

What We Choose to Forget: Robert Clive Statue in London



Age group: 14 to 18 years old



Time: 90 mins (2 sessions of 45min)



Key question: What does a society reveal about itself in what it chooses to commemorate, and in what it leaves uncommemorated?



Materials needed for the lesson: Photographs of statues in the school's own locality, with a photograph of the Robert Clive statue included among them. Teachers are encouraged to photograph the monuments of their own area. Source Sheets 1 to 6. Large sheets of paper or a clear stretch of wall, and sticky notes. Materials for the memorial-design task: paper, card and pens, with modelling materials if available. A projector or screen (photograph slideshow).

Skills and Concepts developed in the lesson plan:

The lesson develops the skill of reading memory and absence: the practice of asking not only what a society commemorates, but what it passes over in silence, and what that silence tells us about how it understands itself. Students work with the concepts of commemoration, historical significance, multi-perspectivity and historical empathy. They learn to distinguish between not knowing and choosing to forget. And they take up the idea that a monument is a document of the moment that made it, carrying the values of its makers into a present that may no longer share them. Alongside these run the more familiar disciplines of source analysis and inference, and the harder discipline of holding a question open rather than hurrying to close it.

Learning Outcomes: By the end of this lesson, students should be able to:

- Explain how a monument expresses the values of those who made it, and how its meaning is contested rather than fixed;
- Recognise that the presence of a memorial does not mean it was ever universally approved, and that public memory is layered and contested rather than settled;
- Account for how the Bengal famine of 1943 has been remembered, and for why a catastrophe on this scale has left so little public trace, distinguishing concealment, neglect and active forgetting;
- Use testimony to consider what different people who lived through the famine might most want remembered;
- Weigh, using the reporting of a contemporary witness, whether a catastrophe is better understood as a natural disaster or a human failure, and recognise what is at stake in that distinction;
- Design a memorial that responds to an absence, and justify their decisions about its site, its form, its words and the way it is encountered;
- Sustain an open historical and ethical question without reducing it to a single, settled answer.

Pedagogical Recommendations

This lesson is built on the principles of participant-centred learning, and it will not do its work if it is delivered as a narrated account. The aim is to dissolve, as far as a classroom allows, the hierarchy that places the teacher as the holder of knowledge and the students as its recipients. As a rough discipline, the facilitator should aim to speak for no more than a fifth of the lesson and to leave the rest to the students: to their reading, their discussion, and the meanings they make together. The sources are placed in their hands, in small groups, and the questions that drive the lesson are genuine ones – questions to which the facilitator also does not hold a settled answer, and can say so honestly.

Much teaching about empire and atrocity reaches too quickly for its 'lessons'. It tells students what to feel and what to conclude, and in doing so it closes down the very thinking it hoped to open. This lesson asks the opposite. It surfaces what students already assume about statues, memory and the past, tests those assumptions against the evidence, and then leaves them with a question rather than a verdict. The dissonance this produces – the discovery that a familiar national story contains a catastrophe most students have never heard of, with no memorial to mark it – is not a problem to be smoothed away. It is where the learning happens, and the facilitator should protect rather than resolve it.

The human material at the centre of this lesson is, in places, very hard. People starved; parents could not feed their children; a society came apart under the weight of hunger. It should be handled with care, and teachers should use their own judgement about what is appropriate to include for their own students. The governing principle is compassion rather than pity. The people in these sources are not a faceless mass of victims but individuals who experienced and witnessed the era of the Bengal famine in multiple ways. The lesson seeks to recover the dignity and agency of those who suffered its impact, not to overwhelm or traumatise students, and explicit details that could produce disgust or revulsion have been deliberately left out.

Because no student needs to read everything, the personal story case studies are designed for shared reading. Within each group of four students, the sixteen cards are divided up so that each student reads three or four closely and then brings back what they find to the group, so that the fuller picture is assembled by the group rather than given to students in the form of a narrative account. This also lets the facilitator distribute the material according to the confidence and reading level of different students, and to circulate, listen and prompt rather than instruct.

A word on where this lesson is taught. In an English classroom, the dissonance is likely to be the discovery of an unfamiliar history that implicates a familiar national story (Britain's role during the era of the Second World War, the period in which the famine unfolded), and the facilitator's task is to open that discovery without rushing to console it. In Indian, Bangladeshi and diaspora classrooms, the same material may lie closer to inherited grief or family memory, and the facilitator's role shifts from revelation towards holding a space in which that memory can be spoken. The questions remain the same; what changes is how the facilitator best supports the students encountering this difficult past.

Preparing the lesson

No prior knowledge of Robert Clive or of the famine is assumed; the lesson builds it. Before the first session, photograph several statues in your own locality (or print them from images on the internet) and place the photograph of the Clive statue among them, unremarked. Print and, if possible, laminate the five source sheets, and cut Source Sheet 3 into individual case-study cards. Arrange the room so that students sit in small groups, and clear a wall, or lay out large sheets of paper, where the class can gather its thinking on sticky notes. The plan that follows assumes the two sessions run consecutively or close together; if they are separated, begin the second by returning briefly to the question the first session left open.

Breakdown of Activities Step-by-step

Step 1

What a statue is for (12 minutes)

Begin with the statues students pass by in their local area, often without noticing. Show the photographs of monuments in your own area, with the photograph of the Clive statue placed quietly among them. Ask students, in their groups, to record their first thoughts on sticky notes: who is given a statue, and who decides? What is a statue for? What do the statues in a location tell us about what that place values, or once valued?

Take a few of these thoughts in plenary and record them on a whiteboard or flipchart where the whole class can see them. The point is not to reach agreement but to make the students' own assumptions visible, so that the lesson can later test them against the evidence.

Open question. Whose values does a statue record – those of the person it depicts, those of the people who chose to raise it, or our own, now, as we choose how to relate to it, whether to keep it up, take it down, add to or amend it?

Step 2

One statue, one word (15 minutes)

Now turn to the statue that was sitting, unannounced, among the others, and hand out Source Sheet 1. Give no more than two minutes of context: that this is Robert Clive; that he won the Battle of Plassey in 1757 by bribing a rival commander to stand aside; that the victory, and the grant of revenue rights that followed it, made him a founder of British rule in Bengal; and that the statue was raised in 1912, well over a century after his death, by a fund got up to correct what its organisers called the neglect of his memory.

Set the groups an observation task. Consider how the statue is dressed and posed – what is being communicated about this man. How are we supposed to see and regard him? The monument carries a single word on its plinth: 'CLIVE', and three sides are inlaid with bas-reliefs celebrating moments in his political and military career.

Hand out Source sheet 1 and ask them to consider which aspects of Clive's story are embodied in the statue, and what parts of his and the wider story of British imperial rule are left out. *What does this monument choose to say, and what does it leave out? Who was it speaking to, and what did it want them to believe?*

Then the dissonance. Students tend to assume that a statue is a settled inheritance, an agreed verdict of the past. Source Sheet 1 shows that this one was fought over from the day it was proposed – celebrated by imperial enthusiasts in Britain, opposed by nationalist newspapers in Bengal who argued instead for honouring Clive's defeated opponent, the nawab Siraj-ud-Daula, or for inscribing the statue with the record of Clive's own duplicity. Clive was contested in his own lifetime too: after the Bengal famine of 1769–70 he was mocked on the London stage as 'Lord Vulture' and jeered in the street.

