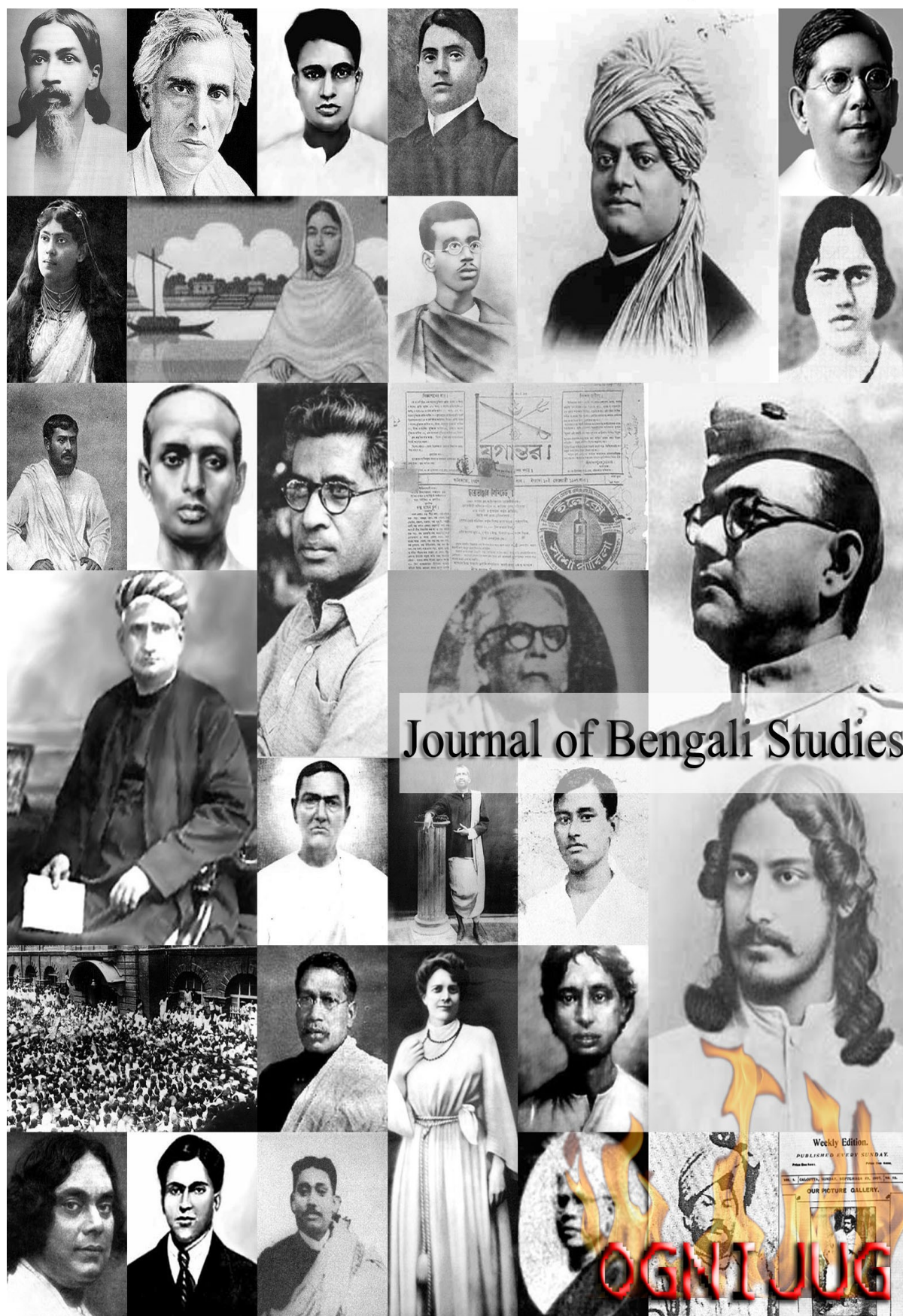


Inaugural Issue



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Inaugural Issue

Ognijug

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Editorial

While being constantly vigilant against all ideas of racial supremacy, and while being adequately resistant against all forms of xenophobia, we believe that the Bengali people of the Indic variety (not just the Bengalis of India who are concentrated in West Bengal, but Bengalis living in any part of the world who subscribe to indigenous faiths, philosophies and customs and participate in the indigenous culture) have every right to celebrate, criticize and preserve their history, like other nationalities of India, like Marathis, Tamils, Oriyas etc. This is how we conceived this e-journal, as a Bengali nationalist intervention into the study of the Bengali people, their history and culture. Most contributions to this inaugural issue have not distinguished between Indian nationalism and Bengali nationalism, because this distinction did not exist in Ognijug. India's sovereignty, integrity and strength are the primary conditions for the Bengali nationalist consciousness to assume a concrete shape, so while Bengalis fought for the freedom of the entire Indian people, they were not specifically concerned about Bengali nationalism. That was the necessity of their time. However, today, in order to secure a vibrant, powerful, colourful India, in order to preserve the tremendous cultural treasures and the rich diversity of our country, we need a strong Bengal, as we believe, Bengalis are the guardians of the eastern frontier of India, and it is their duty to protect the age-old tolerant, accommodating, democratic, egalitarian and progressive Indic values which the history of Eastern India from Buddha to Chaitanya to Vivekananda has witnessed and respected. And there is a continuum in this tradition. Amalendu Ghosh notes that Gandhiji remarked in a conversation with the political prisoners at Alipore Central Jail, “Sree Chaitanyadev was the greatest revolutionary of Bengal” (223).

