

Quaker Relief and Rehabilitation: The Bengal Famine 1942–45

Steven Patrick Baumann
Temple University, USA

Abstract

The Friends' Ambulance Unit and the American Friends Service Committee responded to the Bengal famine, 1942–45. Relief and rehabilitation during the Bengal famine are under-studied despite a large database of written records housed in the AFSC archives and the London Friends House Library. Much of the existing work on the Friends' Ambulance Unit and the American Friends Service Committee focussed on efforts in Europe and China rather than India. In an attempt to fill a gap in historical knowledge, this paper will demonstrate how humanitarian disaster relief and rehabilitation attempted to improve conditions during the Bengal famine. Relief also provided an opportunity for pacifists to provide relief in areas greatly affected by war before massive non-government international organisations existed, as is the case today. I argue that, while small in size, the transnational response made by non-government humanitarian organisations is an early example of government attached relief operations.

Keywords

The Friends' Ambulance Unit, American Friends Service Committee, India, humanitarians, transnational, World War II

Introduction

The Bengal famine was one of the greatest human disasters of the twentieth century. The famine left over 2 million people dead from starvation and a region in financial ruin.¹ The governments of Britain and the United States,

1 Metcalf, B. D. and Metcalf, T., *A Concise History of Modern India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 209.

focussed on war in Europe, did not adequately respond to the famine, so non-government humanitarian organisations staffed with pacifists responded. The Friends' Ambulance Unit, overseen by the Friends Service Council in London, and the American Friends Service Committee, headquartered in Philadelphia, led the response to Bengal famine. Although the 1947 Nobel Peace Prize went to the Friends Service Council and the American Friends Service Committee, on behalf of all Quaker peace work, the work both organisations accomplished in India during the Bengal famine remains largely unexplored. This paper explores and explains how the Friends' Ambulance Unit and the American Friends Service Committee reacted to the Bengal famine, worked with both colonial and colonised people, and offered an organisational alternative to government through work with local populations in relief systems that did not just provide relief but also enabled recovery.

The teacher, Friend, and ornithologist, Horace Alexander moved to British India in 1942 to help formulate plans for successful response to Japanese air-raids on Bengal. However, a cyclone in Midnapore and a famine that followed altered his plans.² By the time Alexander returned to Britain the next year, his response group, the Friends' Ambulance Unit was an established and important aid organisation in Bengal. When the Friends' Ambulance Unit needed assistance, the American Friends Service Committee offered financial and fieldwork help. By the time the famine had ended, Alexander and the Unit had done much more than raise air-raid awareness.

Relief and Rehabilitation efforts in the Bengal Famine, 1943: Friends' Ambulance Unit

A wartime coalition of relief workers called the Friends' Ambulance Unit responded to the Bengal famine of 1943. The response was one of many operations for the Unit, which Friends founded in response to World War I.³ While a small amount of historical literature on the Friends' Ambulance Unit exists, it remains an understudied topic. Historians most frequently discussed FAU work in terms of its work in continental Europe and China.⁴ The most

2 Pickett, C. E., *For More Than Bread*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1953, p. 246.

3 Tegla Davies, a member of the Friends' Ambulance Unit that served in China, wrote the first history of the work done by Friends in Europe and Asia almost immediately after returning home from war. Davies, T., *Friends Ambulance Unit: the story of the FAU in the Second World War 1939–1946*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1947. Davies' history is simple in style and briefly mentions work with interesting anecdotes but little data or historical context. Later Lyn Smith interviewed members and offered more brief summaries in Smith, L., *Pacifists in Action: the experience of the Friends' Ambulance Unit in the Second World War*, York: Sessions, 1998.

4 An example of some of the work on China: Jones, A. (ed.), *Jack Jones: a true friend to China, the lost writings of a heroic nobody*, London: Earnshaw, 2015, and Armstrong-Reid, S., 'Two China "gadabouts": Guerrilla nursing with the Friends Ambulance Unit, 1946–48', in

influential work on FAU relief and rehabilitation operations in India was written by FAU member Tegla Davies almost immediately after the war.⁵ Davies' work is a first-hand description of events that established the context of the service of the FAU. Davies showed that the FAU attempted to provide relief, often in areas where the government was unable to work, by working with local populations. In another important historical analysis of the Bengal famine, the historian Lance Brennan, analysed the local and British government response to the famine with only a quick glance at the FAU in his work, because Brennan was most interested in how government responded.⁶ Brennan showed that much of the relief work was accomplished with financial assistance from government. In this way, volunteer organisations remained a vital piece of humanitarian response. The authoritative history of British Friends humanitarian relief is the first volume of John Ormerod Greenwood's three volume *Quaker Encounters*.⁷ In it, Greenwood surveyed the work that the Unit accomplished. In his account of the Bengal famine, Greenwood pointed out the important links between Gandhi and Friends in India and highlighted how the FAU and the AFSC led the famine response by tapping into such networks.⁸ Finally, the recent history of the AFSC written by Gregory Barnes catalogues the work of the organisation through its one hundred years of operations. Building on the aforementioned histories, this article will show that important personal and organisational networks, as well as the willingness to enter and attempt to understand rural Bengal helped the FAU and AFSC deliver a significant humanitarian response to the Bengal famine.

