

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF BENGAL AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

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Abstract: Exclusion from society is a communal hazard that lowers the value of human existence. The development of social exclusion is documented throughout Bengal's history. Because of Bengal's troubled past, certain religious communities, castes, and sects have been oppressed throughout its history, which can be better understood with a comprehensive examination of Bengal's historical context. As a result of this prejudice, child beggars in Bengal often face serious consequences.

Keywords: Social Exclusion, History of Bengal, Child Beggar.

INTRODUCTION

Who are the Bengalis?

The Bengalis, the jewels of their own crown.¹ A quarter of a billion individuals, and growing. Bengalis occupy one of India's most fertile and magnificent landscapes, yet we are one of the poorest, most densely populated and socio-politically brittle communities. Bengal is a land of rational intellectuals and appalling illiteracy and intellectual poverty; a place of great reformation and misery; a land where emotion seems to be much greater than edification; a land that has witnessed empires being won and lost; civilisations being celebrated and ground to dust. Bengali have free thinkers, revolutionaries, Nobel Laureates, cinematic icons and innovators. But Bengal has become a chronicle of unending struggles, of stench, of love, passions, and dreams; of profound aversion; of secured uncertainty; of glorious and terrible pasts; of great riches and terrible poverty of both wealth and wisdom; and of an entire civilisation that has been lost, won, and lost once more in the eyes of history. The Bengalis are a people who had both astounding achievements and horrifying acts of destruction throughout their history.

Bengalis' sense of self and pride is rooted in Kolkata, a city that is three centuries old, overpopulated, dirty, and falling apart, but which is nonetheless known as a "city of joy." In British India, it was a "city of the palace," the house of Bengal Renaissance, the dwelling of Babu culture, horror of famine, witnessing the wrath of partition, defeating the Naxalite movement, receiving painful refugees from East Pakistan and Bangladesh, and ruled by a communist regime, which wrecked the economy. As I grew up as a Bengali, I found it is a continuous examination of beliefs. It was inspiring to see the city's desire to endure its great history, countless tragedies, and grand expectations. In the midst of all this, a small hand reaches you, a pitiable face raising immense sympathy, asking for some money. She is a child on the street either with a younger sibling or alone fighting all odds against her age. Why and how did she land up there? Begging—is the most socially excluded profession in human history. The city excluded these children from herself. In 1985, our former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi said about Kolkata as a "dying city" because of the social and political traumas.² The city never asked her, if she was the creation of Bengal's royal and abysmal past. This article aims to see the development of social exclusion in the history of Bengal from the perspective of the psycho-social impact on girl children begging on the streets of Kolkata.

It is established that begging is an age-old social phenomenon, but none questioned the psychosocial impact of begging and social exclusion, especially among children. Furthermore, Kolkata's generally, silent multitude for several hundred years, practised harmony among religions. But Kolkata still identifies its minority with their religion, the Bengali Mussulman as Mussulman first and Bengali later. In addition to this, caste is also a significant factor. Now, when I raise my voice in support of those girl children on the streets of Kolkata defying the odds, viewing their horrible conditions from a theological perspective, then how will I be acknowledged? A Christian first, then a Bengali or a Bengali first, then a Christian? My objective is simple, telling the story of an unimportant population of my people as seen through my eyes, as I am Bengali by birth, Christian by faith, and cosmopolitan by practice. As a result, it is necessary to examine the history of Bengal from three perspectives: pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial in the context of the growth of social exclusion.

PRE-COLONIAL ERA

Mughal Empire

According to Richard, "The legacy of the Indo-Muslim frontier, the medieval Indian economy, and a new connection with Europe helped create conditions favourable to the rise of an imperial state. The Mughal Empire was the product of prolonged political struggles, and their domain was in the rich Indo-Gangetic plains in north India."³ The Bengal Subah, also called Mughal Bengal, was a part of the Mughal Empire that covered a large part of Bengal between the 16th and 18th centuries. Bengal was the richest and most industrially developed place in the world. It was also the place where the first signs of the Industrial Revolution could be

¹Chakravarti, *The Bengalis*, xvi.

²'Last Days of the Rickshaw'.

³Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, 6.

seen in its economy.⁴ Mughal Bengal eventually developed into a semi-independent state that was ruled by the Nawabs of Bengal in the 18th century. After witnessing the beginning stages of industrialization, substantial contributions were made during the first Industrial Revolution.

But the gradual decline of the Mughal Empire led⁵ to and was followed by the Maratha invasions of Bengal. It was the beginning of the dark era of Bengal. From 1741 to 1751, the Marathas under Raghuji Bhonsle invaded Bengal six times.⁶ The invading Marathas were never able to get across the Hooghly River, but they were nevertheless able to cause significant devastation to the prosperous and highly productive regions in western Bengal. The horrors committed by the 'Bargis,' as the Maratha raiders were called, left a deep mark on the traditions of the people of Bengal. They were grimly commemorated in poetry. According to the *Maharashtra Purana*:⁷

They repeatedly shouted, give us money, and when they got no money, they filled peoples' nostrils with water, some they seized and drowned in tanks, and many died of suffocation. In this way, they did all manner of foul and evil deeds. When they demanded money, which was not given to them, they would put the man to death. Those who had money gave it; those who had none were killed.⁸

According to Chaudhuri, "close to 400,000 people were killed by the Bargis during their occupation of western Bengal and Bihar."⁹ This devastated Bengal's economy, as many people died in the Bargi raids, including merchants, textile weavers,¹⁰ silk winders, and mulberry cultivators.¹¹ The repeated attacks by the Bagri played on the creative impulse of the people of Bengal.

“খোকাঘুমালোপাড়াডালোবগীএলদেশে

বুলবুলিতেখনখেয়েছেখাজনাদেবকিসে?”

“When the children fall asleep, silence sets in, and the Bargis come to our lands. Bulbuls have eaten the grains; how shall I pay the tax?”¹²

British writer Robert Orme reported that the Marathas caused so much distress to the local population that many “were continually taking flight” in large numbers as refugees to Calcutta whenever they heard rumours of the Marathas coming.¹³ The Maratha invasions forced the Nawab of Bengal to pay a tribute of Rs. 1.2 million annually as the *Chauth* (Maratha Tax).¹⁴ Additionally, the Nawab of Bengal made a payment to the Marathas in the amount of Rs. 3.2 million to cover the arrears of *Chauth* for the years prior.¹⁵ The *Chauth* was paid to the Marathas every year by the Nawab of Bengal until the British took over Bengal in 1758.¹⁶ The Bargi invasions ended in May 1751 when the Nawab and the Marathas made peace.¹⁷

COLONIAL ERA (1757-1947)

In Bengal, influential political and military power was transferred from the old regime to the British East India Company around 1757–65.¹⁸ East India Company rule began under the Bengal Presidency in India. Calcutta was named the capital of British India in 1772. The Battle of Plassey was a decisive victory over the Nawab of Bengal and his French allies on 23 June 1757.¹⁹ The French were rendered a relatively insignificant force in Bengal as a direct result of the Battle of Plassey, which was won by the British East India Company. By 1759, Mir Jafar had concluded that he could no longer remain in his position as a subordinate to the British. He incited the Dutch to move forward against the British and oust them from Bengal by defeating the British. The battle of Chinsura, which took place on November 25, 1759, was won by Robert Clive despite the fact that the Dutch had a far bigger force. Clive's offensive actions were launched immediately on land and water. The British then removed Mir Jafar from his position as Nawab of Bengal and replaced him with Mir Qasim. The British Empire had become the preeminent European force in Bengal at this point.²⁰ The collapse of the Mughal Empire was also responsible for the difficulties that arose in the aggregate supply of manufactured products in India. The British colonisation of India was a crucial contributor to both the deindustrialization of India and the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain. According to Ray, “the capital amassed from Bengal following its 1757 conquest helped invest in British industries such as textile manufacturing during the Industrial Revolution. It increased British wealth while contributing to the deindustrialisation of Bengal.”²¹ Despite the fact that raw materials needed in textile manufacture such as cotton were shipped

⁴Voss, Hiemstra-Kuperus, and Meerkerk, *The Ashgate Companion to the History of Textile Workers, 1650-2000*, 256.

⁵'Bengali Language History'.

⁶'Maratha Invasions of Bengal'.

⁷Marshall, *Bengal*, 72.

⁸Gangaram, *Maharashtra Purana*, 32.

⁹Chaudhuri, *The Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company*, 253.

¹⁰Chaudhuri, 253.

¹¹Marshall, *Bengal*, 73.

¹²Ahmed, 'Folk Literature.'

¹³Marshall, *Bengal*, 73.

¹⁴Daniyal, 'Forgotten Indian History.'

¹⁵Mehta, *Advanced Study in the History of Modern India 1707-1813*.

¹⁶Sarkar, *Fall of The Mughal Empire- Vol. I (4Th Edn.)*.

¹⁷Sengupta, *History of the Bengali-Speaking People*, 135.