If today Bengal cannot give shelter to Taslima Nasrin, we consider it as a threat to the core values of the Bengalis, like generosity, love, plurality, rebelliousness, heterodoxy and freedom of

thought. Those who want to fight the fundamentalist aggression of any kind of organized religion against Bengaliness by resorting to universalism, liberalism and rationalism will always have our support and sympathy. However, we choose to resist all forms of religious fundamentalism by celebrating our indigenous culture, by revisiting our indigenous philosophy from Sankhya, Charvak, Buddhism to Vaishnav and Shakto ideologies. Moreover, as post-modernist, post-materialist, and post-enlightenment subjects (Terry Eagleton's recent defence of Christianity immediately coming to mind), we cannot entirely neglect the role of mysticism, spirituality and dharma (which is different from the western/Semitic concepts of religion) in human psychology. Celebrating identity itself is a post-enlightenment project, while the class-conception and economic determinism of History in classical Marxism were, strictly speaking, enlightenment rationality derived notions.

Anyway, coming back to our original question of defining the relationship of Bengali nationalism with India, we believe that all the different nationalities of India (like Europe is home to many nationalities) share the Wittgensteinian notion of *family resemblances*. Culturally India is multinational, it is not a singular nation, and yet politically it exists as one nation. India is a grand cultural entity whose unity is derived from such commonness and resemblances which the Indian nationalities share among themselves. And India cannot emerge stronger by losing these treasures of diversities which the different nationalities represent. We are not being narrow in celebrating a part of India (to which we feel our primary responsibility, commitment and duty): we urge others to understand that this is the only way to strengthen the India we value and love. Arresting the current degeneration of the Bengali people (largely devoid of any nationalist consciousness owing to the prevailing ideologies of vulgar Marxism and Western universalism) is important to ensure a strong India. And we shall continue to exchange notes and ideas with the rest of the world, incorporating whatever is necessary and assimilating whatever appeals to us. We shall compare and study the

different nationalist movements in different parts of the world, as in the last century they were the single most significant political ideologies of liberation in the worldwide anti-colonial struggles (hence the vilification of nationalism by certain sections of our intelligentsia).

The period we commonly call Ognijug [pronounced ogneejoog, meaning the *Age of Fire*] is the theme of our inaugural issue. The revolutionary nationalist movement of Bengal presents a rich history that present day Bengalis can neglect only at their own expense. Since Ognijug, the rebellious spirit of the Bengalis has entered the lore of modern India, while historians have tried to trace a continuous motif of rebelliousness throughout Bengal's history spanning thousands of years.

It is a matter of great critical curiosity to inspect the extent to which the revolutionary nationalist movement was deeply influenced by the Occident. Let us take an example. Many Bengal revolutionaries including Aurobindo were heavily influenced by Bankim's conception of Krishna as Ideal Man (and not as God), as a model fit for human emulation. Bankim's concept indeed shows contemporary European influences, influences of concepts like renaissance man (let us not forget that the Renaissance was by and large a Victorian invention/discovery; the Victorians coined and applied this term about a specific period in Europe's history) and polymath, while Nietzsche's concept of *ubermensch*/superman was eerily simultaneous with Bankim's concept of ideal man (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* was published in German in 1883, and *Krishna Charitra* was published in 1886). Bankim's *anushuilan* (cultivation) theory strangely parallels Nietzsche's concepts of “self-cultivation”, “self-direction”, and “self-overcoming”. These concepts date back to the flourish of liberal humanism when it was still a revolutionary idea, and our criticism of its anthropocentric vanity notwithstanding, Bankim's strategy of finding the Ideal Man in Krishna spoke simultaneously of an assimilation and a resistance to the west.