The Friends' Ambulance Unit

The Friends' Ambulance Unit was a relief organisation during World War II overseen by the Friends' Service Council, a British non-governmental service organisation led by the Religious Society of Friends. While the Friends' Ambulance Unit existed as an alternative to armed service in the First World War, it adjusted its mission to meet the greater global significance of World War II. In her book about Friends relief in the Spanish Civil War, the historian Farah Mendlesohn argued correctly that peace testimony played an important role in the work of the Unit.⁹ In its founding principles the Friends' Ambulance Unit

Sweet, H. and Hawkins, S. (eds), *Colonial Caring: a history of colonial and post-colonial nursing*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 208–31.

5 Davies, T., *Friends Ambulance Unit: the story of the FAU in the Second World War 1939–1946*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1947.

6 Brennan, L., 'Government Famine Relief in Bengal, 1943', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 47 (1988), pp. 541–66.

7 Greenwood, J. O., *Quaker Encounters*, York: W. Sessions, 1975.

8 Greenwood, *Quaker Encounters*, p. 299.

9 Mendlesohn, F., *Quaker Relief Work in the Spanish Civil War*, Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002.

described itself as a charity, an organisation, and a community. It was an organisation for those who did not wish to take up arms, but felt called to service by a nation that they dearly loved. It was an organisation that sought to enable people to do work that realised the value of humanity in every person. And it was a community in which people aimed to live differently than commonly accepted cultural norms.¹⁰

While it is likely that the people of Bengal, a centre of the Indian Independence movement, did not view the arrival of more British favourably, the FAU attempted to work with open minds through the establishment of clear relationships with both the British in India and the Indians. At the time of Gandhi's Quit India movement, when Gandhi ordered British withdrawal from India, the FAU considered its ability to effectively cooperate with both the Indian National Congress and the British Government one of its greatest achievements.¹¹ Indeed, to accomplish much needed relief work and attempt political neutrality during World War II was no simple task. After a solid core was selected, the overriding goal established by the Unit in India was to relieve suffering and distress.¹² The broad goal to relieve suffering provided ample room for different projects in the field.

Relief Work

The FAU brought relief experience to Bengal. Nearly all of the seven members of the FAU in Bengal had previous wartime experience as leaders or members of relief organisations.¹³ In Bengal, the leader of the Unit was Horace Alexander, a friend of Gandhi and a man with much experience in India.¹⁴ The growth of the Unit closely matched the FAU's goals in terms of young and energetic youth paired with old and experienced leadership, which facilitated successful relationships with a diverse population in the field.¹⁵ Perhaps with its leader Horace Alexander, described by his biographer Geoffrey Carnall as reflective at times but fiery amongst friends, the FAU was prepared to deal with issues caused

10 'The Unit—Purpose', n.d., Library of the Society of Friends (LSF) FRS/1992/27.

11 Symonds, R., 'The F.A.U. and India', *Friends Ambulance Unit Chronicle* 35, 25 April 1942, p. 2.

12 FAU India Office to Viceroy, 9 March 1942, LSF FAU/1947/2/1.

13 Richard Symonds was put in charge of shelter workers in late 1940, his job provided training for similar situations to those he faced later as the leader of the FAU. His main argument was, 'Anyone with a little initiative and energy can make excellent progress.' *FAU Chronicle* 4, 25 November 1940.

14 Years later, Alexander was deemed 'Gandhi's Interpreter' by Geoffrey Carnall. Gandhi told Alexander he was the new Charles Freer Andrews. Carnall, G., *Gandhi's Interpreter: a life of Horace Alexander*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010.

15 The other members of the FAU India were Richard Symonds, Pamela Bankart, Jean Cottle, Glan Davies, Ken Griffin, Brian Groves.

by the famine. An initial goal to establish a meaningful connection with the local branch of the Indian National Congress was high on the agenda.¹⁶

The FAU also earned local endorsements for its work. Shortly after the FAU arrived in Bengal, the Unit established a relationship with the local political parties and received positive press in Gandhi's weekly journal *Harijan*, an important connection that John Greenwood highlighted in his history of the FAU.¹⁷ Not only did Gandhi endorse the Unit in his publication and also name Horace Alexander the British link to India, but he also helped create a link between the FAU and the local government of Bengal. The Bengal government and the Bengal Civil Protection Committee had connections to the nationalist Congress Party and trusted Friends due to the support many Friends gave the independence movement.¹⁸

In Bengal, the FAU first established procedures for a local response to Japanese air raids, organised and created relief centres, and facilitated volunteers in first aid and basic medical procedural training. The Unit trained students and members of the Indian National Congress in first aid, in part, to establish cooperation between official and unofficial groups.¹⁹ Shortly after moving into the new FAU Bengal office on 1 Upper Wood Street in Calcutta, Horace Alexander created more contacts through lectures at Calcutta University, likely by an invitation from a personal contact, the vice-chancellor Shyamaprasad Mookherjee.²⁰

Such connections created links to the local community, yet a number of challenges overshadowed the original goal of air-raid awareness. One of the first challenges was the influx of refugees from Burma after the Japanese invasion. Hundreds of thousands of refugees from Burma fled Japanese persecution to neighbouring Bengal in hopes of finding freedom from persecution. The FAU helped to set up refugee camps, but the main focus remained the air-raid preparations.²¹ The FAU also felt called to action elsewhere, in response to a massive cyclone that hit Midnapore, a city west of Calcutta. In response to the cyclone, the Unit distributed food, medicine, water, and clothing.²² In a report to Friends in Britain, Unit member Alec Horsfield wrote, 'Still despite the desperate need, the food did not reach the people. We harassed officials, as in the days of old. Milk for babies, barley for sick, chloride for drinking ponds, we dabbled in all.'²³

16 'Report to the Executive Committee on Recruiting, 30.3.42—India', LSF FAU/1947/2/1.