¹⁸Baten, *A History of the Global Economy*, 251.

¹⁹Watts and Campbell, *Memoirs of the Revolution in Bengal, Anno Dom. 1757*.

²⁰Stanhope, *History of England from the Peace of Utrecht to the Peace of Versailles*, 349–52.

²¹Ray, *Bengal Industries and the British Industrial Revolution (1757-1857)*, 7–10.

to British companies, the British Empire implemented protectionist regulations in order to restrict the sale of Indian goods and services in international markets.²²

The decline in the amount of cotton that was produced domestically as a result of low pricing was a direct result of India's de-industrialization, which played a significant part in the country's overall underdevelopment and growing level of poverty. As a direct result of this, the process of de-industrialization in India led to a rise in the number of unemployed artisans and workers in the country's traditional cotton industry. The unemployed artisans and workers found work in agriculture, which not only resulted in an increase in the amount of surplus labour on the land but also contributed to the trend toward returning to agriculture.²³ The colonial policies associated with the land and taxation undermined the ability of these poor peasants to control and command the land. It pushed these peasants to take significant debt from non-cultivating moneylenders who charged significantly high-interest rates and aided in underdevelopment and poverty. This also robbed half of the population of Bengal due to the crisis.

The East India Company had been given the rights of taxation in 1764. In Bengal, these revenues came from both land tax and trade tariffs, and in a few years, the tax doubled.²⁴ The Great Bengal Famine of 1770 affected the lower Gangetic plain of the Bengal region and is estimated to have caused the deaths of about 10 million people.²⁵ The Bengali Nobel Laureate, economist Amartya Sen describes it as a *man-made famine*, noting that no previous famine had occurred in Bengal in that century. The region under Muslim rule was one of the world's major economic powers and signalled proto-industrialisation.²⁶ Furthermore, Historian William Dalrymple held that the deindustrialisation of Bengal and the British policies were the reasons for the mass famine and widespread atrocities.²⁷

Murshid Quli Jafar Khan, the first Nawab of the Bengal, appointed honest Hindu revenue officers and some Hindu *Ijardars* of the area to govern. His feudal chiefs also known as the zamindars mirrored the European system of serfdom.²⁸ The zamindars dominated most of the villages in Bengal.²⁹ During the Mughal Empire, the zamindars belonged to the nobility.³⁰ The zamindars were divided into two categories: the autonomous chiefs who enjoyed "sovereign power" in their territories and the ordinary zamindars who exercised superior rights on the land. They collected land revenue and were appointed by the Mughals.³¹ These people were known as the zamindars (intermediaries).³² They collected revenue primarily from the *ryots* (peasants).³³

According to contemporary Muslim analysts of Bangladesh, the Mughals unfairly treated the Muslims of Bengal by establishing a new Hindu landed aristocracy in Bengal, which was then made hereditary by Lord Cornwallis in 1793 as part of the Permanent Settlement. This occurred despite the fact that Bengal was part of the Mughal Empire.³⁴ As stated by Tong, "British rule represented a period of oppression for the Bengali Muslims since preference was given to the Hindu middle class. Furthermore, the dictatorial agricultural policies adopted and the feudal land system drained the wealth of Bengal and damaged the social fabric. The favour toward the minority Hindus led to confrontation and frustrations of Muslims through riots and insurgencies."³⁵ In the late 1820s, an Islamic millenarian by the name of Titu Mir appears to have been the one to articulate the grievances of Muslim peasants in central and eastern Bengal against Hindu zamindars and European indigo planters. These grievances centred on the exploitation of Muslim peasants by both groups.³⁶

During the Mughal Era, the Zamindars were not proprietors. The East India Company under Lord Cornwallis, realising this, made the Permanent Settlement of 1793 with the Zamindars and made them proprietors of the land in return for a fixed annual rent. The state's demand was set at 89% of the rent in the Permanent Settlement, and the Zamindar was allowed to keep 11% of the rent revenue for themselves. The state demand could not be raised, but payment had to be given on the due day before the sun went down. Because of this, the law was also referred to as the "Sunset Law." Due to the inability to make payments, the land was put up for auction and sold to the highest bidder.³⁷ This created a new class of Zamindars in society. The main aim of the Permanent Settlement was to resolve the problem of the agrarian crisis and distress that had resulted in lower agricultural output.

The true reason, though, was that Bengal income created a lot of animosities. Nevertheless, it also resulted in a fresh perspective on one of the issues that have persisted for a very long time: the guarantee of security of tenure for those who fulfilled the demand. One of the new As Guha and Sen put it, "Councillors, Philip Francis, a man deeply versed in contemporary European social theory, produced a highly doctrinaire solution to the problem of security. The core of his argument was that the Bengal *Zamindars* were not simply the possessors of certain revenue rights that had become hereditary but that they were the outright owners of the lands from which they collected revenue. The land is the hereditary property of the Zamindar. He holds it by the country's law, on the

²²Eacott, 'Making an Imperial Compromise', 69.

²³Roy, 'Globalisation, Factor Prices, and Poverty in Colonial India', 47.

²⁴Dutt, *The Economic History of India Under Early British Rule*.

²⁵Sen, *Poverty and Famines*, 39.

²⁶Perlin, 'Proto-Industrialization and Pre-Colonial South Asia', 30–95.

²⁷Dalrymple, 'The East India Company'.

²⁸Banu, *Islam in Bangladesh*, 21.

²⁹Markovits, *A History of Modern India, 1480-1950*, 301.

³⁰Metcalfe, *Moral Conduct and Authority*, 269.

³¹Hansen and Curtis, *Voyages in World History*, 461.

³²Jaffrelot, 'Sanskritization vs. Ethnicization in India', 756–66.

³³Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India, 1526-1707*, 140.

³⁴Banu, *Islam in Bangladesh*, 21.

³⁵Tong, *Finance and Society in 21st Century China*, 151.

³⁶Marshall, *Bengal*, 96.

³⁷'Permanent Settlement'.

tenure of paying a specific contribution to government.”³⁸ Only the unequivocal recognition of the property rights of Zamindars would create that long-term security that all Englishmen believed to be essential for recovery and improvement. Farming was an invasion of property rights which had inevitably led to destruction. But once the Zamindars’ ownership of the land was secure, men would buy and sell estates.³⁹ Hence the Permanent Settlement of the Bengal revenues took shape. Zamindars would do all they could to improve the value of their property. To give the Zamindars complete security, the Company must forgo the search for increased revenue. It was formally enacted in 1793 and ended with the end of British rule in 1947. The Company’s revenue was to be paid by Zamindars at a level to be fixed in perpetuity. So long as the Zamindars paid their revenue punctually, they had total security over the land from which the revenue came. It was their property. If they failed to pay the revenue, the land would be sold to somebody else, whose property it would become.⁴⁰ Lord Cornwallis, the first Governor-General of India, too believed that Bengal was in decline and that the security of property rights was the key to its revival. With security, “a spirit of improvement” would be “diffused throughout the country.”⁴¹ So, it was not for the betterment of the people of Bengal but to fill the Company’s treasury. At this point, I would like to raise an issue of British government policies.

In comparison to its initial goal of increasing tax revenue, creating a land market in Bengal that was modelled after land markets in Western Europe, and encouraging investment in land and agriculture, the Settlement and its outcome fell short in a number of important respects. This made it possible for the company and the people living in the region to establish the conditions necessary for long-term economic growth. It was common practice for officials of the East India Company and Indian landlords to coerce their tenants into engaging in plantation-style farming of cash crops such as indigo and cotton rather than rice and wheat. This factor contributed to a significant number of the worst famines that occurred in the nineteenth century. Meanwhile, the condition of the Bengali peasantry became increasingly bleak, with famines becoming a regular occurrence as landlords sought to guarantee revenue by forcing the local agriculturalists to cultivate cash crops such as cotton, indigo, and jute. At the same time, long-term private investment by the Zamindars in agricultural infrastructure failed to materialise. The system failed in the long run due to operational difficulty and because the Permanent Settlement did not take into account the seasonal and precarious nature of Bengali agriculture. The Company also did not understand the structural issues or society.⁴² Their problem was not so much that they lacked the resources to meet the Company’s demands but that they could not mobilise these resources. Farmers and under-farmers could not be made to fulfil their contracts and pay what they owed to the Zamindar, nor could Zamindari officials be compelled to account for what they collected. The Zamindari failure was a failure primarily of authority.⁴³ Within Bengal, by the early nineteenth century, private Europeans were involved in producing silk, sugar and above all, indigo. Institutions called ‘Houses of Agency’ played a dominant role in all forms of private enterprise.⁴⁴ The private British community in Bengal was essentially a commercial one, ranging from shopkeepers to bankers. By the end of the eighteenth century, they were joined by the first Protestant Christian missionaries. Missionary Christianity, as opposed to the official Christianity of the Company’s chaplains, caused scepticism in the East India Company which saw them as a possible threat to the stability of the Company’s rule. Baptist Missionary William Carey came to Bengal in 1793, but the main influx came only after the relaxation of controls that Parliament forced the Company to concede in 1813.⁴⁵

The Company failed to develop the Bengal investment on the scale it had anticipated in 1765,⁴⁶ In the early nineteenth century, however, difficulties multiplied. Between 1802 and 1819, duties on imports of Indian textiles for the British market were increased on nine separate occasions. At the highest point in 1813, the burden on calicoes was 85 per cent.⁴⁷ A recent study has argued that the Company’s procurement system crippled the productive capacity of Bengal. Weavers were forced into full-time servitude by the company, which barred them from engaging in competitive activities and paid them salaries that were so low that working for the company was no longer profitable for them.⁴⁸ Bengal had a highly developed sugar industry. However, Bengal sugar faced heavy duties.⁴⁹ Painful as it was to admit it, ‘the fact is undoubted...that since the accession to the Diwani⁵⁰ rights, the condition of

³⁸Guha and Sen, *A Rule of Property for Bengal*, 123.