Draw out the wider point, because it is one students should carry well beyond Clive. The presence of a memorial does not mean that everyone, then or now, approved of it. A statue can give an impression of a past that is settled, agreed upon, a single story with a single message embodied in stone or bronze, when in reality that same past can be contested, layered, and complex. Part of learning to read a monument is recovering the arguments it has quietly buried – the things that lay hidden, uncommemorated, and forgotten. Hold this thought; the students will meet it again in Stage 6, when they try to build a memorial of their own.

Open question. If the statue was contested from the start, what does it mean that it now stands, to most who pass it, as though it had never been in question at all?

On keeping Clive tight. Clive is the way in, not the subject of the lesson. He opens the character and the long arc of British rule in Bengal. Resist the pull to spend the session on him; the lesson now follows that arc forward, past his own lifetime, to a catastrophe that has no statue, no monument, at all.

Step 3

The number with no memorial (15 minutes)

Introduce the turn the lesson now takes. In 1943, in the middle of the Second World War, an estimated three million people died of starvation and of the diseases that followed it, in Bengal. They were Indians, and therefore subjects of the same empire that raised the statue to Clive. Give the journalist Kavita Puri's framing: that this was one of the largest losses of civilian life on the Allied side, and that, in her words, there is no memorial anywhere to them, not even a plaque.

Then put the harder question that the uncertainty of the figure opens. We cannot say for sure how many died. Estimates run from one and a half million to as many as six or seven million; most settle on at least three million. Ask students what it means that the dead were never counted, their names never recorded. What does the absence of a count tell us about how much each of those lives was valued by the authorities of the day? Why are some lives written down, recorded, marked and remembered, and others disappear from our sight and our memory, left to be guessed at in millions?

Then introduce a witness. In 1943, the reporter T. G. Narayan travelled the worst-affected districts for the newspaper *The Hindu*, working around the censors, and wrote down what he saw. Hand out Source Sheet 5, or read two or three of its passages aloud. He found the dead and the dying even in districts that grew far more rice than their people needed, and he reached a conclusion he put in print at the time: that the famine was, in his words, 'man-caused'. He dedicated his book to the people of Bengal who died, as he wrote, 'denied the food they grew for other men's benefit'.

Narayan's reporting sharpens the question the second session will pursue, rather than answering it. The famine was seen at the time, and reported, and even argued in print to be man-made; the forgetting came afterwards. It was known and not commemorated, and so it has been forgotten by subsequent generations. That is a choice.

Open question. What does it take for three million people to die of starvation, for that famine to be reported in the press and debated in the British Parliament, and yet leave no trace on our memory? No public memorial or monument, no recognition or acknowledgement, no trace that they had ever lived or how they died under British rule? Was that a deliberate choice? What would forgetting serve? And what would it take to set the historical record straight? What purpose would memory serve?

For extension only. The scale of the famine, its causes, and the question of British and in particular Churchill's responsibility are all genuinely contested by historians. Notes on this contestation, with questions for older or further-extending students, are presented at the end of this lesson plan. They are kept out of the lesson's main line not because they are unimportant but so as not to displace its central concern, which is not who is to blame but how three million people came to be forgotten.

A note on Source Sheet 5. The extracts in Source Sheet 5 are drawn from T. G. Narayan's *Famine Over Bengal* (1944). The sheet is longer than the other source sheets; facilitators should decide in advance how much of it to use. The first section ('The experience of the famine') and the final section ('What good relief looked like') are the most accessible for most groups at GCSE level. The sections on causation ('Made by humans, not by nature') reward older or extension students engaging with the historical debate on responsibility. The sheet can be used in full at Stage 3 with a strong class, or selectively – one or two sections read aloud – with a group less confident with extended primary source work.

An optional close-reading: the language of denial. Narayan paid attention to how officials wrote the famine down. Starving people were entered in hospital registers as 'beggars'; deaths were recorded as 'debility' rather than starvation; a day's relief was measured out in cigarette tins. If time allows, groups can consider the connection between how the sick and the dying were regarded by the authorities and the failure to record and remember those who perished.

Step 4

The people (18 minutes)

This is the heart of the lesson, and most of the time belongs here. Working in their groups, students read the case studies on Source Sheet 3. Not all students need to read all of them. Within each small group of four, the cards are divided up, each student reading two or three closely and then telling the others what they have found, so that the group assembles between them a fuller picture than any one of them holds alone.

The people on these cards are not only the starving. They are a nine-year-old rationing out the food his family can spare from a cigarette tin; survivors who carry the fear of hunger into great old age; a wealthy family watching the dying arrive at their gate; the newspaper editor who broke an official silence; the office boy who handled a file whose meaning he understood only decades later; the granddaughter of a colonial governor, holding a shame she that comes from no action of her own. Some lived through the famine, some watched it from safety, some administered it, and some have inherited its memory.

Groups who want more than the cards can also draw on the reporting in Source Sheet 5, where Narayan describes particular people he met, among them a woman who told him, 'I am no beggar... I want to work for my food', and the relief at Sarisha, which kept families together and let family members serve one another to preserve their self-respect. What good relief preserved, beyond life itself, is worth noting alongside the question of what these people would want remembered.

Set the groups a single task as they read and share, and ask them to capture their thinking on sticky notes: for the person you have read about, what would they most want remembered? What part of this history matters most to them?

An optional thread: from the cigarette tin to organised relief. The personal stories show acts of individual kindness alongside organised action, and the contrast is worth drawing out. Amartya

Sen's cigarette tin, and the stranger's gift of bread that Jamina Pakayth never forgot, are real and they matter; but they could not meet a catastrophe on this scale. What did save many lives was organisation: for example, the women of the Women's Self-Defence Association, whom Manikuntala Sen led, running gruel kitchens and marching on the Assembly to force the release of rice; the relief at Sarisha that kept families together. Setting these beside the individual gestures lets students reach a quiet conclusion of their own: that kindness is necessary but not sufficient, that meeting a crisis on this scale takes organisation and mutual reliance, and that this is part of why stable societies and capable, accountable government matter.

Step 5

One name among three million (10 minutes)

Bring the class back together for the hinge of the lesson. Of the three million who died, the sources we have recover almost no names at all. Hand out Source Sheet 4. It carries one very rare exception: a man whom the artist Chittaprosad Bhattacharya drew and captioned, 'His name was Kshetramohan Naik' – insisting that one of the dead be remembered and given back the dignity that had been taken from him. Set this one recovered name against the fact that there is no voice of the three million, and that the only memorial many families kept was a private habit: a handful of rice set aside from each meal.

Then show how others have marked the dead and the missing from other human tragedies. Look briefly at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., which gives every name; at the Menin Gate at Ypres, built around the names of those whose bodies were never identified; and at the statue of Siraj-ud-Daula raised at Plassey in 2007, beside the older British memorial, as examples. Each found a different way to make absence visible. Show them, too, that a memorial need not be a physical monument in stone or bronze: Narayan's book opened with a dedication to the dead of Bengal, 'denied the food they grew for other men's benefit', which was, in its way, among the few memorials they were given.