17 Greenwood, *Quaker Encounters*, p. 300.

18 Carnall, *Gandhi's Interpreter*, p. 155.

19 'Report to members of the Council prior to Meeting on Wednesday, 23 Sept', LSF FAU 1947/2/1.

20 Carnall, *Gandhi's Interpreter*, p. 161.

21 'Refugee Stream From Burma', 15 July 1942, LSF FAU 1947/1/1B.

22 *FAU Chronicle* 49, 2 December 1942.

23 Horsfield, A., 'After the Cyclone: Relief in Bengal', *The Friend* 101, 22 January 1943, p. 53.

Subsequently, the imperial government asked the Unit to take control of relief operations throughout the entire Midnapore region, but the FAU chose to focus on the smaller region of Contai instead.²⁴ Relief operations challenged the Unit, and the establishment of a children's hospital was a Pyrrhic victory in a region in which disease was so widespread it had killed 10 to 15 per cent of the population.²⁵

The response to the cyclone was an important step in the growth of local confidence in the FAU, which proved important in the larger operations of relief and rehabilitation during the famine. The presence of the Unit facilitated the communication and understanding between Indian voluntary organisations and the British Government. In the words of Unit leader Horace Alexander, 'The world-reputation of the Religious Society of Friends for disinterested relief activity counted for something.'²⁶ A relief operation that sought to help rather than reform and cooperate rather than coerce was well received locally. At one point, the imperial government only allowed Bengali doctors to enter a famine area after the Unit assured the Government that the doctors were non-political.²⁷

A successful transition from civil defence or air-raid work to famine relief occurred because of the FAU's connection with local government, local volunteer organisations, and an understanding of infrastructure information. The transition was uncomplicated and the Unit stepped into a relief role without much trouble.²⁸ After all, the main reason the FAU was established in India was to relieve suffering. Nearly a year after the onset of relief operations the Unit member Richard Symonds explained the contours of the Unit's role in an interview, 'Our most important function is as a bridge between the needs and the workers, by having some members working with Government and others with the voluntary organisations.'²⁹

To provide relief, the FAU distributed food, milk, and clothes. It was a disappointment to the Unit that it was impossible to provide food for the general population rather than just milk for women and children.³⁰ This supports Greenwood's argument that the size of the task was one of the biggest issues that faced the Unit as he challenged readers to think about the futility of saving babies by providing milk, while their parents died nearby.³¹ The challenging numbers and government regulated food supply worked consistently against the Unit.

24 'Minutes of Meeting held at 4 Gordon Square', 17 September 1943, LSF FAU 1947/2/1.

25 *FAU Chronicle* 78, 23 June 1943. For additional information on the number who died, see Brennan, Lance 'Government Famine Relief in Bengal, 1943'.

26 'Memorandum for the FAU Executive and India Committee of the FAU', LSF FAU 1947/2/1.

27 Carnall, *Gandhi's Interpreter*, p. 163.

28 'Minutes of Meeting held at 4 Gordon Square', 17 September 1943, LSF FAU 1947/2/1.

29 'Interview with Dick Symonds', *FAU Chronicle* 62, 5 August 1944.

30 'Journal Letter No.7 from Horace Alexander to the Friends Service Council India Committee', 9 August 1943, Horace Gundry Alexander Papers, Swarthmore College Peace Collection, DG 140.

31 Greenwood, *Quaker Encounters*, p. 300.

While the members of the military were locked behind barracks gates, FAU members worked on the crowded streets of Calcutta, the unpaved village roads of Contai, and in a number of other settlements in Bengal in an attempt to reach people who had struggled in search of food.

The difference between the response by the army and the FAU was best explained by Horace Alexander: 'The best thing about it all was the opportunity it brought to make friends with Indians, to understand something of a mentality and a culture quite different from our own.'³² The FAU's major goal was to provide people enough food for sustenance and clothing to survive. While the FAU worked with government, a member of the Unit was not focussed on professional gain or military regulation, and took broad measures when necessary. The lack of personal ambition from FAU members was so great it led to a self-reported lack of suspicion from the local population.³³ Clothing was distributed to almost ten thousand people, mostly children and women, as milk centres continued to expand from simple relief huts that distributed milk to a conceptual community centre. Occasional Japanese air-raids on Calcutta inflicted some damage, but the raids remained secondary to food issues.³⁴ Between 1943 and 1944 little changed in terms of goals or actions, except for the movement of distribution centre leadership from FAU members to local villagers. Concern began to emerge about rehabilitation but at the moment the key concern was still the success of the milk centres.³⁵

By 1944, food availability was normalised again, but much damage was done. The widespread migration from rural areas towards the already densely populated Calcutta streets resulted in increased death tolls. At the same time there was an increase in the number of children who had lost their parents to famine and women without money or food. Still, Horace Alexander hopefully suggested, 'The Bengal famine, which to-day adds immeasurably to the deep bitterness and resentment in India against England, may yet become the means of bringing healing and understanding between our two countries and so between East and West.'³⁶ While many people argued that India and Britain were incompatible, Alexander and the Religious Society of Friends looked towards a future for both Britain and India with the least amount of suffering. The FAU built a solid positive, operational foundation which facilitated the American Friends Service Committee's later support.

Horace Alexander knew his work in India was in good hands with the able members of the Friends' Ambulance Unit. After a quick tour of China, in collaboration with the American Friends Service Committee, he returned to India

32 'The Calcutta Background', *FAU Chronicle* 52, 2 October 1943, pp. 4–6.