International perspectives, scopes and networks always existed for the nationalist revolutionaries of Bengal, as Bhupendranath Dutta's *Oprokashito Rajnoitik Itihash* chronicles in details. Interestingly, the early communist influences crept in through these international channels as well. The nationalist revolutionary movement fell into decline when the revolutionaries joined the communist party *en masse*. Binod Behari Choudhuri, a centenarian revolutionary living in Bangladesh speaks about his experience of communistic proselytizing activities in prison in an interview in recent times conducted by Ehsanul Kabir and Alam Khorshed. He reminisces,

When Germany attacked Russia, Communist Party of India took the side of the British Government. Many revolutionaries, including Ananta Singha and Ganesh Ghosh gave statements in favour of the British Government. From Chittagong (rebellion case), we were almost a thousand and half in number in the prison. Towards the end of 1945 when we were getting out of prison, then barring 10-15 people all others became communists. Jatindra Mohan Rakkhit, me, Mahendra Choudhuri, Pulin Dey, Dinesh Dasgupta, apart from this handful few, the rest became communists. (cheerkoot.blogspot.com)

Retrospectively speaking, what the revolutionaries did was a premature giving up of nationalism, if we follow Terry Eagleton's postulation about nationalism. Eagleton has been a Marxist and an Irish nationalist. His mentor, Raymond Williams had a lifelong attachment to Welsh nationalism. Let us quote from *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature* co-written by Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson and Edward Said. Eagleton writes there:

"Nationalism," remarks an African character in Raymond Williams's novel *Second Generation* (London, 1964), "is in this sense like class. To have it, and to feel it, is the only way to end it. If you fail to claim it, or give it up too soon, you will merely be cheated, by

other classes and other nations." Nationalism, like class, would thus seem to involve an impossible irony. It is sometimes forgotten that social class, for Karl Marx at least, is itself a form of alienation, canceling the particularity of an individual life into collective anonymity. Where Marx differs from the commonplace liberal view of such matters is in his belief that to undo this alienation you had to go, not around class, but somehow all the way through it and out the other side. To wish class or nation away, to seek to live sheer irreducible difference now in the manner of some contemporary poststructuralist theory, is to play straight into the hands of the oppressor. (23)

Easy vulnerability to foreign influences (a fact chronicled about the westernized Bengalis by eighteenth and nineteenth century European observers) recurs as a continuous trope in the history of the Bengali people. Our elites showed extraordinary propensities to adopt Persian as a language and disinherited themselves of the indigenous culture when they were under the rule of Afghan and Mughal forces during the medieval period. The rich synthesis that results from such openness to the culture of the rulers is a positive aspect; but the dangerous flip-side is the loss of the valuable treasures of our own culture and the defeat of indigenous interests in the midst of an atmosphere of collaboration.

I would like to trace a *continuum of compradorship* in the history of Bengal. It represents a power equation that has dominated Bengal for a long time. Following Eagleton's initiative to blast open the dreary continuum of history (that he employed famously in his monograph *Walter Benjamin*), I trace this continuity between a section of the Brahmins of Sen period who prophesied that Bakhiyar Khilji was destined to be the occupier of the throne that currently belonged to Lakshman Sen, and the Bengali Brahmin youth in late 1960s who prophesied a world revolution under the luminous leadership of the Chairman of China, who was now our chairman too.

I shall argue, and this argument will continue to invest my future critical oeuvres regarding the study of Bengali culture and history, that the Bengali upper castes are products of a disastrous social experience that sought to impose an artificial hierarchy in Bengal, disinheriting the indigenous power blocks, the native communities and castes. As a result, the social fabric of Bengal had since been in jeopardy. As the comprador elites derived their status of power from above, they had no qualms to change their allegiance while the kingdom's western part was massively surrendered and a senile king escaped from the back doors of his palace in Nadia with the advent of Khilji and the legendary seventeen horsemen. This is a hugely controversial history, but there is more than a grain of truth to these legends.

Distinguishing myth from history is important, but we would not subscribe to empirical determinism and the hubris of absolute history. I shall approach E H Carr regarding this debate presently, so more of this later. But Myths, oral narratives and legends give some valuable insights about historical conditions, while being rather comfortingly undeterministic. The legend of seventeen horsemen similarly tells us that western part of Bengal fell like a pack of cards before the invading marauders. There can be many reasons, but one reason may be that the Sen kings encouraged a parasitical hierarchy and made every attempt to uproot the indigenous power blocks, be it Buddhist Brahmins (some of their descendants are Namashudras), Baishyas (Sonar Benes were the worst hit) or other castes which failed to find favours with the Sen dynasty.

Surrender of indigenous interests under the guise of an internationalism, something that was done by a large section of the revolutionaries in Bengal, marked the end of Ognijug. The sustainable success of this project of collaboration is due to the absence of an indigenous power centre, absence of a Bengali bourgeois class (Acharya Prafulla Chandra Roy's warnings immediately coming to mind) and presence of a parasitical elite/intelligentsia that did not owe its strength to the native

resources but to its affiliation and collaboration with the powers above. The influential sections of the Bengal society (the upper castes) have exhibited a consistent collaborative potential throughout their history. Absence of a Bengali nationalist discourse is a result of such material conditions which have prevailed in Bengal for centuries.

