation in Bengal as being “difficult,” “not good,” and “still acute” from May to July 1945 (Rahim and Rahim 2000: 82, 90, 97).

Communists and religious leaders also raised the alarm about the clothing crisis of 1945. Bhowani Sen, the secretary of the Bengal provincial committee of the Communist Party of India, described the widespread struggles for clothing, noting that only the wealthy few were exempt. In 1945, he wrote: “The village women have to remain in semi-nudity owing to lack of cloth (...) Cases are not rare of ladies from bhadralog³ families having to put on rags from torn quilt-covers or loin cloth” (Sen 1945: 11). In parallel, Swami Sambuddhananda, president of the Ramakrishna Ashram in Bombay, published his statement after visiting Bengal in August 1945, emphasising clothing shortages: “Cloth distress has come to its climax in Bengal at this hour. Thousands of men and women, I have seen, cannot go out to attend their usual work outside for want of a piece of cloth to wrap round their loins. Cases of suicide among women for want of cloth are not few” (*Modern Review* 1945: 74).

In 1943 and 1944, when deaths from famine were at their peak, intellectual interest was focused primarily on questions of food scarcity. By 1945, however, when the famine had subsided, their attention shifted to clothing, which persisted as a pressing social concern. The phrase “cloth famine” was frequently used as a rhetorical expression to underscore the seriousness of the shortage. *The Modern Review* magazine, which catered to English-speaking, nationalist intellectuals, employed the term “cloth famine” not even once in 1943, four times in 1944, 18 times in 1945, eight times in 1946, and not once in 1947 (Matsumoto 2025: 112). This suggests that although the clothing crisis undoubtedly existed in 1943–44, intellectuals at that time were directing their attention to issues other than clothing.

The frequency of the use of “cloth famine” also suggests that the clothing crisis seemed to ease in 1946 and 1947 due to increased supplies of cloth. Politicians gained confidence in the improvement of the clothing situation. Casey was pleased with the procurement of cloth in March 1946, describing the progress as “fairly satisfactory” and “improving” (Rahim and Rahim 2000: 135). Louis Mountbatten (1900–79), the last viceroy, addressed the Constituent Assembly on 15 August 1947,

mentioning the cloth problem as if it were a thing of the past, stating, “It is for you (...) to provide against future scarcities of food, cloth and essential commodities” (*Modern Review* 1947: 99).

Causes

Clothing of Indians in the 1940s: In the 1940s, Indians commonly wore traditional clothing, such as *sari* (or *saree*) and *dhuti* (or *dhoti*),⁴ most of which were made of cotton cloth. In this paper, cotton piece goods and cotton cloth are considered to be the same. Most outfits in the picture appear to be made of whitish cotton cloth.

Cotton cloth, particularly plain-woven thin cloth, wears out over time, and so people would periodically need to replace their saris and dhutis by purchasing new ones. Bhabani Bhattacharya (1906–88), a Bengal-born writer, published his first novel in 1947, titled *So Many Hungers!* which is set in Bengal during the famine of 1943–44. In this realistic fiction, Bhattacharya (1947: 155) describes the anxiety of a village woman, a fictional character named Kajoli, about her saris getting worn out:

She and Mother had two saris between them, and no other clothing. The two saris were getting worn; a few months more, and they would be ragged. The village had become ragged as never before; no new clothing for almost a year, [...] What would happen when these two saris went to shreds? Other village women, Kajoli knew, slept naked in the dark of night, these days, to save their saris' wear and tear, but she and Mother had not cast off shame to that extent. They must, some time. Else—Kajoli closed her eyes because of the shameful vision.

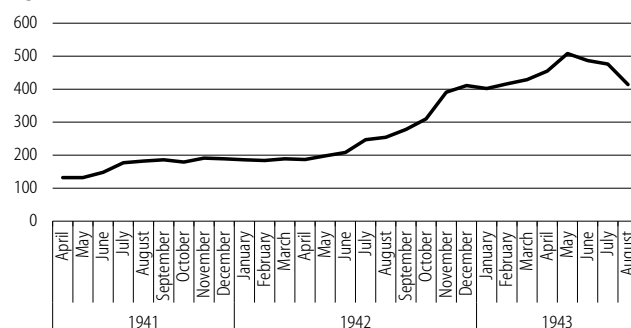
Although Kajoli felt shame about her nudity, whether a woman was considered shamed for being topless varied according to the community she belonged to. Janah's photographs of India in the 1940s, for instance, depict some topless women, such as female agricultural workers and tribal girls, who posed before the camera without any sign of embarrassment (Janah 2013: 207–11). Yet, in the political debate on the clothing crisis, such cultural diversity in attitudes towards nudity was disregarded. Groups who had long lived half-naked could even be represented as evidence of the cloth shortages. For example, Santhanam (1943: 34) described a scene of naked people in Bengal in the autumn of 1943:

All along our way in the dinghy from Loharjang to Munshiganj we crossed many boats plied by boys of 10 or 12 with not a shred of clothing on their body. Girls and women could not go about in this way, but the torn and dirty rags with which they tried to hide their sex made them look many times more horrible than even utter nakedness.

However, as some Janah's (2013: 185–86, 196) photographs suggest, it is possible in Bengal that the boys rowing the boats were often half-naked and that poor girls commonly wore rags (Matsumoto 2025: 113–14).

Cotton cloth price inflation of 1941–43: The clothing crisis was triggered by the price increase in cotton cloth. The price index of Indian cotton manufactures began to rise around July 1941 and sharply increased from 1942 to 1943, reaching its peak in May 1943 (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Index Number of Prices of India's Cotton Manufactures



Source: Gol-RTI (1946: 25).

The price of cotton cloth rose more sharply than that of other principal items in 1942, and remained at a high level in 1943. In December 1942, the index number of average monthly wholesale prices of cotton manufacturers reached 414, while other items remained around half of this figure: rice at 218, wheat at 232, and general manufactured articles at 221.5 (FIC 1945: 217). As of 22 May 1943, the index number of retail prices of coarse cloth was at 475, while the food price indexes skyrocketed: rice at 683 and flour at 578 (GOB-CG 1943: 1312).⁵

If the price of clothing goes too high, the poor lose their exchange entitlement to clothing. Amartya Sen (1977: 34), a Bengal-born economist, illustrated the mechanism of exchange entitlement to food, stating, “In an exchange economy, whether a family will starve or not will depend on what it has to sell, whether it can sell them, and at what prices, and also on the price of food.” This principle applies equally to non-food items. For example, a fisherfolk exchanges fish for money, and money for clothing. If the price of clothing rises too high, the fisherfolk cannot afford to buy it. A fictional character in Bhattacharya (1947: 75) novel, a fisherfolk named Kanu who lost his fishing boats, expressed his predicament: “No fish, no clothes for you, you go naked.” Logically, the victims of the clothing crisis outnumbered those of the food famine. With limited funds, people prioritise buying food over clothing. If they cannot afford food, they cannot afford clothing either. Even if they can buy food, they might still struggle to buy clothing. This is why not only the low-income, but also the middle-income groups who managed to survive the food famine suffered from the lack of clothing.

Causes of the cloth inflation: The cloth inflation was caused by a shortage of cotton cloth. Three factors influenced the cloth shortage: (i) prioritising textile production for the military, (ii) the stoppage of imports of cotton products from Japan, and (iii) the increase in exports of cotton products from India. Mullath Kadingi Vellodi (1896–1987), the textile commissioner, surveyed the cotton cloth situation in 1947. According to him, from 1939 to 1945, while the production of cotton cloth remained stable around 5,500 million yards, the production for the military rose to 800–1,200 million yards. While the imports into India plummeted from 700–800 million yards to negligible levels, the exports from India increased from less than 200 million yards to 800–1,000 million yards. All three factors led

to a decline in domestic consumption of cotton cloth from about 6,300 million yards to 5,000 million yards (Vellodi 1947: 10–13).

(i) Factor 1—India's war efforts in 1941–44: India's war efforts contributed to a shortage of cotton cloth for civilians. The Indian textile industry prioritised the production of cotton products for the military, leading to a decrease in production for civilian consumption (Goi-SWE 1947: 27). However, not all military items increased in production. The rate of increase depended on the specific items required. From 1942 to 1944, the production of battledress blouses or trousers increased rapidly, while production of khaki drill trousers, shirts, and shorts remained stable or dropped (Goi-SWE 1947: 11). The production of parachutes also strained civilian consumption of cotton cloth. The Indian textile industry supplied four million cotton-made parachutes for supply-dropping during the war period (Goi-SWE 1947: 7). In November 1943, Wavell (1973: 37) expressed his disagreement with expanding the production of parachutes, reflecting his concern about the civilian consumption of cotton cloth.