33 'FAU relief work in Bengal', *FAU Chronicle* p. 99.

34 *FAU Chronicle* 106, 5 January 1944.

35 *FAU Chronicle* 127, Spring 1944.

36 Horace Alexander to Richard Symonds, 3 November 1943. Swarthmore College Peace Collection (SCPC), DG 140.

to find that the Unit member, Pamela Bankart, had organised a local women's relief committee which could focus on relief and rehabilitation of displaced women. Encouraged by the efforts he saw in Bengal, Alexander travelled to the United States to rally for additional financial help from the United States and the American Friends Service Committee.³⁷

Relief and Rehabilitation efforts in the Bengal Famine, 1944–45: American Friends Service Committee

Voluntary organisations, mostly Indian in origin, sought to help the people most affected by the Bengal famine as people continued to suffer. In 1943, at least ten organisations used funds from a number of sources, mostly in an attempt to distribute available clothing and food. The groups involved were: Ramakrishna Mission; Bengal Relief Committee; Marwari Relief Society; Muslim League Relief Committee; Bengal Women's Food Committee; All India Women's Conference; Bengal Christian Council Relief Committee; Bengal Medical Relief Coordination Committee; Bengal Civil Protection Committee. While the Friends' Ambulance Unit was one of the first groups to respond to the famine, the Unit had fewer than a dozen staff at any time and searched for support. Appeals for more aid, specifically to the American Friends Service Committee were sought as a necessary means to continue the distribution of milk to women and children.³⁸

It was from American Friends, the AFSC, that the Unit found its greatest financial support. In December of 1943, only a few months after the FAU started its official relief efforts in Bengal, the India Famine Relief Committee was incorporated in New York City.³⁹ Shortly after incorporation, the IFRC was recognised by the War Relief Control Board as the official channel of American Aid to India.⁴⁰ It was through the IFRC funds that the American Friends Service Committee sent members to do relief work in Bengal.

The IFRC wanted to help the FAU, but first focussed on the procurement of money and the spread of information rather than groundwork. In February 1944, the IFRC sent a board member to survey the famine, who returned with a troubling report. AFSC reports explained that British and American government responses 'lacked imagination' while the FAU introduced weaving and pottery

37 Carnall, *Gandhi's Interpreter*, p. 170.

38 Alexander, H., 'India To-day and To-morrow', *Quaker Weekly Journal*, 24 September 1943.

39 'Indian Famine Relief Committee', Correspondence with Directors, American Friends Service Committee Archives (AFSC).

40 The founding board members came from a number of faiths that the American Friends Service Committee worked with. They were: Bruce Bliven, Pearl S. Buck, Stephen Duggan, William Hocking, Gifford Pinchot, Cornelius Starr, Ruth Smith and Richard Walsh. Supporting members were drawn from a number of backgrounds including professors, writers, librarians, publishers, priests, and politicians, among others.

‘with a feeling of hope’.⁴¹ The British imperial government claimed mortality statistics were unavailable or an ‘obvious exaggeration’ which led to a battle for the continuance of funding the IFRC.⁴² Still, the United States government allotted the IFRC one hundred thousand dollars per month from January to May, but an official declaration that the famine was over jeopardised the funds. Despite the rhetoric, field workers continued to plea for more aid through reports and letters back to the United States. They sought resources needed to establish centres for women who had been forced into prostitution due to starvation, the supervision of distribution of meals, and rebuilding of cottage industries built to replace failed agricultural enterprise.⁴³ With the help of an appeal for more aid from the AFSC’s Richard Walsh to the U.S. Government, one hundred thousand dollars per month until the end of 1944 was secured with the hope that private funding could continue the mission thereafter.⁴⁴

Relief Work Perspectives

Accounts of service offer a clear picture of work carried out by the AFSC. The accounts of James Vail, John Scott Everton and Julia Abrahamson described daily life in Bengal during the famine and offer insights into the individual perspectives of famine relief as a member of a larger relief organisations. Their accounts documented what life was like during the famine as well as the perspective of relief workers, which helps us to understand who they helped and how they provided relief.

The letters that relief workers sent home featured an optimistic tone, present in both relief work successes and failures. James Vail reported,

The picture I would like to leave with you is living, human, loving, and lovable children—happy in response to kindness, for whom we, who are so much better favoured, can bring a gift which added to the efforts of their parents will save their lives and give them a chance of health which, without us, would be denied to them.⁴⁵

Vail sent a message of hope back home to keep spirits up.

Both the AFSC and the FAU maintained unique identities, but used common information, goals and resources in a transnational collaboration between Friends. The AFSC reported back to headquarters in Philadelphia and worked within an

41 ‘Bulletin’ *India Famine Relief Committee*, 17 February 1944, AFSC.

42 *Government of India*, Food Department to Secretary of State, 6 January 1944. Mansergh, Nicholas *The Transfer of Power 1942–47* vol. 4: *the Bengal famine and the new viceroyalty*, London: H.M.S.O., 1970–83, p. 599.

43 ‘India Bulletin #14’, Letter from Richard Symonds to D. F. McClelland, 7 January 1944, AFSC.