Show also the work of two artists who documented the famine at the time. Zoinul Abedin (1914–1976), the Bangladeshi artist, produced a series of raw ink and charcoal drawings in 1943 depicting famine victims on the streets of Calcutta; the series, created as the famine was still unfolding, is held by the British Museum. Chittaprosad Bhattacharya (1915–1978), a Communist artist and journalist, travelled on foot through the famine-affected districts, producing hundreds of drawings and linocuts documenting what he witnessed. His book 'Hungry Bengal' (1943) was confiscated and destroyed by the British colonial government; the surviving work is now held by the Delhi Art Gallery. Because both artists' work remains in copyright, images are not reproduced directly in these materials: slides 8 and 9 of the PowerPoint carry links to online pages where their work can be viewed. Click through to display the images to the class. Slide 8 also carries a map of Bengal and the wider wartime context in South Asia, produced by Omniatlas; use it at this point to give students geographical orientation before they move to the memorial design task.

Open question. Can you commemorate millions of people when we do not know who they were because their names and lives were never recorded? What would a memorial to the unnamed actually look like?

Step 6

Design a memorial (15 minutes)

Now hand the lesson over to the students. In their groups, they design a memorial to the victims of the Bengal famine of 1943. Four decisions frame the brief: where it should stand; what form it should take; what, if anything, it should say; and how a person should come upon it and move through it. The thinking they gathered in Stage 4 – what the people in the stories would most want remembered – should feed directly into these decisions, so that the memorial answers to the human material and not only to the scale of the loss.

Set them one further challenge, one the lesson has been building toward since Stage 2. Whatever they design, someone would object to it, just as people objected, and still object, to the statue of Clive. The people they have read about would not all want the same thing remembered, and no single memorial can hold every view; the attempt to make a memorial that tells a single point of view can flatten a past that was always messy, layered and argued over. So put the harder question to them: is there a way for a memorial to admit that it cannot speak for everyone, to show a past that is contested rather than settled?

Groups present their thinking by a short pitch or a gallery walk. Assess their reasoning and how they have reflected on the key questions. A modest, well-argued proposal that knows why it makes its choices is worth more than an elaborate one that does not.

A further decision sits underneath the other four. Narayan held that the famine was a human failure and not a natural disaster. Ask groups to decide whether their memorial says why the people died, and not only that they died, and whether it mourns the dead or also names what was done to them. There is no right answer; the reasoning is the point.

Do not close the lesson with a conclusion. Close it with a debate. Put Kavita Puri's own explanation to the class, in her words on Source Sheet 4: that the famine is hard for Britain to remember because remembering it complicates a heroic British story about the war. Then ask them, plainly: how far do you agree with her? Is it harder for a country to remember the things that do not fit the story it tells about itself, and if it is, what should it do about that? Let them argue it out and let them leave with the conversation rather than with a settled answer.

For extension. The famine scholar Alex de Waal argues that the failure to remember famine is bound up with the failure to prevent it, and that famine is making a return in our own century. Older students might be asked to test that claim rather than accept it: if we do not mark a catastrophe, are we more likely to let it happen again?

Annexes

Notes for the Facilitator: the Contested History

These notes are for the teacher, and for extension with older or further-reaching students. They are kept apart from the lesson's main line on purpose: the central concern is memory and absence, not the apportioning of blame, and the contestation below can easily consume a lesson if it is allowed to. Used sparingly, it deepens the inquiry rather than displacing it.

The death toll

The figure is genuinely uncertain. The official Famine Inquiry Commission of 1945 estimated around 1.5 million excess deaths; Amartya Sen arrived at between 2.7 and 3 million; later demographic work has tended to settle near 2.1 million, while some estimates run higher still. 'An estimated three million' is defensible and is the figure around which much public memory has gathered, but it sits towards the upper-middle of the range rather than at its centre. The lesson treats the uncertainty itself as the point: that the dead were never counted is part of what it means to say they were forgotten.

Causation

Causation is multi-causal and contested. A cyclone, the loss of Burmese rice imports, wartime disruption, hoarding and profiteering, and the rigidity and priorities of colonial administration all compounded one another. Sen's influential account holds that there was no overall shortage of food, but a collapse in the ability of the poor to buy it; others have argued for a real decline in supply. The defensible position for the classroom is that British colonial policy bears substantial responsibility for turning hardship into catastrophe. The stronger claim, that Britain deliberately manufactured the famine, is not one the scholarship supports, and the lesson does not make it.

A note on chronology

Students sometimes conflate Robert Clive (1725–1774), the founder of British rule in Bengal, with the later history of the famine. The connection is structural rather than causal: Clive belongs to the establishment of Company rule and the famine of 1769–70 that followed it; the 1943 famine is a separate event, nearly two centuries later, under a different administration. What links them is the long arc of British rule in Bengal, and the asymmetry between what that rule has commemorated and what it has left unmarked. A simple orientation may help: 1757, Battle of Plassey and the beginning of Company rule; 1769–70, the first great Bengal famine; 1858, Crown rule replaces the Company after the uprising; 1912, the Clive statue is erected; 1939–45, the Second World War and the Bengal famine of 1943.

Further Reading

- Kavita Puri, *Three Million* (BBC Radio 4, 2024) – the series on which this lesson's testimony draws.
- James Watts, 'Contested Statues: The Clive Memorial Fund, Imperial Heroes, and the Reimaginings of Indian History', *Journal of British Studies* (2024).
- William Dalrymple, *The Anarchy: The Relentless Rise of the East India Company* (2019).
- Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (1981).
- Madhusree Mukerjee, *Churchill's Secret War* (2010).
- Cormac Ó Gráda, writing on the demography and historiography of famine, for the contested death toll.
- 'Hunger Burns', an exhibition curated by Sona Datta with Diya Gupta and Sujatro Ghosh (London, 2024), on the recent cultural commemoration of the famine.

Worksheet for the students

Source Sheet 1

The Statue and the Empire It Remembers

Use at Stage 2. Read together in groups as the basis for Stage 2 observation and discussion.

Read this together in your group, then discuss the two questions at the end.

On King Charles Street in London, beside the building from which Britain once governed much of its empire, stands a bronze statue of a man. Its plinth carries a single word: CLIVE.

Robert Clive (1725–1774) worked for the East India Company, a private British trading company that came to rule much of India. In 1757, he won the Battle of Plassey in Bengal, mainly by paying a rival commander to change sides. In the years that followed, the Company took control of the wealth and revenues of Bengal, then one of the richest regions in the world. This was one of the beginnings of British rule in India, and Clive returned to Britain enormously rich.

Bengal under the new regime suffered a terrible famine in 1769–70. The historian William Dalrymple puts the dead at three to five million, though older accounts give a figure as high as ten million. The statue itself makes no mention of this. It says only: CLIVE.

Dalrymple has described how the Company met that famine. Where Indian rulers had long waived taxes and opened relief in a year of hunger, the Company kept collecting its revenue, by force where it had to, and in Company-ruled Calcutta, he says, 'not one soup kitchen' was opened. In 1772, with the dead still counted in the millions, the Company's shareholders in London were told the full revenue had been gathered, and voted to pay themselves more of the profit. News of the famine made the Company notorious at home, and Clive was mocked on the London stage as 'Lord Vulture' and jeered in the street.

The monument was not put up in Clive's lifetime. It was raised in 1912, more than a century after his death, by a fund organised by Lord Curzon, a former Viceroy of India, who wanted to correct what he saw as the neglect of a great imperial hero. In Britain the campaign met mostly with indifference. In Bengal it met opposition: nationalist newspapers argued that Plassey had been won by trickery, that the real hero was Clive's defeated opponent, the nawab Siraj-ud-Daula, and that if a statue were built at all it should record Clive's deceit. A statue to Siraj-ud-Daula was finally raised at Plassey, the site of the battle, in 2007.