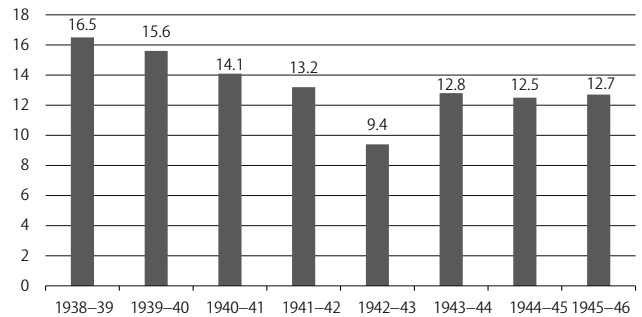
The availability of cotton cloth for civilian consumption remained at a low level during the first half of the 1940s. The total quantity of cotton piece goods available for civilian consumption reached 6,223 million yards in 1938, dropped to 3,722 million yards in 1942, and recovered to 5,069 million yards in 1944 (Goi-SWE 1947: 31–32). The per capita quantity of cotton piece goods available for civilian consumption bottomed out in 1942–43, recovered slightly afterwards, but never returned to the pre-1941 level (Figure 2).

India had an ample domestic supply of raw cotton between 1942 and 1945. Before 1941, substantial quantities had been exported to Japan, but this trade ceased. As a result of losing markets in both Japan and China, the value of India's cotton exports declined by 32% between 1940–41 and 1941–42 (GORTI 1943: 128). This decline was one reason why the government was able to launch the Grow More Food campaign, converting extensive cotton fields to areas for foodgrains such as millets (Mansergh 1973: 896).

Meanwhile, Gandhi, released from prison in May 1944, continued to address the problem of clothing. Since the 1920s, he had promoted *swadeshi* (indigenous) and the *khadi* (hand-spun cloth) movement, symbolised by the hand-spinning *charkha*. By the mid-1940s, however, this movement became more than a symbolic call for national consciousness and independence; it offered a practical response to the clothing shortage. As a pragmatic politician, Gandhi advocated hand-spinning and weaving as a way to overcome the crisis: "Cloth famine can and ought to be averted by telling the millions to spin and weave in their own villages" (CWMG 1981: 111).

(ii) Factor 2—Halting of cotton imports from Japan: In the 1930s, Japan was a major exporter of textile products, such as raw silk and cotton fabrics. Many countries around the world had relied on imports of textile products from Japan until July 1941. When Japan invaded southern French Indochina in July 1941, the governments of the United States, Britain and the Netherlands

Figure 2: Per Capita Quantity of Cotton Piece Goods Available for Civilian Consumption (Yards)



Source: Goi-SWE (1947: 32).

froze Japanese assets as an economic sanction in response to this aggression, preventing Japan from trading with the allies, including India. Due to the cessation of trade with Japan, people in India expected that the Indian cotton textile industry would thrive in the near future. Investors thought that Indian textile companies would be busier producing cotton cloth and yarn to make up for the loss of Japanese cotton products. The share market reacted to this situation. In August 1941, a weekly review of the Calcutta share market indicated an economic boom, a shortage in cloth supply, and soaring cloth prices:

Cotton industry has been passing through a boom and it has been more so owing to the cessation of business with Japan. The Indian mills are busy with war orders and owing to want of imports there will be a shortage in the supply of piece goods. Speculative activities have forced up the prices and in spite of Government efforts the prices are soaring up. The Indian cotton industry would have been very prosperous. (...) (ABP 1941b)

Share prices of cotton companies rose sharply from late July to early August 1941. For example, the share prices of a textile company, Benares Cotton and Silk, increased by 38.3%, from 3/7/0 (rupee/anna/paisa) on average of the week ending 19 July to 4/12/0 on average of the week ending 2 August (ABP 1941a, 1941b). But at the same time, the loss of Japanese cotton products was too large for the Indian textile industry to fully compensate for the deficiency. A cloth shortage was looming. Gandhi underlined the scarcity of food and clothing due to the trade cessation, stating, "As the war progresses, both the scarcities must increase. There are no imports from outside, either of food-stuff or of cloth" (CWMG 1979: 233).