The Bengali Babus have been seekers of “chakri” for a long time. Not to have a consolidated, socially respected, professional trader class even to this day brings this illusion to a Bengali's mind that the world revolves around universities, medical and engineering colleges, courts of law, Government secretariats and merchant offices. While they have been oblivious to the mechanisms of power, during the Raj by default they became fit subjects for any ideology that could be professed by the white people. A comprador elite that tried and still tries to walk on its head, because the long continuum of collaboration never taught them how to stand on their feet, became converts to vulgar Marxism and universal humanism in the later part of twentieth century. ===Community and culture remain blind spots for the monopoly holders of Marxism in India, in spite of the works done by Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton.

What are the intellectual resistances to a nationalist discourse (and not political-economical, which is the case of the educated middle class Bengalis' resistance to nationalism) in cultural studies? As a representative case, we shall consider Eric Hobsbawm's claim that there can never be any nationalist historiography.

Finally, I cannot but add that no serious historian of nations and nationalism can be a committed political nationalist, except in the sense in which believers in the literal truth of the Scriptures, while unable to make contributions to evolutionary theory, are not precluded from making contributions to archaeology and Semitic philology. Nationalism requires too

much belief in what is patently not so. As Renan said: 'Getting its history wrong is part of being a nation.' Historians are professionally obliged not to get it wrong, or at least to make an effort not to. To be Irish and proudly attached to Ireland - even to be proudly Catholic-Irish or Ulster Protestant Irish - is not in itself incompatible with the serious study of Irish history. To be a Fenian or an Orangeman, I would judge, is not so compatible, any more than being a Zionist is compatible with writing a genuinely serious history of the Jews; unless the historian leaves his or her convictions behind when entering the library or the study. Some nationalist historians have been unable to do so. Fortunately, in setting out to write the present book I have not needed to leave my non-historical convictions behind. (Hobsbawm 12-13)

If Marxism can produce a historiography with a teleological paradigm, then it escapes all reason why nationalism, with perhaps a less idealistic and strenuous story to tell cannot offer any historiography. If a nationalist historiography is a contradiction in terms, as Hobsbawm seems to suggest, then the valid question of the choice of methodology comes to the fore. How does a communist historiography exist without being a contradiction in terms, how does a liberal historiography exist without resolving the same glaring contradiction? Even the question of disinterestedness loses any significance without the presence of real interests which determine our actions and thoughts. Hobsbawm's is an idealist position at best, and at worst a familiar classic Marxist attempt to deflect critical pursuit of questions which can never be sufficiently discussed within the clichéd ambit of class conception of history and economic determinism and teleology. It cannot be denied that Marx did not just think that state would wither away, he thought the same about nations and communities and identities, which would all be ideally surpassed by an all encompassing class struggle. This universalist fantasy is derived from capitalist urbanization and

modernity; this fantasy is ultimately derived from western enlightenment. It gives us immense amusement when we realize that Marx's politics of class conception of human society has been a mirror image of the capitalist civilization that it goes out to challenge.

Methodology has never been innocuous, and is always pregnant with its choices for frame of reference, selection of objects and preferred vantage points. There can never be a study that doesn't have a set of preoccupations and yardsticks. Empiricism too is an *assumption*. In other words, there is no seeing the world without theory ('theory' etymologically means speculation). To borrow a maxim from the great thinker Marx himself: we need theory, because things rarely are the way as they seem. Deconstructing the apparent, the obvious, the commonsensical and the pre-given (together they symptomatically reveal the mechanisms of power) is the important agenda of the Bengali nationalist studies, that will have to challenge the dominant perceptions (perceptions of Bengali comprador elites) prevailing in Bengal.

There should not be any disinterestedness in our cultural studies to the point where we are disinherited from our identity. Any research in history and culture will have certain focus areas, certain methodologies and specific processing of raw materials. E H Carr gives three notable features of historiography.

In the first place, the facts of history never come to us 'pure', since they do not and cannot exist in a pure form: they are always refracted through the mind of the recorder. It follows that when we take up a work of history, our first concern should be not with the facts which it contains but with the historian who wrote it. ... The second point is the more familiar one of the historian's need of imaginative understanding for the minds of the people with whom he is dealing, for the thought behind their acts: I say 'imaginative understanding', not

'sympathy', lest sympathy should be supposed to imply agreement. ...The third point is that we can view the past, and achieve our understanding of the past, only through the eyes of the present. The historian is of his own age, and is bound to it by the conditions of human existence. (22, 24)

Nevertheless, Carr is well aware of the dangers of what he calls the Collingwood view of history, that reduces history to an uncertain game, a space of utter relativity: "The emphasis on the role of the historian in the making of history tends, if pressed to its logical conclusion, to rule out any objective history at all: history is what the historian makes" (26). He warns us against going to that extreme of relativity which will negate the very meaning and validity of data. Data must be valid for all, but it is the discursive processing of data that is the prerogative of a methodology.

