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The Famine Projects and Digital Trauma Studies in India

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Abstract

In this essay, I examine two aspects of the twin projects' foregrounding of trauma: the modes of representing trauma in the digital and the consequent construction of a trauma globalectic. Preserving, and in many cases, retrieving, cultural trauma in the digital age as *Famine and Dearth* and *Famine Tales* demonstrate, will mean a media archaeology that merges different forms and genres of/in media. Conjoining instances of social injustice and suffering, as these projects do across spatial and temporal spaces ensures that we see historical trauma in multiple sites and stemming from different forces and causes and yet following certain patterns – social hierarchies, unequal legislation, administrative inefficiency/indifference, all of which conspire to produce food scarcity and famine.

Keywords: Famine projects; digital trauma studies; India

Introduction

In Argha Manna's illustrated narrative, 'Extravagance in Mendicancy: An Entanglement between Food, Body and Famine', based on Wajihuddin Ashraf's eighteenth century Persian biography of Indian saints and mystics, Bahr-e-Zakhhār, in *Famine Tales* (<https://famineanddearth.exeter.ac.uk/index.html>), we are told that the human body is not simply a collection of organs but a philosophical unit. The body is 'connected to every living and non-living element on earth'. Elsewhere in this same project, we have Kabir's lines on poverty, hunger and greed depicted in visual form by Debkumar Mitra. These and other graphic texts are hyperlinked to a larger project, *Famine and Dearth in India and Britain, 1550-1800* (<https://faminetales.exeter.ac.uk>), from the same team from the University of Exeter (the UK) and Jadavpur University (India). *Famine and Dearth* excerpts the *Fort William-India House Correspondence*, texts from William Hunter and others on the Bengal famine of the 1770s, East India Company records, travel memoirs, and other texts. There are also videos, printed texts, translations, conversations, graphic art, fictionalised versions of English diaries (Peter Mundy's), planning sketches and the final versions, performances, etc, making this a truly multimodal project. While *Famine and Dearth in India and Britain, 1550-1800* is a geohumanities project focusing on connections and resonances, *Famine Tales* is a more limited endeavour.

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These twin projects are an extraordinary effort at documenting critical, and tragic, historical events and processes, and a major initiative in the digital humanities for India, and an instance of Digital Trauma Studies (Menyhért 2020). The Famine Projects are a key contribution to the understanding of the connected histories and cultural memories of India and England. I take it for granted that the two projects are to be read together, since *Famine Tales* is an offshoot, by their own admission, of *Famine and Dearth in India and Britain*.²

Before examining specific texts, a word about the overall effect of the segments and their contents in the two projects.

First, the videos and visual material, especially the performances on video such as the ‘Captain Pouch: Performance’, the clickable visual texts, are re-enactments of the cinematic. The camera zooms in to focus on the scroll being held up, then zoomed out to show the location where the performance is being held (with a member of the audience watching), thus enabling the digital interface to function like a cinematic image, and gives a certain panoramic immersive effect. While such an effect is primarily associated with the virtual reality installation artworks (Kenderdine 2016), the interface and the visual apparatuses of these projects involving the creators and artists in the same frame as their artwork, I suggest, lend a certain panoramic immersive effect.

Secondly, the refusal to stay within the confines of traditional ‘objective’ historical narration through the invocation and insertion of the teller of the chronicle, the employment of the video-film on the making of the artwork, the mix-and-match of materials of different emphases, provenance and genre such as the spiritual, the literary and the historical, collectively ensure that a certain heteroclit is always at hand which disrupts *how* we read the historical or literary text in the projects.

Thirdly – and one which this essay at least does not explore – we ought to see how the cultural history and archive are transformed through the arrival and employment of technology. In *Famine Tales*, we are privy to the making of a cultural memory of the famine in the form of material media like scrolls and paintings. In showing us the ‘making’ of the archive (in the form of recorded videos, planning sketches, drafts, etc), the projects demonstrate not just the mediated nature of cultural memory but also the materiality of the medium being employed for the purpose. These instances of the process of building the archive are self-reflexive, of course. But they also foreground two forms of digital materiality, which Sydney Shep identifies as formal and forensic. ‘Forensic materiality’ is the ‘physical evidence of production, distribution, reception, and preservation which can be detected through the identification and analysis of various traces, residues, marks, and inscriptions visible to human sight or accessible through instrumentation’ and ‘formal materiality’ is ‘the architecture of digital media and their symbolic forms, whether the structure of individual software programs, embedded data

² The two Famine projects are exercises in geohumanities, with their spatial analysis, visualization and mapping in a new, digital key, albeit with a considerable amount of verbal (print) matter. Todd Presner and David Shepard have argued that