Cotton piece goods were classified into three categories: grey (unbleached), white (bleached), and coloured (dyed or printed). In general, grey was the cheapest, and coloured was the most expensive. Therefore, grey is more important than the others to evaluate the impact of the cloth shortage on the poor. Before the cessation of trade with Japan in July 1941, India had imported more cotton piece goods from Japan than from the UK. Japanese grey was the largest in quantity and the lowest in price (Table 1, p 57). In 1939–40, 94.7% of the imported grey came from Japan, while 3.8% came from the UK. The Japanese share accounted for 67.9% of India's total imports of cotton piece goods, while the UK's share was 25%. Japanese grey cost about two-thirds of the UK's, and its coloured goods were nearly half.

Table 1: India's Imports of Cotton Piece Goods, 1939–40

		Share (%)	Quantity (thousand lbs)	Price* (₹/a/p)
Grey (unbleached)	UK	3.8	9	0/3/6
	Japan	94.7	223	0/1/10
White (bleached)	UK	61.4	82	0/3/8
	Japan	32.2	43	0/2/5
Coloured	UK	25.6	54	0/4/7
	Japan	60.6	127	0/2/5

* Values per yard (rupee/anna/paise).

Source: Gol-RTI (1940: 109–11).

Plain-woven cotton cloth accounted for the majority of India's imports in terms of quantity. This type of cloth was used to make practical items. Shirting, which is plain-woven fabric for making shirts, accounted for about 70% of India's imports of grey (GoI-RTI 1940: 110–1). In late 1920s Japan, the Osaka Prefectural Trade Centre expected promising exports of lower-grade cloth, such as unbleached shirting:

Products of inferior quality, such as unbleached shirting and sheeting, (...) are in high demand as practical items among lower-class people. Therefore, as long as the price of Japanese products is lower than that of foreign products, there will be almost infinite demand for our shirting and sheeting. (Osaka-furitsu Boeki-kan 1927: 81)

(iii) Factor 3—Increase in cotton exports: India had been a net importer of cotton cloth until 1941. Despite deindustrialisation during the colonial period, India's production of cotton cloth

Table 2: India's Imports, Exports, and Production of Cotton Cloth (million yards)

	Imports (I)	Exports (E)	(I) minus (E) *	Production
1930–31	873	188	685	2,561
...	...	...	...	...
1939–40	560	222	338	4,013
1940–41	440	410	30	4,269
1941–42	180	897	(717)	4,494
1942–43	10	943	(933)	4,109
1943–44	3	535	(532)	4,871
1944–45	5	486	(481)	4,726
1945–46	3	480	(477)	4,676
1946–47	16	369	(353)	3,890

* Calculations by the author.

Source: Mehta (1953: 127).

Table 3: Japan's Export Destinations and Quantity of Cotton Cloth, 1939

Export Destinations	Regions	Quantity (yards)	Share* (%)
India	South Asia	47,59,77,477	19.5
Dutch East India	Southeast Asia	36,86,73,526	15.1
French Morocco	Africa	10,83,74,281	4.4
Kenya, Uganda, and Tanganyika	Africa	9,40,84,829	3.8
Iraq	West Asia	9,21,41,303	3.8
Thailand	Southeast Asia	8,31,28,202	3.4
Iran	West Asia	8,11,57,330	3.3
Australia	Oceania	7,61,05,926	3.1
United States	North America	7,15,47,677	2.9
Syria	West Asia	6,90,93,804	2.8
Aden	West Asia	6,29,08,780	2.6
Anglo-Egyptian Sudan	Africa	5,98,06,754	2.4
Hongkong	East Asia	5,68,49,908	2.3
Chile	South America	5,18,93,023	2.1
Others *		69,42,92,689	28.4
Total		2,44,60,35,509	100.0

* Calculations by the author.

Source: Okura-syou (1942–43: 273–75).

increased by about 1.7 times from 1930–31 to 1940–41 (Table 2). However, India still imported 440 million yards of cotton cloth to make up for the deficiency in 1940–41 (Mehta 1953: 126–27). In 1939–40, the number-one import item of India was “cotton and cotton goods,” comprising 13.37% of the total value of imports (GoI-RTI 1940: 106).