And while discussing Ognijug, we need a nationalist methodology, as the base-superstructure model of Marxism cannot adequately explain why some prominent members of the collaborator classes decided to go against their immediate material concerns, and embraced martyrdom, risked their lives, and took great troubles to go against the British imperialism. This is a question that cannot be reduced to a binary dialectics of thesis and antithesis, while the revolutionaries cannot be confined within a simplified notion of class traitors. We need to discuss Ognijug by using the parameters of identity, culture, community and dharma (for which no adequate translation exists in English, as dharma is not the same as religion). We need to understand the political force of martyrdom that challenged foreign domination: giving up one's physical existence in protest against imperialism was the ultimate rebellion against foreign rule that eventually made our independence possible. The revolutionaries made great sacrifices to achieve independence for their motherland. The martyrs of Ognijug practised the supreme form of political rejection of colonialism by refusing to live under colonial regime. We need to re-read those hours of glory from the pages of our history.

The renewed interest in nationalist revolutionary (or left-nationalist) ideologies in different parts of Europe in our present times evokes some critical curiosity. Raymond Williams' life long engagement with Welsh nationalism and Terry Eagleton's continuing preoccupation with his Irishness are glaring examples of Marxist intellectuals dealing with the question of nationalism in an affirmative manner. No one can deny that nationalism has the propensity of degenerating into racism, racial supremacy, xenophobia and uncritical glorification of *ancien regime*. We have begun by renewing our commitment to be vigilant against these tendencies. But all ideologies bear within themselves the possibilities of abuse and tendencies to become totalitarian; no human activity/ideology is free from possibilities of accidents, disasters and wrongs. That does not deter us from stepping out of our home and going to work every morning.

Given the world wide decline of the ideals of the old left and liberal universalist humanism, given the increased interest in the local and the specific, given the resistance of the local culture against the global market, given the liberal humanist's fantasies of a post-ideological world are in tatters, given the intellectually anemic and awkward left liberal regime in academia today and given that the guiding lights from overseas have stopped arriving, there is no reason why today a Bengali nationalist methodology cannot stake a righteous claim to perform academic analysis of the events in the history of the Bengali people.

Journal of Bengali Studies (JBS) gave its contributors a free hand; conforming to the left nationalism and postmarxism of the editor was never a requirement for them.. They have been free to express their opinions, and we have published them even when we don't share their ideological orientations. Here at JBS we shall always aim at a heterodox assemblage of different Bengali nationalist perspectives, as we shall retain a postmodernist diversity in building our discourse of Bengali nationalism. Here let me utilize this space to thank each of our contributors. Pradip Ray and

Professor Abhijit Mukherjee deserve our special thanks; they are not just contributors to this issue (their respective contributions consisting of a review of Tagore's novels and a review of a Japanese biography of Rashbehari Bose bear the distinct marks of their robust intellectual originality), they have been constant pillars of strength to this project of Bengali nationalism. My wife Mousumi has endured my erratic work hours which went into this project, and still has contributed a piece to the issue (hers is a Dalit-feminist review of Sarala Debi Chowdhurani's autobiography). My Chief Assistant Editor Sourav Adhikary has made the project's realization possible. Soubhagya Mukhopadhyay and Sourav Kumar Dutta have been of immense help regarding the graphics. Sujay Chatterjee was the first person to draw my attention to the revolutionary movement in Bengal some two years ago, and I acknowledge that conceiving this project would not have been possible without him; he has also contributed to this issue. Kalyan Sarkar's article on Mukunda Das tries to rediscover the glorious history of the songs of the revolutionary nationalist movement. Saradindu Mukherjee in his article deals with what he calls the issue of Muslims' non-participation in the freedom struggle. Kaustav Kundu's article on New Theatres is a nostalgic recollection of the visual culture that was contemporaneous with the flourish of nationalism, though for practical reasons of British control and censorship, such films could not directly relate to the revolutionary experiences. Anirban Ganguly has affirmatively discussed the spiritual currents in revolutionary nationalism. My own article is a critical inspection of the relationship between historicity and literariness, and communist appropriations of revolutionary narratives (and resistances it that). A critical approach to the history of nationalism, as we continuously need to stay clear from any kind of hagiography while dealing with the stalwart figures and signal events of nationalism. I shall express my gratitude to all our well-wishers for the words of encouragement that JBS has received from from them, in particular I shall thank Prithwindra Mukherjee (the eminent Indologist based in France, who is also Bagha Jatin's grandson) and Esha Dey (renowned writer and a Bengali nationalist). Finally, let us thank all our friends, colleagues and students who have been with us in this project.

The vexed issue of transliteration of Bengali words into English is something that JBS has to resolve in the long run. I have personally tried to follow the Sankritic system in case of words like Vivekananda (words which signify a history we share with the rest of the world), and adopted a system of transliteration that is phonetically close to standard Bengali sounds in case of words which belong specifically to our culture, like Ognijug. I am fully aware of the limitations of this approach and would invite suggestions from the scholars to overcome its present anomalies. I believe that the linguistic cultures specific to the Eastern Indian people are not adequately represented within the received Sanskrit pronunciations, and this is a problem for us as we need to capture the Bengaliness of the words which we shall transliterate. JBS wants to celebrate the local, specific flavours of the Bengali experience. Dispensing with the uniqueness that characterizes the Bengali language will impoverish the India as we know her.