44 Statement by Richard Walsh at the National War Fund Budget Hearing, AFSC.

45 James Vail to AFSC, 12 April 1944, AFSC.

organisational structure distinct from the FAU. With the additional human and monetary resources, the organisations established more rehabilitation centres, most notably in 24 Parganas, Midnapore, Chittagong and Dacca.⁴⁶ After they started rehabilitation centres, the AFSC worked as administrative managers, while the formerly displaced locals learned new skills in an attempt to re-enter the economy free from the burden of opportunistic loan sharks.⁴⁷ Relief workers provided lunch to hungry women and children and workers shared profits made by spinning, weaving, mat-making, paper-making and farming led by the relief workers. Members of the AFSC and the FAU believed that employment returned dignity and sense of self to people who had just recently starved in the streets.⁴⁸ The positive reports home proved the potential for light at even the darkest of times.

Unit members departed Calcutta for small villages by river boat or jeep. Once at the village, they slept in a simple bungalow with little more than a roll out mat on the floor as a bed. In many cases, the bed was nothing more than a wood platform to lie on. Breakfast was simple and consisted of a banana and water, or tea and an orange. Day to day work was administrative and consisted of financial audits and surveys of the availability of medicine and food in local canteens. If the village was home to a work centre, relief workers also organised finances.⁴⁹ At times, the relief workers found that people commoditised and sold milk intended for free distribution, which was an issue that required administration.⁵⁰ In such cases, relief workers used some level of imperial authority before releasing new cases of milk. As the FAU member Alec Horsfield described, 'From dwelling to dwelling we walked and waded, inoculated, walked, waded, and inoculated again ... to our weapons of syringe and flask they added eerie processions in the dark with the discords of conch-shell, cubal and dum and the call of prayer.'⁵¹

The Quaker ethos was visible in the transnational FAU and AFSC effort because of the focus the humanitarians placed on India. The FAU and AFSC sought to accommodate India through personal empathy, a goal best explained in a guide to new relief workers: 'The person who goes to India should try to identify himself with the country as much as possible ... he should go to India as a humble servant who is bringing food to the starving because of the love of God in his heart and in the hearts of the donors.'⁵² This, naturally, is a far-cry from the multiple-course meals, the palatial mansions, and the separate quarters of the

46 'Friends Ambulance Unit Occasional Bulletin' no. 3, April 1944, SCPC.

47 'Report of the India Section of the Friends' Ambulance Unit & American Friends Service Committee June 1943 to December 1944', AFSC.

48 'Friends Ambulance Unit Occasional Bulletin' no. 3, April 1944, SCPC.

49 Scott Everton, J., 'Field Report', 12 October 1944, AFSC.

50 Abrahamson, J., 'Notes from India', n.d., AFSC.

51 Smith, L., *Pacifists in Action: the experience of the Friends Ambulance Unit in the Second World War*, York: Sessions, 1998, p. 253.

52 'Guide for Relief Workers', n.d., AFSC.

colonial experience.⁵³ The language typical of FAU and AFSC workers is at the same time different from the mentality of typical missionary and relief operations that placed a premium on the salvation of the soul. Additionally, earlier relief organisations in colonial India operated around an even more accusatory colonial mindset which caricaturised a lazy and inept native population.⁵⁴ This view stands in stark contrast to the open-hearted observer mentality embodied by FAU and AFSC, one that delayed pre-judgment despite established norms.

Through the use of empathy and avoidance of judgment, local populations accepted Quaker relief efforts, as a welcome alternative to military intervention. Because of the lack of belief-for-relief ideology noticeable in other relief organisations, and the condescension noticeable in government approaches, the American Friends Service Committee and the Friends' Ambulance Unit remained a useful connection for the British government and for the local population.

The End of the India Famine Relief Committee

Shortly after 1944, the India Famine Relief Committee disbanded. The new, American Relief for India, Inc. replaced the IFRC, and sought to continue rehabilitation work after the famine.⁵⁵ The name and organisation change occurred in aspiration for continued relief work after the nominal conclusion of the famine. The leadership of the charismatic professor Rufus Jones helped attract more attention and funds to the organisation. While sixty-eight organisations helped to distribute aid throughout areas in need in Bengal, the IFRC controlled the American flow of money. However, US Government funds ended in April 1945, so the one-hundred thousand dollars per month stipend necessary to run rehabilitation activities had to be found elsewhere. Appeals for another year of government funding were rejected by the National War Fund, which argued that it was more imperative to send money to newly liberated areas.⁵⁶

53 British soldier Clive Branson, among numerous others, recorded consumption of generously portioned five course meals while children starved outside in the streets. Mukerjee, M., *Churchill's Secret War: the British Empire and the ravaging of India during World War II*, New York: Basic Books, 2010, p. 93.

54 Sharma, S., *Famine, Philanthropy and the Colonial State: North India in the early nineteenth century*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 160.

55 ARI, Inc. leaders were Frank Aydelotte, David Hinshaw, John Haynes Holmes, M. Albert Linton, Henry R. Luce, J. Edgar Rhoads, William Phillips, Guy Emerson, Rufus Jones and Chairman Henry Grady. The office was moved to 14 Wall Street.