³⁹Marshall, *Bengal*, 121.

⁴⁰Marshall, 122.

⁴¹Cornwallis, *Correspondence of Charles, First Marquis Cornwallis*.

⁴²‘Lehs301.Pdf’.

⁴³Marshall, *Bengal*, 145.

⁴⁴Singh, *European Agency Houses in Bengal*.

⁴⁵Marshall, *Bengal*, 103.

⁴⁶Marshall, 105.

⁴⁷Marshall, 106.

⁴⁸Hossain, *The Company Weavers of Bengal*.

⁴⁹Company, *East-India Sugar*.

⁵⁰Treaty of Allahabad Was Signed on 12 August 1765, between the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II, Son of the Late Emperor Alamgir II, and Robert Clive, of the East India Company, in the Aftermath of the Battle of Buxar of 22 October 1764. The Treaty Marked the Political and Constitutional Involvement and the Beginning of British Rule in India. Based on the Terms of the Agreement, Alam Granted the East India Company Diwani Rights, or the Right to Collect Taxes on Behalf of the Emperor from the Eastern Province of Bengal-Bihar-Orissa. These Rights Allowed the Company to Collect Revenue Directly from the People of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. In Return, the Company Paid an Annual Tribute of Twenty-Six Lakhs of Rupees (Equal to 260,000 Pounds Sterling) While Securing for Shah Alam II the Districts of Kora and Allahabad. The Tribute Money Paid to the Emperor Was for the Maintenance of the Emperor’s Court in Allahabad. The Accord Also Dictated That Shah Alam Be Restored to the Province of Varanasi as Long as He Continued to Pay.’

the people of this country has been worse than it was before.⁵¹ Reform must be fundamental and must concentrate on improving the productive capacity of Bengal before higher revenue assessments could be imposed.⁵²

In times of increasing pressure people upon the land, those who controlled land were likely to prosper. It is commonly held against the Bengal Zamindars that they sought to profit by forcing up rents rather than by making any investment in improvements or by encouraging agricultural innovation. Nevertheless, Zamindari fortunes seem to have been built on increased rents for the most part. 'Everywhere in general, landlords doubled their collections as populations rose and cultivation was extended' is a recent verdict.⁵³ This led to more atrocities toward poor farmers, which led to social stratification. Bengal was never able to stand on her feet due to the rapacious attitude of the Zamindars. So, it is essential to examine the social stratification system mainly in the British era.

CASTE — ESTATES AND CLASS

The caste system as a form of social stratification is typical of India. Caste is closely related to Hindu philosophy. The Sanskrit word for caste is 'Varna', which means 'colour'. Races and colour seem to be the bases of the Indian caste system adding to the division of labour and occupations. According to Cooley, caste is "When a class is somewhat strictly hereditary, we may call it a caste". But Ghurya said, "any attempt to define caste is bound to fail because of the complex nature of caste." It is a closed group, also known as 'Jati'.⁵⁴

Caste is a hierarchical division among the group and has a sense of 'purity' and 'pollution.' Brahmins are on the top of the ladder and regarded as 'pure', and supreme, followed by Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. From the beginning, the system was a medium of unequal power distribution. Membership is confirmed to those born into a particular caste, making the system non-transferable, unattainable, inalienable, acquirable, and unchangeable; one is born into a traditional caste occupation.

This section will look at how caste changed during British rule and how it affected Bengal. Before the British, caste had grown into an influential social, cultural and structural institute with the dominance of the Brahmin. The political and traditional form of caste started taking a different shape in the colonial period with a declining power of caste panchayats by introducing a uniform legal, legislative, and judicial system. Some of the legislation shook the integrity of the caste system, such as the caste disabilities removal act of 1850, the Marriage Act of 1872, and the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856. Ghurye has noticed that the British government passed these acts, "purely for administrative convenience and it had no desire to reduce caste rigidity." The impact of the social reform movement, the proliferation of English education and western influence, and the beginning of the backward caste movement were all things that occurred during this time period.⁵⁵

The equal right of women to education and culture was recognised almost universally. Education spread rapidly and increasingly among women. The conservative recoil from the education of girls began to disappear. There was a time when girls' education had no supporters and caused enemies in India. Female education has gone through all the stages of total apathy, ridicule, criticism and acceptance. The widespread poverty of the majority of the Indian population was one of the fundamental obstacles to the rapid growth of women's education, especially the labouring strata of the people, primarily the peasant workers.⁵⁶ Now it is legitimate to ask why India was poverty-ridden during the colonial period. How did we become a colony of the British? The suitable answer comes from Karl Marx's observations on India, which were written on July 22, 1853:

How came it that English supremacy was established in India? The Mogul Viceroys broke the central power of the Great Mogul. The Mahrattas broke the power of the Viceroys. The Afghans broke the power of the Mahrattas, and while all were struggling against all, the Briton rushed in and was enabled to subdue them all. A country not only divided between Mahomedan and Hindoo but between tribe and tribe, caste and caste; a society whose framework was based on a sort of equilibrium, resulting from a general repulsion and constitutional exclusiveness between all its members. Such a country and such a society, were they not the predestined prey of conquest? They destroyed it by breaking up the native communities, uprooting the native industry, and levelling all that was great and elevated in the native society.⁵⁷

Indian agriculture was transformed by the introduction of feudalism by the British. The British conquest of India led to a revolution in the existing land system by introducing private property land as a Permanent Land settlement. According to R. K. Mukherji, "The soil in India belonged to the tribe or its subdivision—the village community, the clan or the brotherhood settled in the village - and never was considered the property of the kind. Either in a feudal or an imperial scheme, there was never any notion of the ownership of the soil vesting in anybody accept—the peasantry."⁵⁸ The new law led to the concept of commercialisation of agriculture.

The unity of village agriculture and industry, the fundamental pillar of the self-sufficient village economy, was disrupted. With new social relations in production, distribution and exchange appeared new institutions. On the other hand, village life on a narrow village scale was poor in artistic quality, un-progressive and passive. If the Indian people were to advance to higher forms of social existence such as nationhood, economic unity and intellectual progress, the self-sufficient village had to leave the stage of history. History moves dialectically. Progress is achieved not through the quantitative extension of the good aspects of the old but through its qualitative transformation. The destruction of the autarchic village and the collective life of the people living in it was historically necessary for the economic, social and political unification of the Indian people. Social progress is achieved, as history shows, through the amoral action of historical forces. It should not be forgotten that these villages were the strongholds of social passivity

⁵¹Firminger, *Historical Introduction to the Bengal Portion of the Fifth Report*, 176.

⁵²Marshall, *Bengal*, 117.

⁵³Palit, *Tensions in Bengal Rural Society*, 12.

⁵⁴Rao, *Sociology*, 289–91.

⁵⁵Rao, 294–95.

⁵⁶Desai, *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, 277–78.

⁵⁷Marx, 'The Future Results of British Rule in India', 217.