Any first attempt at launching a National Revolutionary movement usually ended in failure in most countries of the world, ours was no different. But out of such fear and apprehension of possible failures and mistakes, if one failed to take that very necessary first step, then that inaction would be a bigger failure. So this first attempt at establishing an academic discipline of Bengali Studies is to be excused of its shortcomings, limitations and mistakes. First steps that a child takes are invariably botched up. But they are significant nonetheless.

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Understanding Hi-story: Literariness, Historicity and How the Narratives of Revolution Changed Hands in Bengal

Tamal Dasgupta

This article begins by acknowledging the relationship between history and story; both of them are denoted by a common term in French, which is *histoire*. I want to refer to the narratives which constitute the history of the revolutionary nationalism as *histoire*, as acts which became stories which were told and consumed with great interest and they were also history, in the sense that they were “truths of the events”. And here I use the term “event” with the connotations derived from Alain Badiou's definition of *event*. Daniel Bensaïd comments,

This is why, contrary to Kant, for whom the truth and universal relevance of the French Revolution was to be found in the enthusiastic and disinterested gaze of its onlookers, for Badiou, the truth of the event is that of its participants: it should be sought for or listened to in the living words uttered by Robespierre or Saint-Just, rather than in the detached commentaries produced by Furet and the Thermidorian historians; in the tragic decisions made by Lenin (and Trotsky), rather than the judgments made out of harm's way by Hélène Carrère d'Encausse and Stéphane Courtois. (marxists.org)

Secondly, while the relationship between fictionality and historicity will be my area of investigation, the raw materials for this investigation will be taken from the stories and histories of revolutionary nationalism which concern, among other luminaries, the three stalwarts of this movement, Bankim, Vivekananda and Subhash (they succeeded each other in a politico-philosophical sense), and also from the narratives which are imprinted with the nuances of the transformation of this movement through communistic proselytizing activities, as well as the

nationalist critiques and resistances against such activities. I am not going to chronicle the communists' subversion of the national revolutionary movement, and I am not going to chronicle the communists' glorification of their out-manoeuvrings of the then existing national revolutionary movement. While trying to understand the stories and the histories of Bengal's revolutionary movement by their mutual inter-references, I would rather take an odd attempt or two to blast open the dreary continuum of history as Terry Eagleton has preferred to do on some occasions (most notably in *Walter Benjamin* and *Saints and Scholars*). The familiar colloquial expression of “making history” suggests an action that a culture and a community of people collectively celebrate throughout their history, and that action enters collective consciousness, collective memory as a distinguishing milestone, as an *event*. Needless to say, there are cultural yardsticks which will determine what constitutes the requirements for the making of history for a certain community. What is an event in the Bengalis' history may not be an event for Assam, and vice versa, as history is communally delimited.

The relationship between history and story (narrative/art/literature) works at multiple levels. Historical fiction in Bengal is well established as a genre that began with Bankim Chandra. Secondly, fictionalised history (different from historical fiction) is a popular format and just like popular science it offers documentary-fiction, and as a classic example of that we have Sailesh Dey's *Ami Subhash Bolchi (This is Subhash Speaking)*. In recent times, Shankar's *Ami Vivekananda Bolchi (This is Vivekananda Speaking)* is a specimen that falls within this genre. Thirdly, history can be made by stories as well, so the novels of Bankim which created nationalist history, like *Anandamath* did, constitutes another category; stories which gave birth to history. A similar example from abroad is the Russian novel *What is to be Done* by Nikolai Chernyshevsky (Lenin, who was a lifelong admirer of Chernyshevsky, took the title of his eponymous history-making treatise from this novel). Another category, the fourth one includes the plethora of narratives and

legends and stories/songs/poems which accompanied the *events* of revolutionary nationalism, for instance Sharatchandra's *Pother Dabi (The Demand of the Path)*, and the revolutionary songs and poems of Nazrul Islam (both the writers were actively involved with the revolutionaries); later on, similar narratives were made to describe the continuity, legacy and heritage of the revolutionary nationalist movement as inherited by the communist party. We shall see how these narratives worked since the national revolutionary movement started in Bengal and when the revolutionaries were converted inside British prisons, how that was culturally defended by telling a story of telos, a grand narrative of revolution (the communists' telos is a grand narrative of history with a sufficient amount of determinism that can forecast a linear progression of history; no doubt it was a product of the Enlightenment triumphalism in its teleology) that argued that giving up nationalism was the next required step in history for the revolution to succeed.