56 Winthrop W. Aldrich, President of National War Fund, to Henry F. Grady, Chairman of ARI, n.d., AFSC.

Continued Relief Work

Work continued in much the same manner as 1944, with canteens for milk distribution. Children's canteens consisted of a meal of rice, dal, and vegetables with the occasional addition of meat, fish, or eggs. Vitamin tablets as well as literacy classes supplemented the meals and canteen-centred village recovery.⁵⁷ The operation methods were streamlined by the FAU until accepted as standard practice in terms of relief work for numerous organisations. Canteens were found throughout Bengal and fed thousands of children and women. By 1945, over eight thousand children and nursing mothers received food daily in ninety-five canteens.⁵⁸

Perhaps the greatest strength of the Quaker relief work was that the Unit worked without political or evangelical purpose and sought to bring all people of various interests together to build a better foundation of trust.⁵⁹ Such strength is perhaps best illustrated in the Quaker ability to communicate openly and freely with the British government of India, the Indian government of Bengal, and others influential individuals, such as Gandhi, at a time when constructive dialogue was irregular at best. The AFSC led the relief operation in Bengal by late 1945, when the FAU shifted focus to Partition. While Friends' relief work did not prevent the massive loss of life in the Bengal famine, it stands in stark contrast to the response of the British government to the original crisis of famine. James Vail relayed some of the efforts of the Unit back home: 'American milk for mothers and children, vitamins and drugs to fight disease, are today improving the lot of millions. The service stimulates local efforts and creates widespread goodwill.'⁶⁰ However, problems remained similar to the previous three years: rail transport received military priority; water transport was denied by the British government; many able-bodied Indians served in the military abroad; food prices failed to normalise; and Burmese refugees flooded into Bengal.⁶¹ Despite the ever increasing number of people suffering from famine, the size of the relief operation remained small. Relief organisations faced challenging numbers, yet still transitioned from famine relief to rehabilitation in the so-called 'post-famine' time.

The FAU turned to rehabilitation by closing milk centres and opening industrial work centres. While the FAU increased in size from its original six members to sixteen, it faced difficulty in terms of numbers with thousands of people in need and government hesitation at all levels. The war-economy created additional trouble and forced constant appeals for money. The British Government funnelled aid into the recovery efforts in Western nations like

57 'Reports to AFSC', 1944, AFSC.

58 FAU-AFSC Monthly Reports, AFSC.

59 'Report on the Work of the FAU-AFSC in India 1945', AFSC.

60 James Vail to Gilbert White, 5 April 1945, AFSC.

61 'Needs and Plans for American Relief For India', 18 January 1945, AFSC.

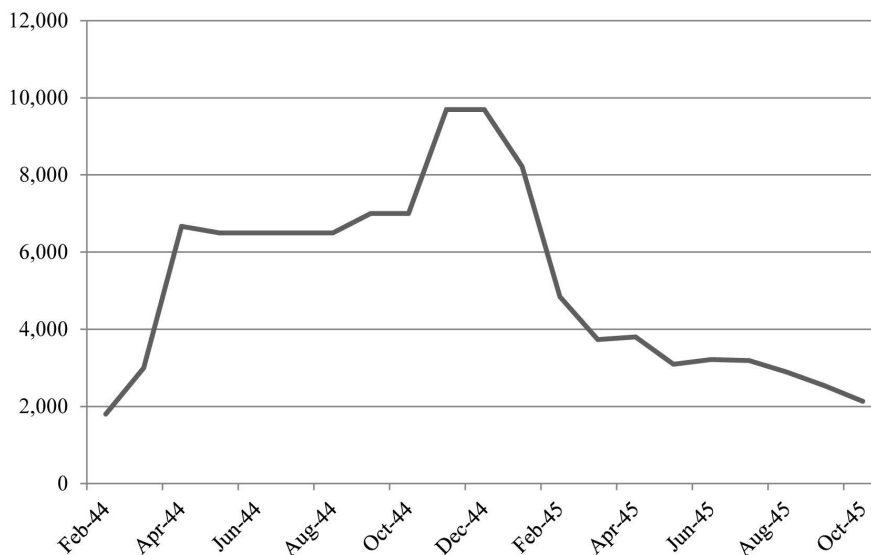


Fig. 1. The amount of nursing mothers and children fed at FAU-AFSC canteens daily, by month.

Source: 'Report on the Work of the FAU-AFSC in India 1945', AFSC.

Germany, Austria, and Greece. On reports back to headquarters, FAU members did not show optimism: 'Unfortunately, however, the relief and rehabilitation schemes of Government have been so drastically pruned and appear so likely to be strangled by political jobbery, that it appears that there would be no effective position for a Unit member within the scheme.'⁶²

During the famine, the amount of physical labour done by the British government in goodwill service of the native population in Bengal was negligible, proportionate to the size of the famine. The will to work alongside others regardless of status or origin, was something unique to the Quaker relief effort.⁶³ One of the most significant schemes involving Quakers and Indians working together for India was in Chittagong. Chittagong fishermen needed help. In some cases, the colonial government had confiscated all fishing boats as part of a plan to avoid maritime defection of boats or people to the encroaching Japanese. Therefore, fishermen and locals suffered the wrath of the famine as they were unable to catch fish because of the lack of boats.⁶⁴ With few economic skills

⁶² Note for the Executive Committee on the Future of the India Section LSF FAU/1947/2/1.

⁶³ 'Quaker-Government Boat-Building Program In India', Report of John Scott Everton's trip to Chittagong, 14-19 February 1945. AFSC.

⁶⁴ *FAU Chronicle* 44, 23 January 1943.

outside of the boat and no income, locals starved. Beyond milk centre work, the FAU and AFSC relief workers continued to work towards solutions to suffering. Through the investment of small amounts of money on raw materials, in the form of what resembles the micro-loans popular today, the FAU helped local fishermen to make boats and restart the fishing industry. By 1945, the Chittagong, where Friends had worked, boat-yard was completely run by locals.⁶⁵ While loans were given to fishermen, seemingly with the expectation that they would not be repaid in full, the Quaker supervisor learned how to build boats and made a point to work consistently alongside the struggling fishermen, which served as both a surprise and a confidence builder to the fishermen.