⁵⁸Desai, *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, 37–38.

and intellectual inertia, reproducing the same type of existence for ages. They were powerful obstacles to all attempts at the unification of India in the past.⁵⁹

The introduction of new land relations in agriculture no longer had isolated village characters but it became significantly national. The history of Indian agriculture, despite it becoming national, under British rule was a history of its 'continuous and increasing disorganisation.' It was also the history of the progressive impoverishment of the agricultural population, the steady growth of their indebtedness, the growing expropriation of land from the peasants, and their transformation into bankrupt agriculturalists or the agricultural proletariat.⁶⁰

The period of 1770-1820 AD saw the *sanyasi* revolt in Bengal. One refers to a large body of Hindu *sanyasis* who travelled from North India to different parts of Bengal to visit shrines. En route to the shrines, it was customary for many of these ascetics to exact a religious tax from the headmen and Zamindars' or regional landlords. Perhaps the effect the *Sanyasi* Rebellion had on rebellions, the best reminder of the Rebellion is in literature, in the Bengali novel *Anandamath*, written by India's first modern novelist Bankim Chandra Chatterjee who was the pioneer of Bengal Renaissance. The renaissance period after the Indian Rebellion of 1857 saw a magnificent outburst of Bengali literature. While Ram Mohan Roy and Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee were the forerunners of the renaissance age.⁶¹ Rabindranath Tagore was the leader of this period and was interested in educational reform.⁶² During the Bengal Renaissance, science was also advanced by several Bengali scientists.⁶³

Although there was a wave of anger against British rule, various socio-religious reform movements took place in India during this era. In the social sphere, there were movements of caste reform or caste abolition, equal rights for women, a campaign against child marriage and a ban on widows' remarriage, and a crusade against social and legal inequalities. There sprang up movements that combated religious superstitions in the religious sphere and attacked idolatry, polytheism and hereditary priesthood. They were convinced that the new society could politically, culturally and economically develop only based on liberal principles such as the recognition of individual liberty, freedom of unfettered expression of human personality and social equality.⁶⁴

The period also witnessed the rising movement for women's liberation from patriarchy. The general national and democratic awakening that took place in India as a consequence of the emergence of the new economic environment, the establishment of the new political system, and the spread of modern western education and ideologies among the people found expression in the movement for the liberation of the Indian women from medieval forms of social subordination and suppression from which they suffered for countless centuries. The subjection of Indian women in the pre-British period was rooted in the social and economic structure of the society of the period. Birth determined the status of an individual in that society. The disabilities of a woman arose from the fact that she was born a woman. This inferior status of women in society was further made sacrosanct by religious ordinances. The Indian women suffered from barbaric customs such as *sati* (The widow had to throw her living body on the pyre with her husband's corpse when he died.) and female infanticide, (Parents killed girl babies because the marriage of a girl was too expensive for poor parents), which were rampant in the past.⁶⁵ Opposition to the practice of *sati* by British Christian evangelists, such as Carey, and Hindu reformers such as Ram Mohan Roy, ultimately led the British Governor-General of India Lord William Bentinck to enact the Bengal Sati Regulation, 1829, declaring the practice of burning or burying alive of Hindu widows to be punishable by the criminal courts.⁶⁶ Child marriage had been one of the principal evils which Indian women; due to the efforts of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, the Act of 1860 was passed, and in 1856 the remarriage of widows was legally permitted.⁶⁷ The issues addressed by the reformers, such as *sati*, polygamy, and the prohibition on widow remarriage, which were affecting the upper castes, primarily the Brahmins more than others, had restricted the spread of the movement across different cross-sections of society.⁶⁸

At the same time, only the English Protestant missionaries showed ardent or permanent missionary zeal with the growth of British power. Bengal became the main centre of their activities. They believed that only education on Christian truth could remove these social evils. The Calcutta Missionary Conference (CMC) also championed the Bengal peasants' cause. Contacts with the village reality made them aware of the anomalies of the colonial land revenue policy and judicial systems. The CMC wanted to create public opinion in England and India in favour of reforms in the socio-economic system in Bengal. Their efforts started with the organisation of the first general conference of Protestant missionaries working in Bengal (Calcutta, 4-7 September 1855). In several petitions to the British Parliament and governments of India and Bengal (1852-1859), the CMC and other suggestions for remedies in the system pleaded in favour of European colonisation in Bengal. A 'liberal Christian' European settlement, they believed, would be able to remove the abuses of the land system. But they were thoroughly disillusioned about the 'boon' of such settlement during the Indigo Resistance Movement of 1859-60. After the Indigo crisis, Bengal missionaries emphasised mass education, believing that a sound Christian education alone would help peasants out of their plight. They actively participated in the mass education programme sponsored by the Bengal committee of the Christian Vernacular Education Society. However, the CMC remained the

⁵⁹Desai, 48–50.

⁶⁰Desai, 51–52.

⁶¹Sengupta, *History of the Bengali-Speaking People*, 253.

⁶²'Rabindranath Tagore on Education – Infed.Org'.

⁶³'A Versatile Genius'. Frontline.

⁶⁴Desai, *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, 240–42.

⁶⁵Desai, 273–75.

⁶⁶Marshman, *History of India from the Earliest Period to the Close of the East India Company's Government*, 374.

⁶⁷Desai, *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, 276.

⁶⁸Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe – Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference – New Edition*.

champion of the peasant cause until the passing of the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885, which the missionaries believed, remedied many cases of abuse of the land system. Since then, the Bengal missionaries dropped this 'political programme'.⁶⁹ Missionaries concentrated more on promoting mass education and formulated different schemes for promoting mass education at the expense of higher education. The methods that showed at times the genuine concern of the missionaries for the well-being of the Bengali masses often influenced government policy. The Christian missionaries were the first to get over gender bias. But the missionary education work was criticised because English medium schools were Christian in character, and Duff's college became the leading agency for the conversion of 'high caste' Hindu youth. These conversions created a stir in Calcutta society. Raja Rammohan Roy warmly supported Duff's efforts in education, but the process of conversion alienated the Brahma Samaj from the Christian mission. The main aim of the Christian missionaries changing the cultural and social fabric of Bengal society by Christianising, which was never fulfilled. Its future primarily lay in converting the 'outcastes and tribal, exiled communities as they were.' The missionary's linguistic and educational work represents their primary contribution to the development of modern Bengal. But they saw their prime purpose as evangelistic: trying to convince people that their salvation lay in Christ alone. The most significant number of the Church and Baptist Missions converts came from the *kartabhajas* (worshippers of the Lord), a Hindu egalitarian religious sect developing among the Hindus' lowest' orders like Chandals and Namashudras. In 1838-39 about 3,000 *Kartabhajas* embraced Christianity after a flood of the Jalangi River in the Krishnanagar District. Flood relief from the missionaries probably encouraged this 'great movement'. Many *Kartabhajas* from Barisal and Jessore (Currently in Bangladesh) became Christians in the 1840s. This was the first and most notable instance of a 'mass movement' towards Christianity in 19th century Bengal.⁷⁰

With some measure of self-satisfaction, it is often said that caste has disappeared from West Bengal politics. Unlike in colonial Bengal of the past and other parts of India today, there is no political formation identified with any caste group or bloc. Caste issues do not feature in election campaigns. There are no political movements that make caste demands. This article will argue that this situation has been created specifically because of the peculiar consequences of the partition of Bengal in 1947 with its ramifications on migration, urbanisation, the re-establishment of social dominance by the urban upper-caste Hindu elite, and the new ideological formations. Since the politics of caste operates in terms of the relations between castes, the possibility of lower-caste mobilisation in West Bengal today must consider the social foundations of upper-caste dominance.⁷¹

Bengal was the first region of British India to be colonised and modernised. The opportunities colonial rule opened up were taken advantage of by the *bhadralok* (gentlefolk) primarily the upper caste.⁷² Bandyopadhyay points to the significant role caste played in everyday life and politics of colonial Bengali society, but increasingly, in the domain of institutionalised politics and through attempts to bring about reforms in society and introduce radical change in modes of governance.⁷³ According to Gough:

The two streams of social movements in Bengal: the reform movements and the peasant movements, operating more or less in the same historical context marked by the origin and development of colonial rule in India, diminished the influence of caste as a principle of social and political organisation. Bengal had represented itself differently, even contradictorily, to the different segments of its population. The emerging enlightened part of the middle class appeared to be a means of attaining the goal of bourgeoisie liberal values in the form of freedom and liberty of the individuals, negating the bond of conservatism of the feudal social structure. Colonialism was nothing but rule-oriented to extract their surplus systematically from the peasantry. Putting off the garb of bourgeoisie liberalism, colonialism to plunder the agrarian wealth produced by the peasants continued to reproduce feudalism, as was manifested from its administrative steps to create a new class of landlords and moneylenders. There was little wonder that from the earlier days of British rule in India, the peasantry engaged themselves in the most protracted struggle with the alien rulers and their allies to safeguard their existence.⁷⁴

Anjan Ghosh has shown how upper castes converted themselves into the new middle classes in early colonial Bengal. The quick and secure conversion was made possible by the cultural, social, economic, and political resources they enjoyed from pre-colonial times. These kinds of resources were themselves products of the caste system. There are certain particularities to the caste structure in West Bengal. The upper castes: Brahmin, Kayastha and Baidyas, who, as a result of the Permanent Settlement (1793), came to control most of the land, functioned mainly as absentee landlords. The land was a productive asset that yielded substantial rent. But they were neither directly engaged in supervising agricultural production nor increasing productivity. As residents of urban areas in Calcutta or the district towns, these upper caste landlords became detached from agricultural pursuits.⁷⁵ Middle-class *bhadralok* society has specific imagery about non-*bhadralok* beings, particularly the 'lowly' people, popularly known as *chhotolok*. They are seen as uneducated, lacking in culture, consciousness and agency, docile and in perpetual need of *bhadralok* assistance. The *bhadralok* self is built and proclaimed through its other, in this case, the marginalised castes.⁷⁶

It was the period of the emergence of the new class system in the lap of the old caste system. *Bhadralok* culture was at the centre of it. As a result, no caste-based political parties were born in Bengal post-independence, and communism took hold of Bengal. As it said, "the ideas of Ram Manohar Lohia, who saw politics through the lens of caste, were irrelevant. Class mattered, not caste. It was a powerful — and destructive — belief. The Left gained Bengal, Kerala and Tripura, but lost everything else."⁷⁷ The industrial

⁶⁹Ali, 'National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh'.