The historian James Watts, who has studied the campaign to raise Clive's statue, argues that when we look at a monument we should notice the argument and opposition that surrounded it when it was built, rather than treating its presence as settled and beyond question. The Clive statue was argued over from the day it was proposed, and Clive himself was argued over in his own lifetime. A monument can give the impression that everyone once agreed; almost always, they did not. Its presence can flatten the arguments that surrounded it, and make a contested, layered past look settled and singular. More recently, in 2020 and again in 2025, there have been public calls for the statue to be taken down.

Discuss in your group.

- This monument carries one word. What does it choose to say about Robert Clive, and what does it leave out? Who do you think it was speaking to, and what did it want them to believe?
- The statue was argued over from the start. What does it mean that it now stands, to most people who pass it, as though it had never been in question at all?

Source Sheet 2

The Famine of 1943

Use at Stage 3. Read together in groups to introduce the Bengal famine before Stage 4 personal stories. Read this together in your group. It is the background to the rest of the lesson.

In 1943, while the Second World War was being fought, an estimated three million people died of starvation and disease in Bengal, in eastern India. They were Indians, and therefore subjects of the British Empire. The journalist Kavita Puri, who made a radio series about the famine, calls it one of the largest losses of civilian life on the Allied side of the war.

Bengal was not a poor corner of the empire. For centuries Britain had drawn great wealth from it, and its capital, Kolkata (then Calcutta), was called the second city of the empire. When war came, Bengal was pulled into it. By 1942, Japanese forces had advanced through Southeast Asia to the edge of the province. Fearing invasion, the colonial authorities carried out what was called a 'denial policy': they seized food and boats across the region so that an invading enemy could not use them. Tens of thousands of boats were taken or destroyed. Fishermen could not reach the sea; rice could not be transported to the marketplaces.

Then, in October 1942, a cyclone struck the rice-growing districts, killing tens of thousands and destroying much of the harvest. Rice grew scarce, and as it did, it was hoarded, and its price climbed beyond the reach of the poor. At the end of 1942 the government in India asked London to send grain. The request was refused; shipping, it was said, was needed for the war. Food was sent to other parts of India, but not to Bengal, which Britain instructed to export still more rice, even while millions of Indians starved.

This was, in Puri's words, 'a class-based famine'. Those with money went on much as before, while the poor died of hunger and disease. In Kolkata, people came to the gates of wealthy houses asking not even for rice, but just for the starchy water it had been boiled in. By the summer of 1943, Puri says, you could smell starvation in the city's air.

A long-standing set of rules known as the Famine Code should have set official relief in motion, but at first the British government denied it was happening because this would have forced them to act and would have meant diverting food and shipping from the war effort. So instead, as the dying filled the pavements of the city, the authorities passed the Bengal Vagrancy Act and began clearing them from the streets – not to feed them, but so that they could not be seen.

Under these wartime rules, newspapers were forbidden to use the word 'famine' to describe what was happening. The silence was only broken in August 1943 when the editor of the Kolkata newspaper *The Statesman* published images of the dying, using the fact that although they were not allowed to use the word 'famine', nothing had been said about publishing pictures that showed the conditions. Only with the public outcry that followed was the famine admitted.

When relief came, it came late, and the dead were never counted. Estimates of how many died range from one and a half million to as many as six or seven million; most settle on at least three million. There is no memorial to them anywhere in the world. As Puri puts it, it is 'like those millions of people never existed.'

Discuss in your group.

1. The dead were never counted. What does that tell us about how much each of those lives was valued by the people in power?
2. Why do you think a catastrophe on this scale has left so little public trace?

Source Sheet 3

Personal stories

Use at Stage 4. Divide the printed and cut cards among students in small groups for Stage 4 shared reading.

Each of the people on these cards lived through the famine, watched it, chronicled it, organised against it, failed to prevent it, or has inherited its memory. None of them is a statistic, and none is only a victim. They include a boy with a tin of rice, an artist who made his ink from burnt charcoal, a woman who marched on the Assembly, an old man who still cannot travel without food.

In your group, divide the cards between you. Read your card, or cards, slowly and closely. There is more here than a single fact to extract; let yourself get a feel for the person, and for the world they lived in. Then tell the others in your group what you have found, so that between you, you build a fuller picture than any one of you holds alone.

As you read, and as you listen to each other, hold one question in mind for every person: what would they most want remembered, and what part of this history matters most to them? Write your thoughts on sticky notes as you go.

A note on these names

Some of the people here are documented public figures – the artists Zainul Abedin and Chittaprosad, the journalists T. G. Narayanan and Ian Stephens, the organiser Manikuntala Sen – and their names are securely recorded by historians and museums. Others are survivors and witnesses whose memories were gathered for the radio series *Three Million* (Kavita Puri, BBC Radio 4, 2024), or by the teacher Sailen Sarkar. Some of those names come from a broadcast, and their spellings are still being checked; one survivor's name has been left off altogether, rather than print a version I am not sure of.

That the names of almost all of the three million who died are unknown is a key focus of the lesson.

Card 1: Shri Patacharan Samanta

Patacharan Samanta was fifteen, and lived with his family in Midnapore, a district on the coast to the south-west of Kolkata. They held no land of their own and bought their rice in the market, so they had nothing stored to fall back on when the price began to climb. He remembered the shape of an ordinary day before the famine, down to its smallest detail: one meal, boiled rice served on a banana leaf, eaten as he sat on the cold mud floor of the house.

Midnapore had reason to fear the authorities. It had been a centre of resistance to British rule, and when the war reached Bengal it was hit hard by the 'denial policy', under which boats and rice were seized along the coast so that an invading Japanese army could not use them. Then, in October 1942, a cyclone came in off the Bay of Bengal. The sea rose over the fields, drowned tens of thousands of people, and left salt where the rice should have grown.

After that, there was no living to be had at home. 'I had no choice but to leave home,' Patacharan said. 'I went to Kolkata.' He joined the roads that were filling with people walking towards the city, where there might be a relief kitchen, or work, or simply more chance than there was in a flooded village. He survived. Many more who set out on the same journey did not.

What would Patacharan Samanta most want remembered?

cut here

Card 2: Chand Ali Khamaru

On a September morning in 1943, a young man named Chand Ali Khamaru walked eight miles to bring food to his father in the Midnapore countryside. What he carried tells you how some managed to stay alive as the rice ran out. He carried a little rice, but also a broth he had made from *googli*, the small snails he had gathered, and *kochu shaak*, the fibrous leaves of the taro plant, which he had pulled from a pond and steamed in an iron pot.

This was famine food: the food of people who had come to the end of the ordinary kind and turned to whatever the ponds and ditches could still give. It took knowledge, and effort, and the determination to keep a father alive across eight miles of road. The people who died in the famine are too easily pictured as helpless. Khamaru's efforts are a reminder of how much skill and resolve went into just staying alive.

We know about that walk for one reason only. A retired teacher, Sailen Sarkar, who also appears in these personal story cards, sought Khamaru out many years afterwards and wrote his memory down in a book whose title means *Witness of the Famine*. Without that, this response to the famine, this resilience and struggle, like that of so many others who tried so hard to survive, would have gone unrecorded.

What would Chand Ali Khamaru most want remembered?

Card 3: A survivor, aged ninety-five

He is one of the last people alive who remember the famine from the inside, and he was a child when it came. More than eighty years later, an interviewer found that in his home he stores enough food to last two years, and that he still will not go anywhere without a bag of food. The experience of hunger he lived through as a boy has never entirely left him. He still prepares for the hunger to return again, long after the danger has passed, and in a time when many prefer to forget that the famine happened at all.