From the data available on a similar project in Dacca, it appears that the FAU never expected repayment in full. This stood in stark contrast to the loan sharks who had previously taken advantage of the desperate, as Tegla Davies described, 'There are many instances of an initial borrowing of Rs.50 or Rs.60 remaining as a permanent yoke on a family. Unable to pay of the total lump sum they continue for years to pay in interest what ultimately will amount to three and four times the principle involved.'⁶⁶ The Chittagong and Dacca boatyards did not make money in the short term, but aimed for eventual economic stability.

The FAU rehabilitation work based its success on local work for the local economy. This is unlike previous famines, in which rehabilitation was carried out by Imperial government orders and projects aimed to benefit the British government rather than the native population.⁶⁷ Additionally, money from the AFSC, some from donations and some from the U.S. government, was paramount in operations. The aid available for distribution was difficult to measure and contingent on other needs throughout Bengal.⁶⁸ This work is a clear example of relief and rehabilitation work that only existed in the capacity of non-government organisations. Before organisations such as FAU and the AFSC worked to rehabilitate the lowest on the economic ladder, governments failed to intervene adequately. Relief organisations bridged the gap between the top and the bottom through participation and activity in the most local situations, previously unreachable by larger government.

Another significant rehabilitation centre was in the village of Kumarsa. The FAU used the remains of a closed canteen from the time of the famine to create the centre. The children who previously relied on the canteen and didn't have anywhere to go were invited to stay for a new project, run by AFSC money and FAU leadership. The humanitarians helped to build a small building with six rooms. There, two teachers and nine students worked to rebuild their community.

65 *FAU Chronicle* 160, 24 January 1945.

66 Tegla Davies to Horace Alexander, 27 October 1944, DG140 SCPC.

67 Sharma, S., *Famine, Philanthropy and the Colonial State: North India in the early nineteenth century*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 160.

68 LSF FAU/1947/3/3A.

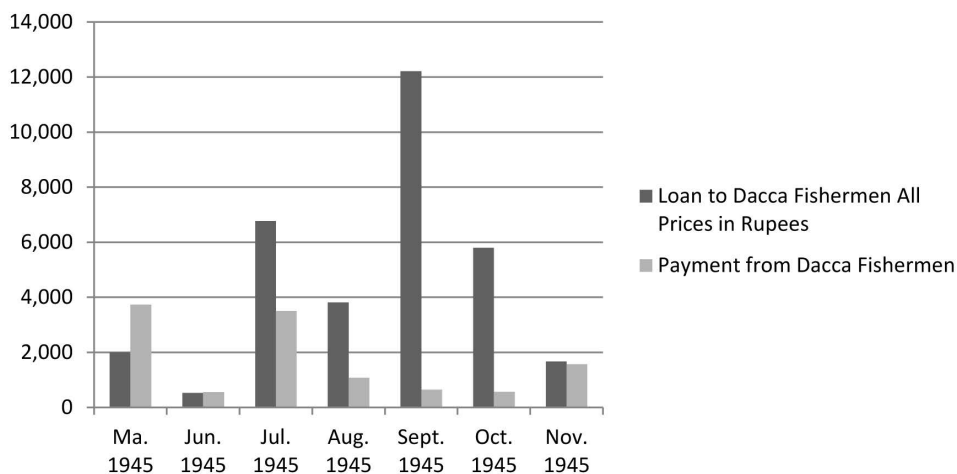


Fig. 2. Financial aid exchanges with Dacca fishermen, loans given and payments received by month.

Source: LSF FAU/1947/3/3A.

Although the school had mud floors and a bamboo thatched roof, instruction and work were completed in full days that included little time for anything but work and school.⁶⁹ While these examples of relief provide only fleeting images of rehabilitation efforts, the tone and hope within the effort show a difference from previous rehabilitation efforts. Work in such local circumstances, devoid of major geopolitical concern, endeared the relief workers to the local population and politicians while it also relieved stress of the large colonial government. Such success is typical in Friends' global relief efforts in the first half of the twentieth century.

Village industrial centres were the number one form of rehabilitation instituted by the AFSC. The AFSC established village industrial centres as repurposed milk canteens located in Midnapore and 24 Parganas. The Government Food Department reported that 24 Parganas was badly affected by the aftermath of famine, but not nearly comparable to the rest of Bengal.⁷⁰ Local economies restarted in typical village industrial centres, of which the AFSC bore the initial cost.⁷¹ Production in the centres included: spinning, weaving, basket-making, toy-making, carpentry, tailoring, vegetable gardening, and poultry keeping among other hand-crafts and skilled works.⁷² Friends supervised the industrial centres, but workers elected workers from within the centres managed skilled

69 Foot, A. E., 'Rebuilding Bengal', *FAU Chronicle* 82, 6 April 1946, pp. 12–14.

70 Mansergh, *Transfer of Power*, p. 599.

71 'Report on the work of the FAU–AFSC in India 1945', AFSC.

72 'Village Industrial Centres', AFSC.

work, cleanliness, and punctual arrivals. Many workers saved smartly, as the AFSC helped to budget efficiently at reoccurring meetings with supervisors before the relief workers distributed payments. Children worked half-time for equal pay, and received an education in the afternoon. Evenings featured lessons in the Bratachari movement, which aimed to provide all people with a unity of Indian identity through physical, cultural, and mental exercises. Monthly meetings were held among workers to determine the needs of the industrial centre.⁷³

In Dacca, the Unit paid for, and shipped, cane from Assam to the local population, who eventually paid money back after creating profit from new industries. The goal was to put workshops on sound business footing and impart literacy and children in schools.⁷⁴ The Quakers created cooperative centres that also produced primary consumer goods and allowed artisans to resume trades and train non-skilled workers.⁷⁵ Such operations highlight the ethos of both AFSC and FAU work that continued in the immediate aftermath of the Bengal famine.