In response to the noted anti-nationalist historian Eric Hobsbawm's evocation of the vintage authority of a statement made by Ernest Renan in a spirit of castigating nationalist historiography from an empiricist perspective, “Getting its history wrong is part of being a nation” (Hobsbawm 12), I would rather point out that being a non-nation is still a way (perhaps a bigger and worse way) of getting our history wrong. One can evoke Bankim Chandra to point out that there is no hi-story without subjective perspectives; as Bankim said: “Read in childhood fables that a man drew a painting. The painting depicts that a man is beating a lion with a shoe. The painter man called a lion to see the painting. The lion said that if lions knew how to draw, the painting would have been of a different kind. Bengalis never wrote history. That is why the historical painting of the Bengalis is in such conditions” (2: 295). Terry Eagleton points out in his one of his studies on Irish culture (*Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*) that like a person, a nation should be able to tell a convincing story about itself: “A nation, like an individual, has to be able to recount a reasonable story of itself, one without either despair or presumption. As long as it veers between idealization on the one hand

and disapproval on the other, it will behave exactly like Freud's neurotic patient, afflicted by reminiscences" (ix). Eagleton's comment establishes a relation between nationalism and subjectivity. It also alludes to the idea that either to idealize or to disapprove nationalism would both be a neurotic condition, and the sensible approach would be to receive and analyse the memories of nationalism in our conscious mind without letting them haunt our unconscious. As stories are never neutral, and they are always told from perspectives, therefore a subjective storytelling is an indispensable process of interpretation that the bare facts perceived by human agencies would have to undergo. Eminent historian E H Carr believed it to be an illusion that history was made up of bare data. Carr observes, "It used to be said that facts speak for themselves. This is, of course, untrue. The facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context. It was, I think, one of Pirandello's characters who said that a fact is like a sack - it won't stand up till you've put something in it" (11). While Carr chronicles the battle between older empiricist and historicists (the former pushing for neutrality and objectivity of facts, the latter for historical conditionality, subjectivity and relativity) with his opinion in favor of the latter. He rules out disinterestedness and gives his vote in favor of the historians' agenda, choice, and politics which come to interpret the facts. And it is quite interesting that he lifts an example from literature to elaborate his point, it further alludes to the literariness of history, (literary, in the sense of something imaginary was a Romantic invention; but in the older, original sense, literary was something that was written down in a special way, with alphabetic *letters*; history, science and philosophy all qualified as literature and today, the same sense of literature is retained in various other fields outside the academic discipline of "Literature"), and the narratives which constitute history. History is an interpretation of facts.

However, a fetishization of the literary mapping of the historical process is not on the present writer's agenda. First of all, the strict separation of literariness from historicity is an aspect

of the reification, commoditization and compartmentalization for which capitalist modernity is renowned. In fact, as if as a challenge to this strict division, many contemporary writers like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh (who are remarkably fascinated with historicity) today deliberately attempt a juxtaposition of historical research and fictionality in their works. Thus, such works become conscious and self-reflexive sites of merger and exchange between literariness and historicity. Secondly, the composite process of “history-making” has to be conceived in its organic whole as far as possible. Instead of going for the empiricist's fantasy of absolute and pure history constituted of unadulterated neutral impersonal data (a fantasy derived directly from Enlightenment rationality), a postmodern approach would no doubt prefer an engagement with the studies of human subjectivity, narrativity and myth making in the composite recording process of history.

Eminent Historian Ramesh Chandra Majumdar wrote in a letter (dated 26 November 1965) to Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay, after reading his historical romance *Tungabhadrar Teere* (“On the Banks of Tungabhadra”),

You have portrayed the memory of the past grandeur of Vijayanagar through a pleasant narrative – for this reason we, the historians are extremely grateful – because people do not read history – but they will read your book. The objective with which Alexander Dumas wrote novels like *The Three Musketeers*, a similar purpose will be served through your two novels (note: here R C Majumdar is referring to *Gouda Mallar* and *Tungabhadrar Teere*) regarding post-Shashanka Bengal and the Vijayanagar of Deva Raya.” (Bandyopadhyay 616)

R C Majumdar's letter is an acknowledgment of the role of literary works in propagating historical literacy, as well as the intellectual juxtaposition of literariness and historicity within the discourse of

nationalism. Clearly, as their respective attachments to nationalist thought are well known, here was one nationalist writer (a Historian) talking to another nationalist writer (a Novelist). One kind of writing interactively complements another in the process of making nationalist consciousness.