The cessation of trade with Japan in July 1941 changed India from a net importer to a net exporter of cotton cloth. A dramatic turning point occurred in 1941–42 (Table 2). Without a remarkable increase in production, the export volume doubled in 1941–42, and the import volume became negligible after 1942–43. Consequently, the export volume exceeded the import volume since 1941–42.

In 1941–42, India began to export more cotton cloth, even though India itself suffered from a shortage of cotton cloth. Former importers of Japanese cotton products, such as Australia, West Asia, and Africa, turned to India as a new supplier of cotton products. From 1940–41 to 1941–42, India's exports of cotton piece goods to Australia rose from about 23 million yards to over 75 million yards, and its exports to Aden rose from less than a million yards to about 26 million yards. From 1938–39 to 1941–42, India's exports of cotton piece goods to Africa⁷ surged from about 21 million yards to nearly 185 million yards (GoI-RTI 1943: 48–49).

In 1939, about 80% of Japanese exported cotton cloth was sent to countries other than India (Table 3). The cessation of trade with Japan in July 1941 affected all countries that had previously imported Japanese cotton cloth. Though East and Southeast Asia came under Japanese control in 1942, other regions suffered from the loss of Japanese cotton cloth since the second half of 1941.

The major cause of the cloth shortage in India was the cessation of trade with Japan in July 1941. This trade cessation stopped India's imports from Japan and increased India's exports to the world. Compared to this impact, India's war efforts had a limited effect on the cloth shortage.

The end of the clothing crisis around 1947 remains an issue that this paper cannot fully explore; it only presents a hypothesis. One possible explanation is that Japan's resumption of foreign trade in August 1947 created optimism regarding the supply of cotton cloth. Since the cessation of trade had contributed to the shortage of cloth, the revival of trade likely played a role in bringing the crisis to an end.

In Conclusion

During the Bengal famine of 1943–44, the shortage of cotton cloth, dubbed the “cloth famine,” afflicted Bengal and its near-by provinces. Not only the destitute but also the middle class suffered from the lack of adequate clothing. This crisis, triggered by cloth inflation, deprived people of their human dignity and contributed to the death toll of the famine. The destitute, living on the roadsides without shelters and warm clothing, died of hunger, diseases, and the cold in the winter of 1943–44, despite relief efforts. The government's economic measures to control supplies and prices of cotton cloth had limited effects. Although the food famine passed its peak

around 1943–44, the clothing crisis persisted in 1945 and finally eased in 1946–47.

Japan had been the major exporter of cotton products around the world until July 1941. The main cause of the cloth shortage in India was the cessation of trade with Japan in July 1941. The stoppage of imports of Japanese cotton products led to the cloth shortage in India. Moreover, British India increased exports of cotton products to other countries to compensate for their deficiency.

A war-induced trade cessation may impact people's lives. Clothing is an industrial product which requires a global supply

chain. Currently, Bangladesh (formed out of eastern Bengal) is the world's second largest producer of ready-made garments, importing cotton from China and exporting garments to developed countries. If conflicts disrupt international trade, shortages in the supply of clothing can arise across different parts of the world. Inflation in basic necessities such as clothing would disproportionately affect the poor and significantly worsen their living conditions. Although often taken for granted, access to clothing remains a fundamental requirement for human life. Disruptions in trade can therefore place the right to clothing at serious risk.

NOTES

- 1 Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) refer to the right to clothing.
- 2 The standard cloth scheme aimed to produce standard cloth "in 66 types of shirtings, dhooties, and sarees (...) sold at a uniform price all over India" (Chatterjee 1948: 56).
- 3 Bhadraklok refers to the upper classes in Bengal, literally meaning gentlefolk.
- 4 A *sari* is the upper garment and a *dhuti* is the lower garment.
- 5 The base period of these indices is the week ending 19 August 1939 (=100).
- 6 The following countries are listed: "Nigeria, the Union of South Africa, Mauritius, Portuguese East Africa, Tanganyika, Kenya Colony, Zanzibar and Pemba" (Gol-RTI 1943: 48–49).

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