The End of Operations

With the sale of the language library's books and equipment in Friends' Ambulance Unit headquarters, the FAU downsized in late 1945. Some operations in Bengal continued, while others were handed off to local authorities or other aid organisations. In the case of India, an operation much smaller than those carried out by the same organisation in Italy, Germany, and China, it was with greater ease that the FAU handed off operations to American humanitarians.⁷⁶ Unit member Richard Symonds transitioned into a government position but, in his own words, still 'fought unsuccessfully to have Famine Emergency Hospitals made permanent.'⁷⁷

Impact and Significance

Today, leading development economists such as William Easterly have argued that effective developmental aid is not as much about money as it is ideas, institutions, and technology.⁷⁸ The Friends' relief and rehabilitation efforts succeeded because the humanitarians understood that Bengal had enough food, but politics and political goals stood in the way of famine relief. With an effort focussed on bridging the gap between independence-driven Indian political norms and a

73 'Mahisagote Industrial Centre 1945', AFSC.

74 'Report on the work of the FAU-AFSC in India 1945', AFSC.

75 Burns, T., 'Rehabilitation in Bengal', *Manchester Guardian*, 30 August 1944.

76 'Friends Ambulance Unit Reports to the Executive Committee', 15 January 1946.

77 Symonds, R., *The Margins of Independence: a relief worker in India and Pakistan 1942-1949*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 25.

78 Easterly, W., *The White Man's Burden: why the West's efforts to aid the Rest have done so much ill and so little good*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 318.

British leadership that clung to power at the end of imperial rule, the Quaker organisations went beyond the arguments that had prevented effective response to disaster earlier. Quaker relief efforts succeeded because of the trust the relief workers put in the local population to help itself. Perhaps most visible in the boatyards of Chittagong and Dacca, the Quaker relief efforts worked side-by-side on tasks such as boat carving and administration only when necessary, before turning operations entirely over to local leaders.

Despite the good work of a handful of humanitarians, the famine in Bengal was a disaster in British-Indian relations. It seems few things disappointed Horace Alexander more than the failure for the Indian nationalist movement and the British Government of India to come together, especially over the Bengal famine. Gandhi and the Viceroy of India, Lord Wavell both worked to solve the famine, but never particularly well with each other.⁷⁹ This space created from the lack of connection between leaders on both sides of the political argument was where Friends operated.

Like the FAU, the AFSC was integral in response to the Bengal famine. The strength of the AFSC, like other international organisations, was that it was able to create networks of interest that went beyond national concerns.⁸⁰ The possibilities created by the lack of government response show what the historian Akira Iriye argued was a typical step in a non-governmental organisation's expansion from education and aid to a greater scope of activity.⁸¹ The FAU explained this step in a report to headquarters: 'The work, too, though it inevitably touched on only a tiny fraction of India's desperate needs, showed how much can be achieved by an independent non-political body, able to co-operate with the Government and Nationalist parties alike, and fuse them into a working whole in a progressive cause aimed solely at relieving some of the appalling sufferings of the common people of the country.'⁸² In this way, regardless of the actual result of the AFSC efforts on the ground, they were directly responsible for saving thousands of lives.

The AFSC concluded its Bengal famine relief efforts in April 1946. Like many non-government organisations today, a big challenge was to secure funds and maintain interest in famine relief which progressively became more difficult over time. The Quaker relief work in Bengal was important because it brought people and organisations together after a disastrous man-made famine.

When the world was deep in conflict, an anaemic government response left many people to starve. In response, the FAU and AFSC relieved suffering and offered pacifists an outlet for service during war. While the response was small, it was important because it relied on the work and leadership of the local population.

79 Carnall, *Gandhi's Interpreter*, p. 178.

80 Iriye, A., *Global Community: the role of international organizations in the making of the contemporary world*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002, p. 6.

81 Iriye, *Global Community*, p. 56.

82 'FAU Report December 1945', *The Friend* 101 July-December 1945.

Through the facilitation of work opportunities the relief operations of the American Friends Service Committee and the Friends' Ambulance Unit restarted stunted economies and helped to restore dignity to the destitute.

The cooperation between the Friends' Ambulance Unit and American Friends' Service Committee serves as a good example of transnational cooperation. The Friends' Ambulance Unit built a reputation for accomplishing important relief work, which allowed the American Friends Service Committee to garner support, both in money and through volunteers. In the United States, exhaustive fundraising efforts sustained the flow of money from the United States to aid workers in Bengal. Such successful cooperative twentieth-century humanitarian operations deserve more attention. If pursued further, it is likely that the FAU and AFSC relief operations will be of interest to historians and humanitarians alike.

Author Details

Steven Baumann is the Host of the Hour of History Podcast and a history PhD candidate at Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA. In 2019, he was a Visiting Fellow at the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. His current work is on the American Friends Service Committee's refugee committee during World War II. Special thanks to Professor Swapna Banerjee, who served as advisor for this project at Brooklyn College.

Mailing address: 240 M Street SW E-302, Washington, D.C. 20024

Email: stevenbaumann@gmail.com