Mapping in the digital humanities ranges from historical mapping of “time-layers” to memory maps, linguistic and cultural mapping, conceptual mapping, community-based mapping, and forms of counter-mapping that attempt to de-ontologize cartography and imagine new worlds. (2016: 202)

They add:

Far from the Apollonian eye looking down from a transcendental view, “thick mapping” betrays the contingency of looking, the groundedness of any perspective, and the embodied relationality inherent to any locative investigation. (210)

Other such notable projects from/in India include the 1947 Partition Archive and the 1984 Living History Project.



standards and metadata encoding, or operating-system configurations' (Shep 2016: 324). Formal materiality is seen in the projects' account of the software, coding systems, and other ICT infrastructures used. In the projects' documentation of the physical evidence of the process of production, the plans for sketches before they are finalized, the performance of the artwork instantiate the projects' forensic materiality. This primacy of technology, infrastructure and *materiality* of old and new forms that converge in *Famine and Dearth* and *Famine Tales* and constitute its 'media archaeology' (Ernst 2013) is worth a separate exploration.

The narratives of scarcity, Company rule, social rebellion that these twin projects document in the 'connected archives' ensure that the right to preservation has kept in mind public interest and historical/evidentiary purposes.³

In this essay, I examine two aspects of the twin projects' foregrounding of trauma: the modes of representing trauma in the digital and the consequent construction of a trauma globalectic.

Trauma in the Digital

Anne Menyhért defines digital trauma studies as follows:

Digital trauma studies is the name of a novel interdisciplinary approach and an emerging research held that investigates the representation, transmission and processing of trauma – individual, as well as collective, historical and intergenerational – in the digital environment. (242)

A diversity of representations, argues Menyhért, marks digital trauma work, so that no single narrative is dominant. Argha Manna and Debkumar Mitra's 'Drawing Disaster: A Lost Sketchbook', one of the texts in *Famine Tales*, opens with an account of the rise of the East India Company's powers in India: the 'vice-like grip' it acquired that became 'complete with the ... *deemani* rights of Bengal'. In the last panel on this page, they draw a starving/starved body and the accompanying text reads: 'within six years of the Company's ascendancy, Bengal suffered its deadliest famine ever'. At a later point, the narrative says: 'the Company played a major role in creating a food crisis'. It also makes a clear case of neglect by local zamindars and rajahs when speaking of the 1770s famine.

Later, the narrative documents the collaboration between William Hunter and Debdulal Mitra, a painter and printmaker in nineteenth century. Hunter requests Mitra to draw some sketches for his under-preparation account, *Annals of Rural Bengal*. Mitra's sketches, Manna and Mitra inform us, were never published, although Hunter's account was.

The hyperlink elsewhere on *Famine Tale*'s pages to *Famine and Dearth in India and Britain* enables us to read the British representations in the official correspondence (the *Fort William-India House Correspondence*), *The Early Annals of the English in Bengal*, letters of various officers and private merchants, the Board of Revenue proceedings, literary texts (poems and plays), among other genres. In the *Fort William-India House Correspondence* we see descriptions such as the following:

³ On the thorny subject of the 'right to be forgotten' in an age of digital preservation and compulsory archiving, see Mkadmi (2021).

Notwithstanding the liberal contributions of charity which have been subscribed at this place and the established monthly allowance collected at Madras for the support of the poor native inhabitants of that settlement we are informed that our united endeavors have hitherto proved inadequate to their subsistence, as hundreds are daily expiring through want. Considering the present extreme scarcity of grain at Madras and the increased distresses of the people, which have been described to us in a most affecting manner, we have opened a charitable subscription at every station of the army and at each subordinate settlement. We have also taken upon us, in order to promote so laudable and humane a purpose, to subscribe in the Company's name 50,000 rupees. By these combined means we hope to save the lives of many poor wretches who must otherwise perish in the most miserable manner from the famine. (letter of 7 Dec. 1782, *Fort William-India House Correspondence*, Vol. IX, https://famineanddearth.exeter.ac.uk/displayhtml.html?id=fp_00235_en_fortwilliam-india_house_vol09)

The *Imperial Gazetteer* (1885) records:

During the past two centuries and a half, fourteen years have been memorable for natural calamities. Of these, three were in the 15th, six in the 18th, and seven in the 19th centuries. In the 15th century, the year 1629 is said to have been a season of great famine; and 1650 and 1686 were years of drought and scarcity. In the 18th century, 1718 and 1747 were years of scarcity, and 1771 was one of pestilence. The years 1714 and 1739 were marked by disastrous floods in the Sabarmati. In 1755, extraordinarily heavy rains did considerable damage to the city of Ahmadabad. The famine, which reached its height in 1790-91, and from having occurred in Samvat 1847, is known by the name *sattalo*, lasted through several seasons. (https://famineanddearth.exeter.ac.uk/displayhtml.html?id=fp_00094_en_impgazetteerindia_vol01)

These and other official documents demonstrate a disaster endemism for the subcontinent. They foreground (a) the disastrous famine as a natural calamity due to the failure of the rains and, (b) the humanitarian and other efforts of the Company and the government to alleviate the misery of the land (for detailed studies of representations of colonial humanitarianism and the politics of famine representations see, among others, Arnold 1999). In other words, they imply that disasters such as famines are endemic to the subcontinent, and that there have been frequent instances of famine, drought and other disasters. This disaster endemism is neatly undermined by the Manna-Mitra text which implies that it is the Company's ascendancy and policies that created the conditions for the famine.

On the landing page of this narrative by Manna and Mitra, to the right, we have the geolocations that enable us to pinpoint the places mentioned in the narrative. Other 'resources' linked from the text's landing page include creative work by artists, Bengali translations of Company records, a page titled 'research notes', videos on the *making* of the scrolls (what we can think of as 'how' videos) based on eighteenth century poetry texts, such as Ramprasad Sen's 'Duto dukher kotha koi' [Let me confide a sad word or two], and the scrolls themselves.

The above examples validate the argument that digital trauma representations are diverse and heteroglossal. The entire exercise signals not just historical trauma but a contemporary



rendering and recall of that trauma. By documenting the process of composition of this rendering-recall, the project also underscores the fact that there is no unmediated trauma.

The Trauma Globalectic

The *Famine and Dearth* project is also, like *Famine Tales*, constituted by multiple textual forms: maps drawn from Peter Mundy's narrative, a vast corpus of Company and government records on India, literary texts, commentaries, etc. It makes use of English texts, but also Bengali and Persian ones in translation, with the original text also displayed in many cases. It includes texts that deal with agricultural practices in England, the 'merchants' map of commerce', and accounts of European wars of the seventeenth century. Texts such as Galeazzo Gualdo Priorato's *A History of the Latte Warres* detail the 'manipulation', as the project itself calls it, of food distribution and thereby created conditions of food scarcity in Europe (https://famineanddearth.exeter.ac.uk/displayhtml.html?id=fp_00417_en_anhistory).

This project's emphasis is clear from its full title: *Famine and Dearth in India and Britain, 1550-1800: Connected Cultural Histories of Food Security*. By bringing together accounts of European, English and Indian documents on food production, distribution, scarcity onto the same page so to speak ensures the making of a trans-geographical survey that ensures the audience has to build a globalectic imagination. The idea of the globalectic imagination comes from Ngūgĩ Wa Thiong'O. He writes:

Globalectics combines the global and the dialectical to describe a mutually affecting dialogue, or multi-logue, in the phenomena of nature and nurture in a global space that's rapidly transcending that of the artificially bounded, as nation and region. The global is that which humans in spaceships or on the international space station see: the dialectical is the internal dynamics that they do not see. Globalectics embraces wholeness, interconnectedness, equality of potentiality of parts, tension, and motion. It is a way of thinking and relating to the world, particularly in the age of globalism and globalization. (2012: 36)

I suggest that when we see and subsequently read a hyperlinked account such as the *Famine Tales* or the *Famine and Dearth* we are made aware that neither food scarcity nor famine trauma is/was unique to India, that in almost every case the trauma had a human causal factor or set of factors, and that in the case of England and India the histories of scarcity have common roots and routes – of trade, governance and textual materials. Seventeenth century Europe gives us examples of man-made food scarcity and large-scale suffering, whether from war or poor food distribution systems. Eighteenth century India, at the locus of English trade as we know – by 1793 India was contributing 500,000 pounds annually to the English exchequer (Bayly 1989: 120) – was subject to the same uncertainties of food distribution networks, policies on taxation and trade as in English and European history, and therefore, while not replicating the exact same problems as Europe, did experience similar crises in the related domains of food and agriculture. It is this similarity of experience and social conditions that the multimodal representations highlight, and which evokes the trauma globalectic.