⁷⁰Ali.

⁷¹Chandra, Heierstad, and Nielsen, *The Politics of Caste in West Bengal*, 83.

⁷²'Does the Caste System Really Not Exist in Bengal?'

⁷³Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India*.

⁷⁴Gough, 'Indian Peasant Uprisings', 1403.

⁷⁵Ghose, 'Cast(e) out in West Bengal'.

⁷⁶'Does the Caste System Really Not Exist in Bengal?'

⁷⁷Barman, 'Bengal Does Have Its Caste Divisions, but Only at the Subterranean Level'.

development of India was indeed insufficient and lopsided due to several reasons. Still, this industrial development created powerful social forces which helped the national advance. The growth of modern industries led to the emergence of such new social groups as the class bourgeoisie and the proletariat, two primary types whose specific weight in the movement of contemporary society was found significant, even decisive. British industries urged the government of the East India Company to establish railways and construct roads in India. By introducing modern education in India, the British brought Indians into contact with the extensive and profound achievements of the contemporary west in scientific and social scientific knowledge. Three primary agencies were responsible for the spread of modern education in India. They were the foreign Christian missionaries, the British government and progressive Indians. Missionaries attacked polytheism and the Hindu caste inequalities, for Christianity fundamentally stood for one God and social equality.⁷⁸ These are the causes of change in the caste system to social class as an open and economic group. However, the very ontology of the notion of colonial modernity speaks about its anti-liberal spirit since the cherished value of individuality cannot be attained under the context of colonial domination. Thus, the fight of the reformers to eradicate the caste system along with other social evils of Hinduism, right from the beginning, was marked by a dilemma set by the limits of colonial modernity. First, their reliance upon the colonisers as a moral and ideological force to oppose the barbaric practices of caste discrimination was not very firmly grounded. Colonialism, far from meeting their expectations, perhaps, invented caste,⁷⁹ made caste more visible, 'pervasive' and 'totalising' compared to the earlier periods.⁸⁰ The colonial power/knowledge constructed caste as something antithetical to progress and modernity, which served as justification for colonial rule in India. By projecting European modernity vis-à-vis the invented caste-centric traditionalism of India, it attracted the imagination of the enlightened Bengali middle class through its promise of modernity. However, it was a 'limiting condition of coloniality'⁸¹ since the promise of progress or modernity was a promise which was not to be kept.

Max Weber said, "social classes are aggregates of individuals 'who have the same opportunities of acquiring goods, the same exhibited standard of living'". The characteristics of such social class were a status group.⁸² But Marx defined all those people who share a common relationship to the means of economic production. Those who own and control the means of production are the dominant class. They are the 'bourgeoisie' or capitalists or owners of the property. On the other hand, those who work for the dominant class are enslaved people, peasants, or industrial labours. They constitute the subordinate class or 'Proletariat' or the labour class, working class, or poor class. The relationship was mainly exploitation. He further believes that the dominant class influences all aspects of the culture and social structure — law, religion, education, and government.⁸³ Most, though not all, members of the *bhadralok* class are upper caste since it attributes economic and class privilege to caste ascendancy. Anyone who could show considerable wealth and standing in society was a member of the *bhadralok*, a zamindar, or a landowner amongst the upper middle classes. But it was sad to notice that when the enlightened segment of the middle class was busy organising 'progressive' movements to bring the Hindu society of Bengal and India out of the clutches of superstition and caste discrimination it failed to notice the progressive potential of the peasant mobilisations of the same time.⁸⁴ So, is it true that low-caste peasants/farmers' status was not uplifted but stayed as the low-class poor.

Meanwhile, the Hindu middle class was forming with socio-religious reformation. Another large population group sees their devastation with their own eyes — the Muslims of Bengal. This attitude of the Hindus towards the British and their civilisation brought them many advantages. Indeed, the Hindus were the main, if not the only, beneficiaries of British rule. They availed themselves of the British's many opportunities in all spheres of life. By embracing western education and culture, they became trusted subjects in the eyes of the new rulers, and by learning the English language, they were offered services by the Government.⁸⁵ On the other hand, the advent of the British brought a dark era for Muslims. Whereas for Hindus, it meant only a change of masters. In fact, for Hindus, it did not matter who ruled them. They had already been used to being ruled by foreigners. But for Muslims, it meant the loss of power, position, wealth and dignity. As Masselos wrote on Muslims' difficulty, it was argued that psychologically, they (Muslims) had not recovered from their loss of power when they were supplanted as rulers of the subcontinent by the British and lived in the past, in a nostalgic world of former glories. Muslims were, indeed, reduced to poverty and deprivation as a result of British rule.⁸⁶ S. R. Wasti stated that the Permanent Settlement Act "elevated the Hindu collectors to the position of landholders, gave them a proprietary right in the soil and allowed them to accumulate wealth." Meanwhile, it "practically reduced the Muslim peasantry to serfdom."⁸⁷

According to J. Masselos, this process of Muslims being replaced by Hindus was set off when the East India Company replaced Persian or Urdu with the English language.⁸⁸ Muslims' rejection of Western education and culture and their attitude towards their successors in power seats had many reasons. One of these reasons was imperial pride. Whereas Hindus were, by nature, too willing to submit to the rulers, Muslims were too proud of their past glory to surrender to the British and was a bitter pill for Muslims to swallow. They had been dethroned and could not reconcile themselves with the current status quo. He further stated, "When Muslim

⁷⁸Desai, *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, 102–65.

⁷⁹Dirks, 'The Invention of Caste: 'Civil Society in Colonial India'.'

⁸⁰Dirks, *Castes of Mind – Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, 13.

⁸¹Dirks, 10.

⁸²Rao, *Sociology*, 304.

⁸³Rao, 306.

⁸⁴Sarkar, *Life and Letters of Raja Rammohun Roy*.

⁸⁵Hay, *Sources of Indian Tradition – Modern India and Pakistan*, 84–85.

⁸⁶Masselos, *Indian Nationalism. A History*, 119.

⁸⁷Belmekki, 'The impact of British Rule on the Indian Muslim Community in the nineteenth Century', 35.

⁸⁸Masselos, *Indian Nationalism. A History*, 119.

hegemony was gone, and real power lay with the British, the Muslims could not forget that they had once ruled over the land. Their reaction was bitter and truculent.”⁸⁹

Anti-British and anti-western feelings that had long been building up amongst the Muslim community culminated in the Great Revolt of 1857.⁹⁰ The Great Revolt was doomed to failure, and many historians attribute this failure to, among other things, the lack of unity among the insurgents. Even though Muslims and Hindus joined hands in their effort to throw off the yoke of foreign rule, differences related to religion and the diversity of interests hampered the cultivation of any feeling of national sentiment among them.⁹¹ A terrible incident awaits as the differences between Hindus and Muslims grow deeper—the partition of Bengal, 1905.

The Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon, explained the partition of Bengal thus, “Bengal united is a power; Bengali divided will pull in several different ways.” A unified province posed a threat to British power, Bengalis were the first to receive English education, which empowered intellectualism, and Bengalis spearheaded the independence movement.⁹² Lord Curzon intended to divide Bengalis, not Hindus, from Muslims.⁹³ However, the Hindus of West Bengal, who dominated Bengal's business and rural life, were outraged at what they saw as a “divide and rule” policy.⁹⁴ The partition triggered radical nationalism. Bengali Hindus were upset with their minority status in the new province. They began an angry agitation featuring terrorism, as younger members adopted the use of bombing, shooting,⁹⁵ and assassinations in a blend of religious and political feelings.⁹⁶ After such a strong protest, the British assented to reversing the partition in 1911.⁹⁷ Now, the Muslims of eastern Bengal were shocked because they had seen the Muslim Majority of East Bengal as an indicator of the government's enthusiasm for protecting Muslim interests. They saw this as the government compromising Muslim interests for Hindu protests and administrative ease.⁹⁸ In the midst, Muslims saw the opportunity to regain their old glories with the Muslim majority in East Bengal. It was true that Bengalis also played a notable role in the Indian Independence movement. Many of the early proponents of independence and subsequent leaders in the movement were Bengalis. Prosperity had forgotten Bengal. The Famine in Bengal of 1943 is not simply the story of a woeful human tragedy; it is just as important the level of how annihilating inequality and material deprivation stems from and impact identifiable structures of power.⁹⁹ Sen concluded that starvation, in this case, clearly resulted not from an overall deficit of food but rather from sharp wartime inflation in India that left the poor of Bengal unable to purchase rice.¹⁰⁰ Mukherjee argues that this blame should be understood as considerable. Therefore, much of the work is dedicated to tracing the policies hatched in the War Cabinet in London that denied imports to India and Bengal during the critical phase of famine.¹⁰¹ A high proportion laboured beneath a chronic and spiralling cycle of debt that ended in debt bondage and the loss of their landholdings due to land grabbing.¹⁰² Stagnant agricultural productivity and a stable land base could not cope with a rapidly increasing population, resulting in both long-term decline in per capita availability of rice and growing numbers of the land-poor and landless labourers.¹⁰³