He survived a catastrophe that was never properly counted. No one wrote down his name in 1943, or the names of the people he lost. The government of Bengal kept careful accounts of rice, of shipping, of prices; it did not keep an account of the dead. That is why the number who died is still only an estimate, somewhere above three million, but we have no list of their names – nothing to show that they ever lived at all.

What will remain of them when the last survivors die, how will they be remembered, who will tell their story and record the experience of the famine?

What would this survivor most want remembered?

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Card 4: Jamina Pakayth

Jamina Pakayth was a small child during the famine, and what she remembers most clearly is not her own hunger but something she saw. Her family was among the great number travelling towards Kolkata, packed into the carriages of a crowded train, because the city was where food and relief were said to be.

On the same train was a mother with a baby at her breast. The mother was starving, and a starving body cannot make milk. There was nothing for the child, and nothing that anyone in the carriage could do, and somewhere on the journey the baby died. Jamina saw it happen. She was old enough to understand and has carried that memory for more than eighty years.

She still chooses to speak of it. It was not her grief, in the ordinary sense; the mother was a stranger, and the baby was not hers. But she was there, and she saw, and in the absence of any record of who that mother and child were, her memory is the only place where they still exist.

She kept something else from those days, too. She had begged for food along the way, and a small girl, a stranger, had given her a piece of bread. Of everything she might have remembered, it was also that kindness she chose to hold onto.

What would Jamina Pakayth most want remembered?

Card 5: Amartya Sen

In 1943, Amartya Sen was nine years old, living between his family's home and the school the poet Rabindranath Tagore had founded at Santiniketan, out in the Bengal countryside. His family was comfortable, and they were not among those who died. That difference between the rich and the poor, he later came to feel, was the most significant feature of the famine. The starvation did not fall on people like him. It fell on landless labourers, on fishermen, on the families of the villages, who began one by one to appear on the roads, walking towards the towns in the hope of food.

They came to his family's door, and the young boy, Amartya Sen, wanted to give them everything there was. His grandmother gave him instead a cigarette tin filled with rice, with a rule attached to it. He could give a measure away, but only after he had eaten half of it himself. If he tried to feed every person who came, she told him, he would soon have nothing left, and would be able to save no one. Sometimes he broke the rule.

Amartya Sen grew up to become an economist and won the Nobel Prize for work that started from a question this childhood had planted in him: why do people starve, when there is often enough food in the country to feed everyone? His answer was that famine is rarely simple scarcity. It is about who can access the food, and who cannot.

What would Amartya Sen most want remembered?

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Card 6: Parthur Mitter

Parthur Mitter grew up in a prosperous family in Kolkata, behind a house with double gates. For people like his family, he remembered, the famine did not arrive as hunger. It arrived as a sound at the gate. The starving walked in from the countryside and gathered outside the homes of the well-off, and what they asked for was not rice. It was the *phan* – the cloudy, starchy water left behind from boiling rice, the kind of thing a kitchen would normally pour away.

Inside the gates, life went on. 'We always had rice,' he said, and his family's daily routine was, in his own words, 'remarkably unchanged.' This was the strange shape of the Bengal famine. It was not that a whole society went hungry together. It was that one part of it died on the pavements while another part, sometimes only a street away, ate as it always had. The journalist Kavita Puri, who recorded these memories, calls it 'a class-based famine.'

What Mitter offers is the view from the comfortable side of the gate, and that view is as much a part of the history as the queue outside it. He was a child, and could have changed none of it. But he remembered it exactly, into old age, which is its own kind of refusal to look away.

What would Parthur Mitter most want remembered?

Card 7: Pamela Dowley-Wise

Pamela Dowley-Wise was sixteen, and her life was comfortable, even during the war. She came from a British family long settled in Kolkata, in the jute trade, with Indian servants and a life lived largely apart from Indians. When the Allied soldiers filled the city, she went with them to the markets, picnicked with them, and sang the old English songs around the piano. A soldier proposed to her by moonlight at the Victoria Memorial, the vast marble monument to the queen-empress at the heart of the city. She walked her dog on the Maidan, the open green around it.

Then the famine reached Kolkata, and the dying came in from the countryside and lay down on the same pavements and the same green. At the foot of the Victoria Memorial, where she had been proposed to, there were now the bodies of the dead, picked at by vultures. Asked, long afterwards, whether she had stopped going there, she said that you could not stop going to the Victoria Memorial.

Hers is the view from inside the bubble: a glamorous life carrying on at the foot of a great imperial monument, while at the base of that same monument people starved. It was her account, given many years later, that first led the journalist Kavita Puri to the famine at all.

What would Pamela Dowley-Wise most want remembered?

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Card 8: Zainul Abedin

In 1943 Zainul Abedin was a young teacher at the Government School of Art in Calcutta, trained in a careful, academic style. Then the starving began to arrive in the city from the villages, and what he saw changed the way he worked. People collapsed on the pavements. Children searched the drains for food. The dying lay in public while the ordinary business of the city carried on around them.

He set out to draw it. He had little money for materials, so he made his own ink by burning charcoal, and worked on cheap, ordinary packing paper, the kind used for wrapping parcels. With a few quick strokes of the brush, he drew the figures of the famine: the bowed backs, the thin limbs, the families on the ground. He did not soften what he saw, and he did not exaggerate. He set it down plainly, as he witnessed it.

Abedin drew a hard line between two kinds of disaster. A flood, he said, belongs to nature; a famine – where people starve because food does not reach them – belongs to human decision. His sketches of 1943 became some of the most widely known images of the catastrophe, and they hang today in galleries in Dhaka and in the British Museum in London. He had no power to stop the famine. What he could do was make sure that it was seen, and that it could not later be denied.

What would Zainul Abedin most want remembered?

Card 9: Chittaprosad

Chittaprosad Bhattacharya was a young artist with no formal training, working for the Communist Party, when in 1943 he was sent into the Midnapore countryside to record what the famine was doing there. He travelled by bus, by boat and on foot through the villages, sketching in black ink what he found: the emptied homes, the relief kitchens, the dying and the dead.

What set his work apart was that he refused to let the people in it become an anonymous mass. Where he could, he wrote their names and their stories beside the drawings, noting who a person was, what they had done, and which village they came from. One sketch records a starving boy as Rabi Raut of Kadamdanga. Another names a dead man, Kshetramohan Naik, whose drawing appears elsewhere in this lesson.

He gathered twenty-two of these sketches and his notes into a book, *Hungry Bengal*. Almost as soon as it appeared, the British authorities seized the copies and burned them, around five thousand in all. One survived, and only by chance: Chittaprosad had posted a copy to his mother before the rest were destroyed.

What would Chittaprosad most want remembered?

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Card 10: T. G. Narayanan

When the famine took hold in 1943, the newspaper *The Hindu*, published in the south of India, sent a reporter named T. G. Narayanan north to Bengal to find out what was happening. He was, by one account, the first Indian war correspondent, and he worked in the teeth of a British censorship that was doing its best to keep the word famine out of print.

Narayanan went to Calcutta, to Dacca, and out into the districts, and he wrote down both halves of the story. He set out the official failures behind the famine, the incompetence and the passing of blame, and he recorded what he saw and heard on the ground: the scenes in the streets, and the accounts of the people living through it. His reports became a book, *Famine Over Bengal*, one of the first full accounts of the catastrophe written by an Indian.

