

Hungry Nation: Food, Famine, and the Making of Modern India. By Benjamin Robert Siegel. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. 290 \$32.00

Historians of modern India continue to debate when people across the subcontinent started to see themselves as part of a shared “India?” When did Indians, whether in Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, or Tamil Nadu see their fates linked together as part of a national project? Scholars can be tempted to focus attention on larger, more obvious moments like India’s 1947 declaration of independence or on one of the repeated conflicts with Pakistan. A new book suggests a different moment in time, when Indian nationalists fashioned a new national space around a shared purpose and future, with the thinking that a tragedy in one region was a tragedy to the nation as a whole.

Boston University Professor Benjamin Robert Siegel’s superb debut monograph, *Hungry Nation* (based on his 2014 doctoral dissertation), argues that the genesis of modern India is the 1943 Bengal famine. The severity of the famine, in which three to four million lives were lost due to hunger and malnutrition, is not what makes it the starting point of contemporary India. Rather, the famine created a breaking point in Indian frustration with English colonial rule and disgust with British attempts to whitewash their culpability in the death toll. Most importantly, the famine contributed to the emerging idea that a free India would make real the promise of food for all. Indian nationalists imagined food, and its abundance, as the ultimate symbol of self-determination, and Siegel skillfully explores the relationship between food, rights, and citizenship. The Bengal famine occurred in an India replete with telegraph wires, terrestrial radio waves, and thousands of miles of

railroad tracks. It was the dawn of an era where mass media provided first-hand accounts and photographic evidence of starvation. As much as they tried, British colonial authorities could not censor every publication. Indians living from Kanpur to Kochi saw their fellow countrymen and women dying. It was no longer possible to believe that only *some* cities and regions were suffering and Indians came to understand that the problem of feeding people was a *national* problem.

Incorporating English, Hindi, Urdu, and a smattering of Bengali sources, Siegel's *Hungry Nation* weaves together many threads, exploring how India's first generation of leaders came to recognize that achieving food security was paramount in postcolonial nation-building. India's first generation of leaders recognized that if the new state could confront and conquer the bedeviling food problem, its governing expertise and authority would see fewer challenges by the newly free citizenry. Siegel's book demonstrated the many ways independent India tried to feed itself and how different stakeholders pushed back on one another. Siegel's account highlights Indian citizens such as farmers, grain merchants and landless laborers, who craved not just enough to eat, but hoped self-rule would usher in a future India that had achieved true freedom from want.

Hungry Nation unfolds over an introduction, six chapters, and a concise conclusion. The early chapters investigate the last years of British colonial rule and the 1943 Bengal famine which resulted in a mandate for self-rule and a fundamentally different polity and economy. In its earliest years of independence, India became "food-minded" as it drafted ambitious, yet unsuccessful, plans for self-

sufficiency by the start of the 1950s. The middle chapters examine Indian central government schemes to grow more food, transform diets, and encourage Indian citizens to skip meals. In public, from Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru down, Indian officials talked up their proposals as if hope could will food into existence. In private, they grew concerned that they had overpromised what they could deliver to their citizens and worried that Indian citizens were unwilling to cooperate with the growing number of regulations and top-down mandates. The final chapters reveal how food became a protracted political fight between nascent right-wing Hindu organizations, the ruling secular and center-left Congress Party, and more left-leaning groups. These left-leaning groups believed India's battle with hunger could be solved through collective farming, reducing the influence of India's propertied classes, and the redistribution of millions of acres through land reform. It is these chapters that are the book's strongest—particularly Siegel's analysis that India's leaders surrendered the larger fight for social equity in an attempt to solve the issue of food security. Increased agricultural production won out over structural reforms to the detriment of small farmers and landless laborers who saw the rich get richer, gain control of land and resources, and wield greater political clout to protect and ensure their hegemonic class.

Siegel's book covers the 1940s through to the 1970s, but his transition from decade to decade is rocky at times, jumping back and forth too quickly and between different Indian leaders leaving this reader briefly confused. Chapter Three introduces a fascinating gender dynamic to India's quest to feed itself by profiling the All India Women's Conference. In this chapter, Siegel explores how the conference appealed to women as the "food ministers" of

their households, with their own unique part to play in independent India. The book would have been stronger if this gendered thread had been carried through more of the work and it would have been useful for the author to explore Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's approach to gender in greater depth. Lastly, the striking conclusion that India's planning and agricultural policy decisions actually increased inequality could have been highlighted earlier in the book. A more accurate subtitle for Siegel's book might state how food, famine, and inequality made modern India.

Overall, Siegel produced an excellent account of how food became the final issue in the nationalist push for independence and the first challenge of the new Indian state. This work is a profound contribution to multiple fields of literature, from modern India, to South Asian history, as well as food studies and human rights. *Hungry Nation* offers valuable insights on postcolonial nation building, the successes and failures of development planning, and the role of food in modern political and economic histories. If Siegel's goal was to bring food into the larger discussion of political and economic life, his book definitely secured it a place at the table.

—Marc A. Reyes, University of Connecticut