In Bengal, the land tenure was very complex, with rights unequally divided among three diverse economic and social groups: traditional absentee large landowners or zamindar; the upper-tier “wealthy peasant” *jotedars* and at the lower socio-economic level, the *ryot* (peasant) smallholders and dwarf holders, *bargadars* (sharecroppers), and agricultural labourers.¹⁰⁴ During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the power and influence of the landowners fell, and that of the *jotedars*¹⁰⁵ rose. Particularly in less developed regions, *jotedars* gained control as grain or jute traders and, more importantly, by making loans to sharecroppers, agricultural labourers and *ryots*.¹⁰⁶ The accumulation of consumer debt, seasonal loans and crisis loans began a cycle of spiralling, perpetual indebtedness. It was then relatively easy for the *jotedars* to use litigation to force debtors to sell all or part of their

⁸⁹ Aziz, *The Making of Pakistan*, 76–77.

⁹⁰ Ghosh, *How India Won Freedom*, 7–16.

⁹¹ James, *Raj; The Making and Unmaking of British India*, 273.

⁹² Narayanan, ‘Hindu-Islamic Relations in India’.

⁹³ Hardy and Hardy, *The Muslims of British India*, 148.

⁹⁴ Chandra, *History of Modern India*, 248–49.

⁹⁵ Kulke and Rothermund, *A History of India*, 289.

⁹⁶ Ludden, *India and South Asia*, 157.

⁹⁷ Ludden, 158.

⁹⁸ Robinson, *Separatism among Indian Muslims*, 203.

⁹⁹ Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal*, 2.

¹⁰⁰ Sen, *Poverty and Famines*.

¹⁰¹ Mukherjee, *Churchill's Secret War*.

¹⁰² Chatterjee, ‘The Colonial State and Peasant Resistance in Bengal 1920-1947’, 169–204.

¹⁰³ Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal*, 61–84.

¹⁰⁴ Das, ‘A Relook at the Bengal Famine’, 59–64.

¹⁰⁵ Jotedars (Spelled Also as Joadder, Joatder, Jwadder) Were “Wealthy Peasants” Who Comprised One Layer of Social Strata in Agrarian Bengal during Company Rule in India. Jotedars Owned Relatively Extensive Tracts of Land; Their Land Tenure Status Stood in Contrast to Those of under-Ryots and Bargadars (Sharecroppers), Who Were Landless or Land-Poors. Many Jotedars Were Bhadrals (Upper Caste Members) Who Adopted the de Jure Status of Ryot (Peasant) Solely for the Financial Benefit That the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 Afforded to Ryots. Others Belonged to the Intermediate Landowning Peasant Castes Such as Sadgops, Aguris, Mahishyas, Rajbongshis, Shershahabadia and the Rural, Less Educated Brahmins. By the 1920s a Gentrified Fraction of Jotedars Emerged from the More Prosperous Peasants among the Tribes Such as Santhals and the Scheduled Castes Such as the Bagdi and the Namasudras’.

¹⁰⁶ Ray and Ray, ‘Zamindars and Jotedars’, 81–102.

landholdings at a low price or forfeit them at auction. Debtors then became landless or land-poor sharecroppers and labourers, usually working the same fields they had once owned.¹⁰⁷

BENGALI FAMINE

Throughout 1942 and early 1943, military and political events combined with natural disasters and plant disease placed widespread stress on Bengal's economy.¹⁰⁸ While Bengal's food needs rose from the increased allied military presence, the Japanese campaign for Burma set off an exodus of more than half of the one million Indians from Burma to Bengal.¹⁰⁹ The fall of Burma brought Bengal close to the war front; its impact fell more strongly on Bengal than elsewhere in India.¹¹⁰ A "denial of rice" policy was carried out in three southern districts along the coast of the Bay of Bengal—Bakarganj (or Barisal), Midnapore and Khulna – that were expected to have surpluses of rice¹¹¹ and a "boat denial" policy.¹¹² In late 1942, a severe fungal brown spot disease outbreak afflicted the winter rice crop. While, on 16-17 October, a cyclone and three storm surges ravaged croplands, and destroyed houses, killing thousands, at the same time dispersing high levels of fungal spores across the region and increasing the spread of the crop disease, including the black marketing of rice.¹¹³ An estimated 2.1–3 million Bengalis died out of 60.3 million. Deaths by starvation and several diseases peaked by November 1943.¹¹⁴ Whatever the reason for the Bengal famine – shortage of rice, Churchill's dirty game, natural calamity, or lack of initiative from the national leaders – the fact was that the life of Bengalis was turned to dishonourable activities. What was more horrible was the aftermath of the famine.

Families disintegrated, with cases of abandonment, child-selling, prostitution, and sexual exploitation.¹¹⁵ Lines of small children begging stretched for miles outside cities; at night, children could be heard "crying bitterly and coughing terribly...in the pouring monsoon rain...stark naked, homeless, motherless, fatherless and friendless – their sole possession was an empty tin."¹¹⁶ Corpses were left to rot and decay in open spaces. The bodies were picked over by vultures and dragged away by jackals. Sometimes this happened while the victim was still living.¹¹⁷

One of the classic effects of famine is that it intensifies the exploitation of women; the sale of women and girls, for example, tends to increase.¹¹⁸ The sexual exploitation of poor, rural, lower-caste and tribal women by the *jotedars* had been difficult to escape even before the crisis.¹¹⁹ In the wake of the cyclone and later famine, many women lost or sold all their possessions and lost a male guardian due to abandonment or death. Those who migrated to Calcutta frequently had only begging or prostitution available as strategies for survival; often, regular meals were the only payment.¹²⁰ Tarak Chandra Das suggests that a large proportion of the girls aged 15 and younger who migrated to Calcutta during the famine disappeared into brothels.¹²¹ In late 1943, entire boatloads of girls for sale were reported in ports of East Bengal.¹²² Freda Bedi wrote that it was "not just the problem of rice and the availability of rice. It was the problem of society in fragments."¹²³ According to Greenough, the victimisation and exploitation of these women and children was an immense social cost of the famine.¹²⁴ It is worth mentioning the psychological trauma Bengalis went through, especially women and children.

A famous line from Shakespeare's 'King Lear is,' "As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods; they kill us for their sport." Bengal had not recovered from the psycho-social suffering of the famine when the happiness of the whole nation celebrated the political independence from the British, at the expense of Bengali blood and life, and one more partition caused the cutting in half the state, by drawing a line among the Bengalis.

POST-COLONIAL ERA

On 15 August 1947, the Indian Independence Act 1947, as passed by the United Kingdom Parliament, which transferred legislative sovereignty to the Indian Constituent Assembly, came into effect. The controversy of the 1905 partitions played a vital role. After the reunification of Bengal in 1911, Muslims were not happy. After it became apparent that the division of India based on the two-nation theory would almost certainly result in the partition of the Bengal province along religious lines. Predominantly Hindu West Bengal became a state of India, and predominantly Muslim East Bengal (now Bangladesh) became a province of Pakistan. Among Hindus in East Bengal, those economically better placed, notably higher caste Hindus, left first. Government employees were given a chance to swap their posts between India and Pakistan. Soon after partition, the educated urban upper and middle class, the rural gentry, traders, business people and artisans left for India. They often had relatives and other connections in

¹⁰⁷Chatterjee, 'The Colonial State and Peasant Resistance in Bengal 1920-1947', 179.

¹⁰⁸Tauger, 'The Indian Famine Crises of World War II', 194–95.

¹⁰⁹Tinker, 'A Forgotten Long March', 2.

¹¹⁰Government of India Press, *Famine Inquiry Commission Report on Bengal*, 103.

¹¹¹Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal*, 217.

¹¹²Mukherjee, 63–65.

¹¹³Gráda, 'Making Famine History', 10.

¹¹⁴Bose, 'Starvation amidst Plenty', 701.

¹¹⁵Greenough, 'Indian Famines and Peasant Victims', 225–35.

¹¹⁶Mukherjee, *Churchill's Secret War*, 170.

¹¹⁷Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal*, 239–40.

¹¹⁸Ray, *Women of India*, 397.

¹¹⁹Cooper, 'Sharecroppers and Landlords in Bengal, 1930–50', 248.

