

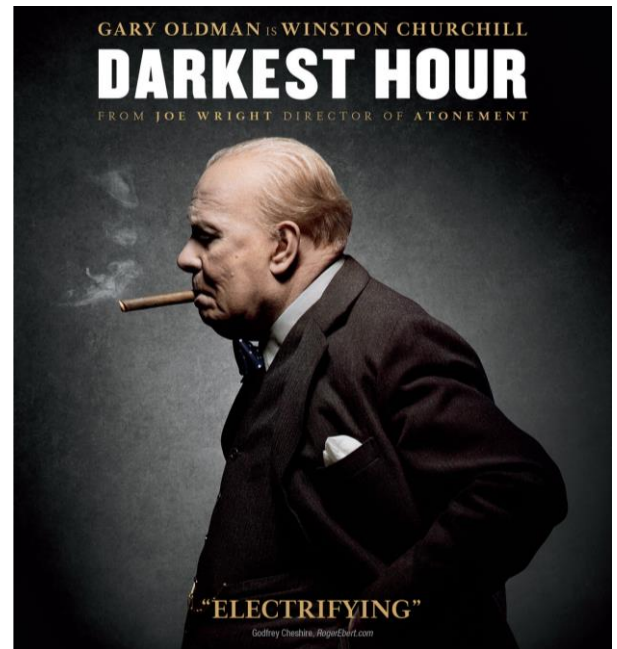
The Darkest Irony of 'Darkest Hour'

By [Sohini Chattopadhyay](#) (2018)

SOURCE: <https://www.livemint.com/Leisure/1cluiBdqarlBpydPKzX5ZP/The-darkest-irony-of-Darkest-Hour.html>

The Oscar-nominated film celebrates Churchill's wit and oration but forgets that he presided over the famine that killed three million Bengalis.

Before we see Sir Winston Churchill for the first time in *Darkest Hour*, nominated for the Best Picture Oscar this year and one of the most nominated films across categories, we see the British statesman's breakfast being made. Bacon sizzling, an egg frying, toast, a glass of wine, a tumbler of whisky—a tray filled to excess. *Darkest Hour* is set in the weeks immediately following Churchill's appointment in May 1940 as the war-time prime minister of Britain. Food is a motif that runs through the film: More than once we see this tray being prepared for Churchill, we see his beautiful decanter of hard spirits and handsome tumbler, we see him nearly always caressing a plump cigar. At one point in the film, he tells his wife that he will cut down his cigar consumption to reduce their household expenses.



Perhaps all this eating and drinking is a pointed reference to Churchill's opponent and World War II architect Adolf Hitler, who was known to be a teetotaler, and a man of generally dyspeptic appetites. But it reminded me of the stories I grew up hearing about people who died begging for rice starch during the [Great Bengal Famine of 1943-44](#). In Bengali, we call this phaenn—the starchy water left over after boiling rice.

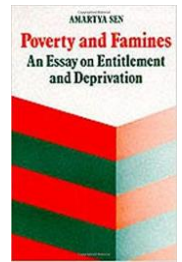
The famine lives on in public memory. In an interview in Pakistan's Dawn, the academic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak said she suffered a stress fracture while running because of weak bones caused by early childhood malnutrition, her doctor told her. She was a child during the famine in Calcutta (now Kolkata).

Sunil Janah's photographs have captured long queues of emaciated women waiting to collect rice rations in south Calcutta in the 1940s. In 2011, DAG collected the sole remaining copy of Hungry Bengal, the sketchbook of the famine drawn by the late artist Chittaprosad Bhattacharya, from his sister in Kolkata, and arranged a retrospective of his work. The British colonial government in India had burnt copies of this book, published in 1943. An essay in Mint in

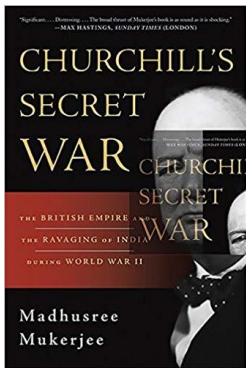
September recalled how the author's grandmother cooked frugally because she had lived through the Bengal famine.