As one instance of how the juxtaposition of materials produces this trauma globalectic, I turn to a small segment, 'Further Reading', in the *Famine and Dearth* project. It opens with a set of two frontispieces: Albrecht Dürer's 'The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse' (1498) and

'Emperor Jahangir Triumphant Over Poverty ("Dalidra")', circa 1620-1625, attributed to Abu'l Hasan. Under Dürer's painting, we see the following caption:

It is speculated that the figures of Death and Famine (on the pale horse and on the black horse respectively) actually overlap. Death on his starving horse conveys the physicality of famine starvation, while the rider of the black horse (holding the scales) is a symbolic representation of social injustice during famines.

The Jahangir painting juxtaposed with Dürer's does not carry a caption on this particular page.⁴

Dürer's painting from the Renaissance is widely accepted as a social commentary on the anxieties of the time (war, famine, death, disease/conquest) and in the context of this project, references not simply Biblical themes of judgement and the Apocalypse but the commonality of disaster, human suffering and human causal factors in the making of disaster. In addition, The page through its intertextual framing of the Dürer painting – which, as the caption tells us, points to *social* injustice – with the Abu'l Hasan one, clearly underlines that famines were socially manufactured and therefore could be averted by human effort, such as by kings.

If we extend the reading frame to include the rest of the textual materials on these project pages, we know that the kings in India as well as the British Company/government could have averted the famines. Various policies drafted in the UK and India in the twentieth century and research projects and web resources on sustainable development and food security follow the frontispieces, and gesture, perhaps proleptically, at a continuity of food crises: they are not just in the past but also iterable in the future. This, again, signals connections rather than separateness in terms of geographical and spatial locations.

The trauma globalectic seeks resonances and connections, even interrupted ones, across geographical and cultural spaces. We see not replication but concurrences: human errors, human indifference, trade and economic policies, taxation systems, organisational breakdown, wars, etc, that merge with natural conditions (like low rainfall) producing famines in Europe and India. Conditions vary but are comparable, and famines are, therefore, concurrent histories. Diana Brydon et al call for concurrences as a methodology, where concurrences are 'understood as located within specific times and places at scales below that of the global' (2017: 4). They treat concurrences as 'points of convergence or confluence where they may be gaps in communication, failures to connect, or forms of coming together where friction predominates' (4. Also see Gunlög Fur 2017).

Thus we see how eighteenth century Bengal experiences the same devastation and effects of human incompetence that Early Modern Europe did. The state of social justice is the same in both regions, and across time. While the two regions are connected *through* the East India Company and policy makers, we see patterns emerging in the administration, approach to

⁴ But elsewhere, on the landing page of *Famine and Dearth* site, we see the following caption:

This richly allegorical and ambivalent painting shows the emperor Jahangir serving justice by eliminating poverty, personified as a dark, pathetic, emaciated old man. The inscribed description above the figures, incorporating a laudatory couplet, reads: "The blessed portrait of his exalted majesty, who By the arrow of liberality drove out any trace of Daliddar [Poverty] from the world, and with justice and beneficence built the foundation of a new world."

The emphasis in the poet's lines is on the 'world'.



poverty and tax regimes. Trauma globalectics are concurrent histories, in other words, as the *Famine and Dearth* project clearly suggests: human tragedy is the same everywhere.

Then there is the more obvious kind of concurrences where the events in a distant past, in a distant country, inspire the contemporary artist through the similarity of tragedy, injustice and protest. The ‘Bidrohi Captain Pouch [Rebel Captain Pouch]’ by Aratrika Choudhury and the Chitrakars in the *Famine Tales* project tells the story of the Midlands Uprising of 1607 in the reign of James VI/I. In a style reminiscent of Art Spiegelman’s classic *Maus*, the artists draw the English nobility as pigs and the people as sheep. The focus on this rebellion draws together a set of concerns: the indifference of the ruling class, the suffering of the masses, unjust laws (we are shown the masses, under their leader, Captain Pouch, burning the hedges and fences which had transformed common land into enclosures) and the cries for justice. 1607 is *not* connected to the Bengal famine of the eighteenth century. And yet the rebellion resonates because the *conditions* in which the rebellion proved necessary – food policy, hunger, oppression – are similar. 1607, then, is a frame for reading eighteenth century Bengal, the Company and ‘our’ famine – and this trauma globalectic is made possible precisely through the form of the medium.

Preserving, and in many cases, retrieving, cultural trauma in the digital age as *Famine and Dearth* and *Famine Tales* demonstrate, will mean a media archaeology that merges different forms and genres of/in media. Conjoining instances of social injustice and suffering, as these projects do across spatial and temporal spaces ensures that we see historical trauma in multiple sites and stemming from different forces and causes and yet following certain patterns – social hierarchies, unequal legislation, administrative inefficiency/indifference, all of which conspire to produce food scarcity and famine.

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12 *The Famine Projects and Digital Trauma Studies in India*

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