¹²⁰Greenough, 'Indian Famines and Peasant Victims', 229.

¹²¹Das, *Bengal Famine (1943)*, 44.

¹²²Greenough, 'Indian Famines and Peasant Victims', 229.

¹²³Bedi, *Bengal Lamenting*, 13.

¹²⁴Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal*, 235.

West Bengal and could settle with less difficulty. Muslims followed a similar pattern. The urban and educated upper and middle class left for East Bengal first.¹²⁵ However, poorer Hindus in East Bengal, most of whom belonged to lower castes like the *Namashudras*, found migrating much more challenging. Their only property was immovable landholdings. Many sharecropped. They didn't have any skills other than farming. As a result, most of them decided to stay in East Bengal.¹²⁶ The 1951 census in India recorded 2.523 million refugees from East Bengal. Among them, 2.061 million settled in West Bengal.¹²⁷

The fertile East produced food and raw materials, which the West consumed, and the industrialised West made manufactured goods that the East finished. The partition severely disrupted this mutually beneficial trade and exchange. Rail, road, and water communication routes were severed between the two. After partition, West Bengal suffered from a substantial food shortage as the fertile rice-producing districts of Bengal went to the eastern half. The shortage continued throughout the 1950s and 1960s.¹²⁸ By 1959, West Bengal faced an annual food shortage of 950,000 tonnes.¹²⁹ Despite the centre and state government's best efforts, the pressure of millions of refugees, food shortages and industrial decline put post-independence West Bengal in a severe crisis. Dr B. C. Roy's government tried to cope with the situation by initiating several projects. But these projects failed, and West Bengal's production declined as poverty rose. West Bengal lost its top place and lagged well behind other Indian states' industrial development. Massive political unrest, strikes and violence crippled the state throughout the next three decades after Partition.¹³⁰ Nehru seemed equally unwilling to accept that Bengal had an acute and growing food shortage. In the summer of 1952, when Dr Roy begged for help. Nehru's reply was both dismissive and patronising.¹³¹ West Bengal started its journey as a constituent state of the union of India with a highly vulnerable industrial infrastructure. In 1962, poverty measured according to accepted yardsticks was the normal condition of 62 per cent of West Bengal's population, compared with 38 per cent for India as a whole. By 1967–68, 'poverty' among Bengalis had risen to a staggering 80 per cent.¹³²

But the most disappointing blow to Bengal's hopes came from Delhi's administration of subjects under Article 369: foodstuffs, coal, iron and steel, and, above all, refugees. West Bengal's particular problems were the centre's policy towards the refugees from the East. Long after the exodus in Bengal of the Hindus from east to west had begun, Nehru's government continued stubbornly to keep its eyes shut to what was happening. These brutal consequences of Partition on the economy of West Bengal forced its leaders to realise the vast gulf between their optimistic prognostications and the harsh realities of independent India. Dr Roy's frustration was with how little influence his ministry had on policy at the Centre in matters that crucially affected West Bengal's well-being. In 1967, when the Congress in West Bengal was finally cast into the political wilderness, this was as much a consequence of the apparent failures of Bengal's provincial government as a rejection of the Congress at the Centre, which had comprehensively let the state down. In these two decades the Communist Party of India and its offshoot, the Communist Party (Marxist), made significant gains in West Bengal at the Congress' expense. This was an outcome that no one could have predicted in 1947.¹³³

COMMUNIST-ERA IN BENGAL

Fresh elections were held in West Bengal in 1969. CPI (M) emerged as the largest party in the West Bengal legislative assembly.¹³⁴ According to Gangopadhyay, the pioneers of India's intellectual modernity have lost their way and are stuck in stagnant provincialism and unyielding despair. The eastern Indian state, racked by famine, Partition, political turmoil and over two decades of dead-wood, reactionary government, masquerading as Marxist, was economically ruined; the best and brightest of its residents left at the slightest opportunity, and the fabled slothful *bhadralok* (literally the 'gentlemen') was hoisted to his own petard, out of sync with modern-day realities. He adds, "The Bengali is under siege, as Bengal is in free-fall economically."¹³⁵

The Naxalbari uprising was an armed peasant revolt in 1967.¹³⁶ Charu Majumdar was the foundation of the Naxalite movement in 1967.¹³⁷ Around 1971, the Naxalites gained a strong presence among the radical sections of the student movement in Calcutta.¹³⁸ Students left school to join the Naxalites. To entice more students into his organisation, Majumdar declared that revolutionary warfare was to occur not only in the rural areas as before but now everywhere and spontaneously. Thus, Majumdar announced an "annihilation line," a mandate that Naxalites should assassinate individual "class enemies" (such as landlords, businessmen, university teachers, police officers, and politicians of the right and left) and others. On the other side of the border, things are not as smooth as on this side of the border.

Following the Partition of India and the creation of Pakistan, the East and West wings were separated geographically and culturally. The authorities in West Pakistan viewed the Bengali Muslims in the East as "too Bengali" and their application of Islam as "inferior and impure," which made them unreliable. To this extent, the West began a strategy to assimilate the Bengalis culturally,¹³⁹ and the

¹²⁵Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition*, 105–58.

¹²⁶Chakrabarty, *The Partition of Bengal and Assam, 1932-1947*, 113.

¹²⁷Hill et al., 'The Demographic Impact of Partition: Bengal in 1947', 13.

¹²⁸Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition*, 244–45.

¹²⁹Chakrabarty, *My Years with Dr. B.C. Roy*, 411.

¹³⁰Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition*, 240–59.

¹³¹Chakrabarty, *My Years with Dr. B.C. Roy*, 206.

¹³²Bagchi, 'Studies on the Economy of West Bengal since Independence', 2973–77.

¹³³Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition*, 250–60.

¹³⁴'Indian National Congress Had Won 55 Seats, Bangla Congress 33 and CPI 30. CPI(M) Allies Also Won Several Seats'.

¹³⁵Biswas, 'Death of The Bhadrakalok | Outlook India Magazine'.

¹³⁶Shekhar, '50 Years of Naxalbari'.

¹³⁷Ahmed, 'Naxalite Ideology'.

¹³⁸Vidal-Hall, 'Long Walk in a Deep Forest', 73–75.

¹³⁹Mookherjee, 'Denunciatory Practices and the Constitutive Role of Collaboration in the Bangladesh War'.

Bengalis emerged as second-class citizens.¹⁴⁰ East Bengali-speaking Pakistanis desperately wanted independence from the west Urdu-speaking Pakistan. In 1971, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi concluded that instead of taking in millions of refugees, India would be economically better off going to war against West Pakistan to liberate East Pakistan as Bangladesh.¹⁴¹ The result of the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 was an influx of millions of refugees to West Bengal, causing significant strains on its infrastructure.¹⁴²

Bengal was under the president's rule from 29th June 1971 to 20th March 1972. In July 1971, Indira Gandhi took advantage of the dissolved assembly to mobilise the Indian Army against the Naxalites. She launched a combined army and police counter-insurgency operation, termed "*Operation Steeplechase*", killing hundreds of Naxalites and imprisoning more than 20,000 suspects and cadres, including senior leaders.¹⁴³ A violent Marxist–Maoist movement by groups known as the Naxalites damaged much of the city's infrastructure, leading to a period of economic stagnation and deindustrialisation.¹⁴⁴

The exceptionality of the left-front political era in West Bengal in contrast to other Indian states lies in the fact that it was minimally influenced by the caste vector, and the traditions of 19th-century social reform movements and peasant movements bear testimony to this.¹⁴⁵ The nature of the political turbulence of the time can be understood because, from 1967 to 1977, West Bengal had witnessed a change of chief ministers five times punctuated by the imposition of the President's rule for four terms covering a total period of almost three years. The political turmoil of the period had its roots in the severe economic crisis affecting nearly every cross-section of the West Bengal populace. According to Kohli, this was a 'decade of chaos.'¹⁴⁶

The land reform policies and the extension of democracy by decentralisation of administration to the grassroots, through politically-elected *panchayats*, were the first policy by the left front after coming to power in the socio-political turmoil coupled with grave economic backwardness.¹⁴⁷ On 29 September 1977, the West Bengal Land (Amendment) Bill was passed. Through Operation Barga, in which share-croppers were given inheritable rights on lands they tilled, 1.1 million acres of land was distributed amongst 1.4 million share-croppers.¹⁴⁸ On 4 June 1978, three-tier *panchayat* local bodies were elected across the state, elections in which the Left Front won a landslide victory.¹⁴⁹ Some 800,000 acres of land were distributed to 1.5 million heads of households between 1978 and 1982.¹⁵⁰

Chakraborti (2003) mentioned that up to March 2002, 10.59 lakh acres of land were distributed among 26.52 lakh beneficiaries. Its performance is by far the best in the country.¹⁵¹ The distributive reform was particularly beneficial to the cause of the socially and economically marginalised population segment. The majority (almost 56%) was composed of the SCs and ST beneficiaries.¹⁵²