More than three million people, Bengalis mostly, are believed to have starved to death in this famine that Churchill presided over (some estimates put the toll at five million). Hitler is accused of killing 12-15 million people in the Holocaust from 1933-45. Churchill oversaw the death of over three million in four years. Darkest Hour makes no mention of this. Is it ignorance? Or colonial arrogance? Either way, it makes for stunning irony to see Churchill gorging the way he does, in the film.

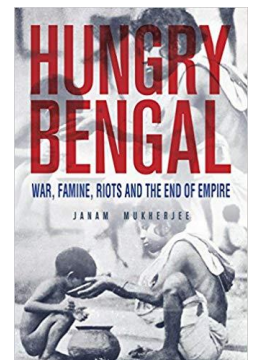
Like Chakravorty Spivak, Prof. Amartya Sen lived through the famine. He was nine years old at the time. He won his Nobel Prize (in economics) for the work [Poverty and Famines](#), which identified that the famine resulted not from people not "having" enough to eat but from people not getting enough to eat. In Prof. Sen's analysis, there was no actual food shortage, but when the British government lifted food price controls in 1943, food became too expensive for many to buy. The distance between those two verbs—having and getting—spells out the culpability of the imperial government in Calcutta, although Sen did not focus on Churchill's leading role in it.



More recently, in 2010, Madhusree Mukherjee held Churchill more directly responsible in her book [Churchill's Secret War](#). It was, in fact, the Churchill war cabinet's strategy of stockpiling food rations for Britain—for both citizens and the war effort—during World War II that was among the factors directly responsible for bringing on the famine, she writes. When the Australian and Canadian governments wanted to send shipments of wheat, these too were moved to the British stockpiles of food. The beloved British "statesman" was informed of how hopeless the situation was by Leopold Amery, the British government's secretary of state for India—that rotting corpses lined the streets of imperial Calcutta, the second city of the British empire. "I hate Indians," he told Amery. "They are a beastly people with a beastly religion." The famine was their own fault, he declared at a war cabinet meeting, for "breeding like rabbits." Mukherjee's book is based on papers from the ministry of war transport and the diary of Churchill's trusted doctor, Lord Cherwell, among other archival sources.



Darkest Hour is set in the weeks immediately following Churchill's appointment as prime minister. Could that be why the film skips the famine? Given the research that is readily at hand, this is hard to accept. In [Hungry Bengal: War, Famine and the End of Empire](#), the historian Janam Mukherjee writes that reports of the famine from the countryside in Bengal could be heard from August 1940. That is, months after Churchill took charge as PM and marshalled his war cabinet to push for victory, not compromise. This plan included stockpiling food for Britain and it involved importing foodgrain from India.



Even in 1943, the year the British government finally declared famine, Madhusree Mukherjee notes that the UK exported 70,000 tonnes of rice from India. Meanwhile, in the UK, right after war was declared in 1940, rations included butter, ham and bacon, and, later, tea, margarine, cheese and preserves. The film reflects the contrast between the colonized and the colonizer beautifully, but probably unintentionally. Incidentally, India provided 200,000 soldiers and volunteers for the British war effort.

Imagine a film on Mao Zedong today that celebrates his role in redistributing land to peasants. Like Churchill's undeniable role in steering Britain aggressively during World War II, Mao did indeed enact successful land reform. Imagine, then, that such a film does not mention the millions of deaths in his time, deaths that can be attributed directly to his decisions that led to famine and enormous economic challenges?

Can you imagine such a film being nominated for the Oscars? Would the actor playing Mao be feted for bringing Mao to life like Gary Oldman is? Or would he be mocked for mimicry?

One of the episodes in the Mahabharat which has given rise to a widely used metaphor is when Krishna asked the Pandavas to lie to the great warrior Dronacharya. The idea was to wear him down in the battle of Kurukshetra. Yudhishtira, the eldest Pandava, who was known for his truthfulness, told Dronacharya that Ashwathama had been injured, and had died. Yudhishtira then hurriedly added in a whisper that an elephant was dead, because he had sworn to be always truthful. It was unclear from his half-whispered missive if Dronacharya's son Ashwathama had died or an elephant of that name had died. Dronacharya, however, thought his son was gone and was heartbroken.

Like Yudhishtira's story, this film tells such a selective truth that it becomes a half-truth of elephantine proportions.

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