This set of personal stories holds another journalist, Ian Stephens, the British editor who broke the silence with photographs. Narayanan is his counterpart: an Indian reporter taking the greater risk of writing against the government of his own colonised country. Between them, they show clearly that the details of the famine were well known at the time. It was reported. The silence that came afterwards was not that of people who did not know, but who chose to forget. He dedicated his book to the dead of Bengal, who, he wrote, had been 'denied the food they grew for other men's benefit.' You can read some of his own reporting in Source Sheet 5.

What would T. G. Narayanan most want remembered?

Card 11: Ian Stephens

Ian Stephens was the British editor of *The Statesman*, the leading English-language newspaper in Kolkata. As the famine deepened through 1943, the government insisted that there was no famine at all. Under wartime rules, the press was steered away from the word, and for a time Stephens, like other editors, went along with the official reassurances.

Then he stopped believing them. He could see for himself what was happening on the streets of the city, and he concluded that the silence was a lie that was allowing people to die. The rules forbade reporting the famine, but Stephens noticed that they had said nothing about photographs. On the 22nd, and again on the 28th of August 1943, *The Statesman* published pictures of the starving and the dead lying in the streets of Calcutta, beside editorials that attacked the government for refusing to act.

These images could not be denied or explained away. They were seen in Britain, the issue was raised in Parliament, and it forced a government that had refused to move into sending relief at last. The economist Amartya Sen later judged that a free press, and Stephens's decision in particular, had saved hundreds of thousands of lives. Stephens regarded it as one of the most worthwhile things he ever did. He was inside the machine that had kept the famine quiet, and he chose to break the silence.

What would Ian Stephens most want remembered?

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Card 12: Manikuntala Sen

Manikuntala Sen had grown up in a conservative household in Barisal, one of the few girls in her town to be educated, and had joined the Communist Party against her family's expectations. By 1942 she was travelling from village to village on a tiny party allowance, organising women. It was hard going: most men kept away from her because she was a woman, and most of the women kept away because she was treated as a leader, which they thought of as a man's place.

When the famine came, she went to Midnapore and began relief work, and spent the war years travelling the districts helping destitute women. She was a leader of the Women's Self-Defence Association, which set up gruel kitchens, milk booths and fair-price shops, and looked after women and girls who had fled to the city alone and were in danger of being trafficked or sold.

She and the other women came to see that feeding people was not enough. In March 1943, thousands of women marched on the Bengal Assembly and forced the government to hand out rice, and they kept up the pressure until ration shops were opened. Years later she wrote of that time. The joy they had felt in serving people then, sometimes going hungry themselves, had never, she said, come to her again.

What would Manikuntala Sen most want remembered?

Card 13: Peter Knight

In 1943 Peter Knight was a teenager, working as an office boy in the Ministry of War Transport in London. His job was to carry messages and to fetch files when a senior official called for one. From that building, decisions were taken about which ships went where, and what they carried, across a world at war.

One day he was sent to fetch a particular file. He remembered its number ever afterwards: 2403, the India file. He brought it to the official who had asked for it and thought nothing more of it. He was a boy in an office, and the file was only a file.

Decisions taken in that building helped to determine whether grain would be shipped to a starving Bengal, and for a long time the answer was that it would not; the ships, it was said, were needed for the war. Knight knew none of this at the time. Only as an old man, when the story of the famine finally reached him, did he understand what had passed through his hands, and the choices and decisions that were being made in the offices where he worked.

What would Peter Knight most want remembered?

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Card 14: Susanna

Susanna is the granddaughter of Sir John Herbert, who was the British Governor of Bengal during the famine, and whom one historian has called the chief architect of the 'denial policy' intended to slow down a Japanese invasion, and that stripped the coast of its boats and its rice. She never met him; he died in December 1943, as the worst of the dying went on. But she has inherited the connection to him, and with it something she did not ask for and cannot easily set down. She calls it 'a deep, complicated sense of shame.'

The empire is in her house in small ways. She owns silk scarves with labels that read 'made in British India,' and she asks herself why she would ever want to wear them. The past is not, for her, a distant thing in a textbook. It continues in the present, in the things that remain in her home from that time, tangible connections to her own family story and the role her grandfather played.

She did not choose her family, and she herself was not alive in India at the time of the famine. The question her story raises is whether that settles the matter, or whether something is still owed. If she could reach back through time, she says, she would tell her grandmother one thing: 'don't go to India.' It is not quite guilt. It is the feeling of being joined to a history one would never have chosen, and of having to decide what to do about that now.

What would Susanna most want remembered?

Card 15: Sailen Sarkar

Sailen Sarkar taught physics for most of his working life. In retirement he set himself a different task. Knowing that the last people who remember the famine are now very old, and that when they die their memories will go with them, he travels through the villages of Bengal to find them, and writes down by hand, with a pen and paper, whatever they are willing to tell him. The story of Chand Ali Khamaru, elsewhere in this set of personal stories, is one of those he recorded.

No one asked him to do this. The state never counted the dead in 1943, and has built no memorial to them since, so there is no official record for Sarkar to add his findings to. He is making one himself, survivor by survivor, before it is too late.

What he has discovered is that the survivors have been waiting. One of them, asked at last to tell what had happened to him, broke down not at the memory itself but at the question. 'Why are you so late to come to me?' he said. For eighty years, no one had thought his story worth writing down. Sarkar cannot undo the famine, or feed anyone who starved in it. What he can do is refuse to let the silence be complete, and put down in ink the names and the words of people most of the world had chosen to forget.

What would Sailen Sarkar most want remembered?

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Card 16: The families cleared from the streets

Content note: this card describes families being separated.

By the summer of 1943, the pavements and open spaces of Kolkata were crowded with people who had walked in from the countryside with nowhere left to go. The authorities decided to act. Under a measure called the Bengal Vagrancy Act, they set about removing the destitute from the streets of the city, so that they could no longer be seen.

The reporter T. G. Narayanan watched it happen and wrote it down. People were seized, he recorded, and packed into open lorries, and as they wailed and wept they were driven through Calcutta, in full view, out to camps beyond the edge of the city. In the haste of the clearances, mothers were separated from their children.

This was a response to the famine, but it was not a response to the hunger. It treated the starving as a problem of appearance, something to be moved out of sight rather than kept alive, and in doing so it broke apart families that the famine itself had not yet broken. The people loaded onto those lorries were not named, and were never counted. We know what was done to them only because a reporter stood in the street, watched, and refused to look away.

What would these families most want remembered?

Source Sheet 4

One Name Among Three Million, and the Question of a Memorial

Use at Stage 5 and Stage 6. Read together at Stage 5; the memorial design brief and closing debate are the Stage 6 activity.

We can name many of the people who survived the famine, watched it, or have remembered it. But of the three million who died, the record we have holds almost no names at all.

One name

One name has come down to us, and only because an artist chose to write it alongside the image he drew. Chittaprosad Bhattacharya was a young artist who travelled through Bengal during the famine, drawing what he saw. He drew a dead man whose body was being picked at by vultures, and beside the drawing he wrote the caption, 'His name was Kshetramohan Naik.' In doing so, he gave back to one of the dead a dignity that had been taken from him – his identity, his name: this person mattered. Against the three million, we have this name.

For many families, the only memorial was a private one. Some set aside a small handful of rice from each meal, in memory of those who had starved – a kind of 'living memorial' kept at home, where no public one existed.