After 26 years of ruling, it failed in 'land reform,' which didn't seem able to break the semi-feudal remnants in rural Bengal, or whether this 'radical' reform has, instead, tightened the semi-feudal bondages (for example, ownership-less Barga registration) in a new form? Or why 1.5 lacs acres of ceiling surplus land is still not distributed? But the report does identify increased landlessness in rural households as a disturbing phenomenon. Further gender discrimination has been an essential feature of economic and social processes in West Bengal. This gender discrimination is also confirmed by the fact that while joint *pattas* (landholding rights by husbands and wives) were distributed from the mid-1990s, it is only 10% of the total *pattas* distributed and when *pattas* in the name of women as single holders were given it is only 6% of the total. Despite the 'radical land reform' and the excellent 'democratic' decentralisation, it resulted in only 52.7% employment for males and 34.8% for females. Access to literacy and education, determined by gender, rural-urban residence, social category and income group performance, was miserable.¹⁵³

The World Bank document argues, 'The poor are the main actors in the fight against poverty; they must be brought to centre stage in designing, implementing and monitoring anti-poverty strategies.' Although it glorifies the values of participation by the poor, it also detaches them from the dynamics of their contexts marked by inequalities of different kinds and magnitudes. Poverty cannot be thought of solely in terms of its economic dimensions; it has political ramifications. Thus, without a definite political orientation, participation of the poor in the fight against poverty possibly bears the risk of getting misdirected, if not appropriate, by the vested interests entrenched within the different layers of a stratified society.¹⁵⁴

To some scholars, the overall decline in the growth rate of the West Bengal economy, particularly agriculture, since the mid-1990s had been an offshoot of the neoliberal economic reform measures adopted by the Government of India in 1991.¹⁵⁵ Being predominantly an agriculture-dependent economy, agricultural modernisation in India was not very encouraging¹⁵⁶ due to neglecting

¹⁴⁰Jones, *Genocide*, 227–28.

¹⁴¹'Indo-Pakistani Wars'.

¹⁴²Hindle, *London Review of Books*, 63–70.

¹⁴³Lawoti and Pahari, *The Maoist Insurgency in Nepal*, 208.

¹⁴⁴Donner, 'The Significance of Naxalbari', 14.

¹⁴⁵Chatterjee and Basu, *Left Front and After*, 16–17.

¹⁴⁶Partha, *State & Politics in India*, 342.

¹⁴⁷Chatterjee and Basu, *Left Front and After*, 32.

¹⁴⁸Chakraborty, *Left Radicalism in India*, 107.

¹⁴⁹'Timeline of Left Front Government in West Bengal'.

¹⁵⁰Bag, 'NLR 70'.

¹⁵¹Chakraborti, *Beneficiaries of Land Reforms*, State Institute of Panchayats and Rural Development (West Bengal, India):40.

¹⁵²'West Bengal Human Development Report 2004 | Human Development Reports'.

¹⁵³Ghose, 'Human Development Report in West Bengal Raises Question'.

¹⁵⁴World Bank and World Bank, *The World Bank's Country Policy and Institutional Assessment*, 29.

¹⁵⁵Bhattacharya and Bhattacharya, 'Agrarian Impasse in West Bengal in the Liberalisation Era', 65–71.

¹⁵⁶Bhattacharya and Bhattacharya, 71.

or reducing the scope for public sector investments in agriculture under the liberalisation policy.¹⁵⁷ Another possible reason for the economic decline may be the initial dilemma of the Left government to go for large-scale industrialisation under the aegis of global multinational capital following the dictate of the neoliberal financial framework.¹⁵⁸ The ambivalent CPI (M) perhaps failed to read the writing on the wall. The CPI (M) and the Left Front partners could not 'modernise' them along this line, leaving behind their traditional social democratic outlook¹⁵⁹ by embracing the neoliberal policies and keeping West Bengal one of the poor states in the country.

In the wake of the liberalisation in 1991, the focus of the development policy of the Left Front Government radically shifted. The government, fully committed to land reforms, started to invite capital-intensive and technologically sophisticated private industrial entrepreneurs, including multinational corporations, to the state. In early 2000, It was the period when the Left Front government in West Bengal, rather than carrying forward its much talked about pro-poor policies such as the land reforms and the decentralisation of institutional power to an even higher level, turned its focus to the neoliberal model of development whose anti-poor impacts were being increasingly felt in most of the developing countries throughout the globe.¹⁶⁰

The ideology and the praxis of the Left Front brought much distress to Bengal. As a custodian of a land reform party now under the pressure of economic liberalisation was forced to make policies such as "industrialisation through land reform" and "employment through industrialization." Singur and Nandigram were the worst examples of the peasant movement in modern Bengal history, mainly by women. The Left Front government failed to design a compensation package that could ensure the reproduction of livelihoods, particularly of the poor and marginalised, at existing or better levels; this acute dislocating situation would probably not have arisen.¹⁶¹

THE END OF THE COMMUNIST ERA

Elections were held in 2011, where Left Front was dethroned by AITC led by Mamta Banerjee, who actively led the movement against land acquisition. Now, a new political setting was established in Bengal. The question of class was diminishing, and movements based on the identities of caste, religion, region and ethnicity have raised important questions regarding the future direction of the struggle against the neoliberal economic and political agenda of Bengal.¹⁶² Now, how Bengal which is on the wave of *poribartan* (change) will address the core of social exclusion?

The latest employment data made available through the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2017-18 shows that unemployment has risen in West Bengal in urban and rural areas between 2011/12 to 2017/18.¹⁶³ According to Amit Mitra, the state finance minister made another imaginary claim in his budget speech on farmers' income. He said: "...over the last seven years, the net income of the farm families of West Bengal has increased more than 3.2 times, from Rs 91,000 in 2010-11 to Rs 2,90,000 (excluding the cost of cultivation as per NSDP) in 2017-18..."¹⁶⁴ Interestingly, the Union Minister for Social Justice Thawar Chand Gehlot said West Bengal has the highest number of beggars and vagrants in India.¹⁶⁵ The annual average income growth was around 219% in seven years, at 31% per annum.¹⁶⁶ All is not well in Bengal as we live in the era of *poribartan*. I will rest my historical overview by quoting Dhirubhai Ambani to Sudeep Chakravarti in a few relaxed moments during a formal interview.

"*Tum sala Bangali haina?*" Asked Mr Ambani.

Yes. Chakravarti replied.

"*Sala tum log itna bright hai*", *Lekin Bengal ka halatdekho*."¹⁶⁷

CONCLUSION

On the outside, having a euphoria toward Bengal is not a cardinal sin, but as an insider, our history speaks for itself. Yes, beyond the agitated history and great divide, we have several points of unity. As we are talkative, argumentative, liberal, conservative, moderate, hypocrites, intensely curious, feminists, chauvinists, misogynists, leftists, rightists, haters of colonialists, lovers of colonialists, vastly literate and vastly illiterate, revolution minded in theory and entirely evolutionist, *bhadralok* and *bhooka* Bengali¹⁶⁸ the gap of between *bhadralok* and *bhooka* Bengali has expounded the growth of social exclusion.

The theological community needs to portray ardent zeal to develop the Christo-social education culture in Bengal. The theological community requires to be the champion of the social cause. Countering the ground reality and creating a public opinion in favour of social reform by providing petitions on state assembly with appropriate suggestions for remedies to social evils.

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¹⁵⁸Chatterjee and Basu, *Left Front and After*, 60.

¹⁵⁹Chatterjee and Basu, 61-62.

¹⁶⁰Chatterjee and Basu, 126.

¹⁶¹Mukherji and Ghosh, 'Democratic Centralism, Party Hegemony, and Decentralisation in West Bengal', 208.

¹⁶²Chatterjee and Basu, *Left Front and After*, 127.

¹⁶³Bose, 'Fact Check'.

¹⁶⁴Budget Speech, 'The Finance Minister of West Bengal, Dr Amit Mitra, Presented the State Budget for the Financial Year 2019-20 on February 4.'

¹⁶⁵ANI, 'Over 4 Lakh Beggars in India, WB Tops Chart'.

¹⁶⁶Bose, 'Fact Check'.

¹⁶⁷Chakravarti, *The Bengalis*, 383.

¹⁶⁸Chakravarti, xxiv-xxv.

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- Jotedars Were Bhadrals (Upper Caste Members) Who Adopted the de Jure Status of Ryot (Peasant) Solely for the Financial Benefit That the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 Afforded to Ryots. Others Belonged to the Intermediate Landowning Peasant Castes Such as Sadgops, Aguris, Mahishyas, Rajbongshis, Shershabadiah and the Rural, Less Educated Brahmins. By the 1920s a Gentrified Fraction of Jotedars Emerged from the More Prosperous Peasants among the Tribes Such as Santhals and the Scheduled Castes Such as the Bagdi and the Namasudras', n.d.
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