How others have marked the dead and the missing

Other catastrophes, other stories of human loss, have been given memorials, and each found a different way to face the problem of how to remember the dead.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington is a long wall of polished black stone carved with the name of every American who died in that war, more than fifty-eight thousand of them. Visitors find the one name they are looking for among the many, and can reach out and touch it. The size of the memorial, the long list of names row upon row, speaks to the number of those who died, helps to give sense to a number that is difficult to visualise, and each individual name reminds the visitor that each of the dead had their own life, their own story.

The Menin Gate at Ypres, in Belgium, remembers soldiers of the First World War whose bodies were never found and identified, and so they have no known grave. It is built around their names, tens of thousands of them, carved into its stone. It is a memorial made out of absence.

The statue of Siraj-ud-Daula, raised at Plassey in 2007, stands beside an older British memorial on the battlefield where Clive won in 1757. It was put up to tell the other side of the story, and to answer a memorial that had told only the British perspective on these events.

Some memorials are made not of stone but of words. The reporter T. G. Narayan, whose own writing you can read in Source Sheet 5, opened his 1943 book on the famine with a dedication to the dead: to the people of Bengal who died, he wrote, 'denied the food they grew for other men's benefit.' A sentence, too, can be a memorial.

Can you commemorate people whose names were never recorded? What would a memorial to the unnamed actually look like?

Your task: design a memorial

In your group, design a memorial to the people who died in the Bengal famine of 1943. You will need to make four decisions and be ready to explain each one.

1. Where should it stand? Think about who would see it, and why that place.
2. What form should it take? A wall, a figure, an empty space, something else entirely?
3. What, if anything, should it say? What should people know and remember; what should they take from this story? How can you communicate the scale of the tragedy? Remember that you have almost no names to inscribe on the memorial – how will you convey the human story?
4. How should a visitor come upon it, and move through it? What should their experience be?

Let what you have learned about the people in this lesson guide you. What would they most want remembered? Your memorial should answer to them, and not only to the size of the loss.

One more thing to weigh. The reporter T. G. Narayan argued that the famine was not a natural disaster but a human failure: that the people died, as he put it, 'denied the food they grew for other men's benefit.' Should your memorial say why these people died, and not only that they died? A memorial can mourn the dead. It can also name what was done to them.

And a harder thought still. You have read about many different people, and they would not all want the same thing remembered. Whatever you design, someone would object to it, just as people objected to the statue of Clive. No single memorial can hold every view, but also the effort to make one that presents only a single perspective can flatten a past that was always messy, layered and argued over. Is there a way for a memorial to admit that, to show a past that is contested rather than settled? That, too, is a choice you can make.

There is no right answer to this. Be ready to say why you made the choices you did.

To finish: a question to argue over

The journalist Kavita Puri, who recorded the memories of survivors, has offered an explanation for why the famine is so little remembered in Britain. To remember it, she suggests, complicates a story Britain likes to tell about the Second World War: a heroic story, about those who fought and struggled and sacrificed for the country and the values we wish to uphold. The famine is hard to confront, she says, because it is also about who we are, and shows a more difficult part of our past.

How far do you agree with her? Is it harder for a country to remember the things that do not fit the story it tells about itself – and if it is, what should it do about that?

Source Sheet 5

Famine Over Bengal: A Reporter's Record, 1943

Use at Stage 3 and Stage 4 (at the facilitator's discretion). Core passages (Experience of the famine; What good relief looked like) suit most GCSE groups. Causation passages (Made by humans, not by nature) are best used with older or extending students.

In 1943 the newspaper *The Hindu* sent a reporter, T. G. Narayan, north to travel through the worst-affected districts of Bengal and to write down what he found. The passages below are his own words, written at the time, and come from one of the first Indian reporters to describe the famine from the inside. You have already met him on a personal story card in Source Sheet 3. Read these extracts from his report, *Famine Over Bengal*, slowly and carefully. He is not only telling you what happened; he is arguing about why.

Note for the facilitator. This is the longest source sheet. The first and last sections – 'The experience of the famine' and 'What good relief looked like' – are suitable for most groups at GCSE level. The sections on causation ('A famine of the poor' and 'Made by humans, not by nature') are best used with older students or those extending their study. The sheet may be used in full, or one or two sections read aloud by the facilitator.

The experience of the famine

The starving mothers who tried to nurse their children were even more tragic a sight. They had no milk in their dry breasts. They had no other baby food. Forgetting their own hunger, they wanted desperately to feed their little ones... The desperate cry of these mothers I heard was one which I could never again bear to hear. *p. 120*

The dead among them were the luckiest. They didn't have to cry for food any longer. It was the living, who were slowly dying, that wailed and wept for a morsel to eat. *p. 116*

Imagine yourself clinging to a piece of flotsam [*wreckage*] in a shoreless sea. The ships that pass throw you bits of food and go their way, but they don't haul you up to safety. That was the fate of several millions in Bengal during the worst famine months. *Famine Over Bengal, p. 135*

To discuss. Narayan was writing for readers far away who could not see what he saw. What did he most want them to understand?

The people he met

Narayan insists that the people he met had not chosen to beg. They were the dispossessed, forced by hunger from their homes.

He told me he had never lived on charity before and was anxious to get back to reap the crop standing on his land... Only his will to live and his desire to get back kept him alive. *pp. 129–130 (Karthik Haldar)*

'I am no beggar', she said, 'and I want to work for my food. I don't like to stay here.' Aifaljan wanted neither charity nor sympathy. She wanted work. *p. 199 (Comilla)*

His own mother, four sisters and a brother perished of hunger. ... When I asked him what he intended to do in the future, he looked at me helplessly and asked me what future one like him could hope for. I was sorry I had asked him a difficult question. *pp. 132–134 (Abdur Rahman, aged seventeen)*

She still had large, liquid eyes, fine, dark eyebrows, and a nose and a chin that would have delighted an artist. She was seventeen, though she looked thirty... Abdul, her husband, had to beg for their food. He begged for a while, and then died, since he gave all he got to his wife and their newborn child. He said she needed food more than he did. They were very much in love with each other... Again and again she said, 'My child was like a Champa flower' *p. 209 (Chittagong)*

To discuss. Narayan refuses to call these people beggars. What does he want us to see them as instead, and why might the difference matter to him?

A famine of the poor

Famine is a killer. It kills particularly the poor and the weak... The banker's son will escape, and the farm-hand's son will probably die. *p. 128*

In those dark days with people dying on the pavements for want of food, one could have had a sumptuous twelve-course meal in any of the great Calcutta hotels for under five rupees. Anyone with money could have filled himself till his belly ached. *p. 143*

To discuss. On Narayan's account, what decided who lived and who died? Was it how much food there was, or something else?

Made by humans, not by nature

Narayan went to Barisal, one of the richest rice districts in the whole province, and found famine there too. This, for him, was the proof of his argument.

In April 1942, the boat denial policy was applied to Barisal. Of all the coastal districts in Bengal, Barisal was hit hardest by this policy. In Barisal, where roads are few, and there is not a mile of railway, boats play a vital role in the economic life of the people. *p. 212 (Barisal)*

For the speculative agents, who bought rice, no price was too high to pay to get the stuff into their hands... they brought about panic among the consumers and in every way effectively set the stage for the entry of an artificial, man-caused famine. *pp. 212–213 (Barisal)*

Other areas in Bengal might have got into trouble due to genuine scarcity, but scarcity of rice in Barisal was unthinkable. Nobody could explain away the famine in Barisal either as an act of God or as a natural consequence of even wartime conditions. *p. 213 (Barisal)*

To discuss. Narayan calls the famine 'artificial' and 'man-caused.' Based on these passages, was the Bengal famine a natural disaster or a human failure? What turns on which word we choose?

What good relief looked like

Not everywhere did it fail. At Sarisha, the Ramakrishna Mission ran relief that Narayan held up as a model, and he carefully said what made it different.

It was a common sight to see a schoolboy or a schoolgirl ladle out *kichuri* or issue milk or rice to his or her own relatives. The people on relief, therefore, did not lose their sense of self-respect. They had no abject looks in their eyes as destitutes in some other places had. *pp. 150–151 (Sarisha)*

Their greatest achievement, perhaps, was the successful way in which they had preserved the family life of the famine-affected people... Husband, wife and children kept together. They looked forward to harvest time with hope. They did not have to wander on to Calcutta's pavements and perish there. *p. 151 (Sarisha)*

In the rural areas, where caste restrictions are rigid and strong, the famine was working a silent revolution. ... As Sahu, a Vaishya cultivator, whom I met in the house of Das, a Namasudra peasant, told me, "When there is hunger, who cares for caste?" *pp. 152–153 (Sarisha)*

To discuss. Besides keeping people alive, what did the best relief protect? Why might Narayan have thought that mattered almost as much as the food itself?

Assessment Rubric

Assessment here is formative, and is concerned with the quality of students' thinking rather than with the recall of facts. The famine is not a body of content to be tested; it is an occasion for reasoning, empathy and judgement, and it is those that the rubric rewards. The memorial design is the natural object of assessment, because it requires students to bring the history to bear on a decision and to justify what they have decided. The discussion that precedes it should be weighed too, through the questions students raise and the care with which they handle the evidence and the perspectives of others.

Strand	Developing	Secure, and beyond
Reasoning from evidence	Makes claims about the statue and the famine with some reference to the sources.	Builds an argument that rests on specific evidence, weighs more than one possibility, and is honest about what the evidence does not settle.
Multi-perspectivity and historical empathy	Recognises that different people experienced the famine differently.	Enters the perspective of particular individuals, infers from their testimony what they would most want remembered, and treats them as people with agency rather than as victims in the abstract.
Holding the question open	Offers an answer to the lesson's questions, often a single cause or a single figure to blame.	Resists the pull towards one tidy verdict, holds competing claims in tension, and frames further questions of their own.
The memorial and its justification	Proposes a memorial and can describe it.	Justifies each decision – site, form, words, encounter – by reference to the history and the people, and can explain how the design addresses the problem of commemorating the unnamed.

Grades, where they are required, should describe the thinking a student has shown rather than score the facts they have retained.

The four strands of the rubric answer directly to the learning outcomes. 'Reasoning from evidence' corresponds to the outcomes on how a monument expresses contested values and on why the famine has left so little public trace; 'Multi-perspectivity and historical empathy' to the outcome on using testimony to consider what those who lived through the famine might most want remembered; 'Holding the question open' to the outcome on weighing whether a catastrophe is a natural disaster or a human failure; and 'The memorial and its justification' to the culminating outcome, in which students design a memorial that responds to an absence and justify its site, its form, its words and the way it is encountered.

Monument information background

Monument Name: Robert Clive, 'Clive of India'

Representation: Monument

Type: Statue

Date of Inauguration: Erected in 1912 in the garden of Gwydyr House, Whitehall, and moved to its present position on King Charles Street, beside the building that now houses the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, in 1916.

Sponsor: The Clive Memorial Fund, raised between 1907 and 1908 under the leadership of Lord Curzon, former Viceroy of India, with Perceval Landon as its secretary.

Person: Robert Clive (1725–1774), soldier and administrator of the East India Company, victor at the Battle of Plassey (1757) and a founder of British rule in Bengal.

Historical Legacies: Colonialism, Nationalism

Authority: British Colonial Empire and era of the Raj

Date of Initial Contestation: The monument was contested from its inception: the fundraising campaign of 1907–08 met official irritation and widespread opposition in Bengal. Calls for its removal were renewed by the historian William Dalrymple in 2020, and again by a member of the House of Lords in 2025.

Intensity: Antagonistic public debate, in the press and in political argument, and organised calls for removal. The statue itself has not been subjected to violence or to physical alteration.

Initial Actor: Indian opponents of the fund, particularly the Bengali nationalist press, from 1907; later the historian William Dalrymple and others calling for the statue's removal or its contextualisation.

Remedies used to deal with the contestations: STATUS QUO. The statue remains in place, without contextualisation. Proposals for REMOVAL and for CONTEXTUALISATION have been debated but not adopted.

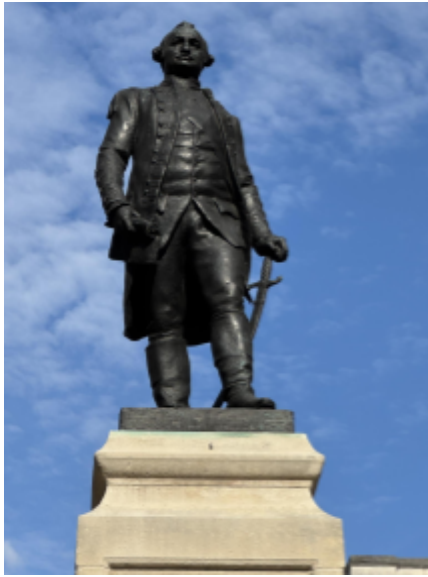
Fictional Representation? No.

Robert Clive won the Battle of Plassey in 1757 not chiefly by force but by arranging for a rival commander to defect, and in the years that followed the East India Company secured the right to collect the revenues of Bengal. This was one of the foundations of British rule in India, and it made Clive immensely rich. It was also followed, in 1769–70, by a famine in Bengal in which, by some estimates, as many as ten million people died. More than a century later, in 1907, Lord Curzon launched a fund to raise statues to Clive in London and in Calcutta, to correct what he saw as the neglect of a great imperial figure. In Britain the campaign met mostly apathy; in Bengal it met opposition, as nationalist newspapers wrote their own history of Plassey, in which Clive was a trickster and his defeated opponent, Siraj-ud-Daula, the wronged hero. The London statue was finished in 1912 and stands today on King Charles Street. Its plinth carries a single word. As the historian James Watts has written, it is worth recognising in any statue 'the mix of opposition and support that surrounded their erection rather than simply accepting their apparently hegemonic and uncontested physical reality'.

Monument Pictures

The pictures are designed to be used at Stage 2, and present a sequence moving from establishing shots of the full statue to close-up details of the plinth inscription and the bas-relief panels. You can access a slideshow to be used with teaching instructions [here](#).





Up to five additional images may accompany the lesson. The images of existing memorials discussed at Stage 5 should be drawn from copyright-free sources. The drawing by Chittaprosad referred to in Stage 5 remains in copyright; until permission is secured, the lesson works from its description rather than reproducing it. The extracts in Source Sheet 5 are taken from T. G. Narayan's *Famine Over Bengal* (1944), which the Digital Library of India records as being in the public domain; because that status rests on Indian law, it should be confirmed for European publication, or the passages relied upon under the quotation exception for criticism and education. A full images-and-permissions section will be appended to the finished pack.