An example of literary celebration of nationalist history coming to my mind is Terry Eagleton's novel *Saints and Scholars* that has the legendary Irish leader James Connolly (a socialist revolutionary leader of the failed Easter uprising of 1916) as its protagonist. Here is how Eagleton ends his novel, with the description of Connolly's execution by the British firing squad: "As the rifles were raised he was already fading, dwindling, fragments of his body flaking away to leave only an image beneath. When the bullets reached him, he would disappear entirely into myth, his body nothing but a piece of language, the first cry of the new republic" (145). So the executed body of Connolly becomes a piece of *language* as his corporeality turns into a myth. Connolly's execution is an event that makes history and is celebrated in narratives. Elsewhere, Eagleton evokes the noted Marxist thinker and Jewish mystic Walter Benjamin to emphasize the role of the narratives in giving justice to the departed, and in preserving their memory, and in celebrating their presence by means of revolutionary imagination

[As per Walter Benjamin,] it remains the harsh truth that the dead can be raised only in revolutionary imagination. There is no literal way in which we can compensate them for the sufferings they received at the hands of the ruling order. We cannot recall the crushed medieval peasantry or the wage-slaves of early industrial capitalism, the children who died afraid and unloved in the wretched hovels of class society, the women who broke their backs for regimes which used them with arrogance and contempt, the colonized nations which collapsed under an oppressor who found them at once sinister and charming. There is no literal way in which the shades of these dead can be summoned to claim justice from those

who abused them. The pastness of the past is the simple truth that, rewrite and recuperate them as we may, the wretched of history have passed away, and will not share in any more compassionate social order we may be able to create. (1998: 325)

Remembering those who died is usually a highly politicized act. We shall see that the Bengal communists would consistently claim the legacy of the revolutionaries, and if we examine the narrative formation process at the moment when the nationalist revolutionary movement was being metamorphosed into communist movement we may be able to locate various disjuncture and punctures in the stories which have since been told by the communists, forever willing to project themselves as the sole inheritors and torch-bearers of the revolutionary movement. Late Saibal Mitra, a noted Bengali writer (and an erstwhile Naxalite leader) wrote in the late forties/early fifties while he was in his teenage, “O brother of Khudiram, cross the sea of darkness/ Comrade Stalin and China's Chou En Lai are showing you the light”, as is reported by his classmate, Samaresh Majumdar (himself a renowned writer) in a memoir (Majumdar 26). In the same vein, Majumdar records that the general atmosphere among the young students was heavily tilted in favour of the communist party; Mitra told his classmates that “unless one reads Karl Marx and Mao Ze Dong, the eyes that perceive life are not opened” (Majumdar 26). Saibal Mitra in his teenage had a book of poems to his name, titled *Khubdho Swadesh (Agitated Homeland)*, which according to Majumdar belonged to the genre of communist revolutionary poetry, established in Bengal by Sukanta Bhattacharya, a poet who died very young in the early forties. Sukanta remained an ideal for the leftist poets through generations. The title of Mitra's book *Khubdho Swadesh* is taken from a poem of Sukanta. Interestingly, Sukanta himself wrote the following lines about the Nationalist Revolutionaries:

“They were brave, they used to brew storms in heavens

Their stories, (written) with the blood of the foreign oppressors

(Written) with bullets, guns and fire of bombs

Are thrilling even today!”

This poem records the history-making acts of the revolutionary nationalists, and makes an explicit celebration of their stories (“kahini”). By recording these acts in such an inspiring literary language (my translation is a rather weak reproduction of the original rhymed poem in Bengali), Sukanta's poem itself entered into the lore of revolution, and became an idiomatic literary expression that continued to capture the popular imagination about Ognijug. These lines became a rallying point of reference whenever other writers wanted to evoke the fiery *events* of national revolutionary movement. The legacy of the national revolutionaries continued to be claimed by the Naxalite movement, following the practice of undivided Communist Party's evocation of the memory of the heroes. Even after fifty years, Sukanta's poem makes an appearance in Nabarun Bhattacharya's (a writer known for his Naxalite sympathies) Sahitya Academy award winning novel, *Herbert*, in an episode where a father alights the pyre of his Naxalite son (murdered in police custody) and recites these lines as his son's body is being cremated. A policeman standing nearby whispers to his colleague, “look there, father of the Naxalite is uttering a mantra because his son is burning!” (Bhattacharya 34).

A mantra is a part of the collective lore that bestows signification on human life and death, and its ritualistic function is to tell a story of cosmic significance, and in these aspects it resembles the heroic *events* of revolutionary struggle. There were characteristics of popular, heroic and legendary narratives in the historical achievements of Revolutionary nationalism. Shobhanlal Mukherjee, a retired professor from Kolkata whose father was a colleague of Charles Tegart, the police commissioner of Kolkata (widely known for his brutal suppression of the revolutionary

movement) reminisces in an article published in *The Statesman*, “Tegart had once told his colleagues that if Jatin were an Englishman, then the English people would have built his statue next to Nelson’s at Trafalgar Square. In his note to JE Francis of the India Office in 1926, he described Bengali terrorists as “the most selfless political workers in India”” (Mukherjee).

The epic quality in the acts and accomplishments of the revolutionaries of Bengal and their acts which made history and entered popular memory are constitutive of *histoire*. These events were ingrained into popular memory. Communistic propaganda made use of that memory, while neither Congress nor the mainstream Hindu politics had a corresponding revolutionary temperament/ideology/agenda to lay a claim to that memory. However, this was a reworked memory that the communists evoked. It was reworked from the perspective of the communists. Works like Sudhanshu Dasgupta's *Karagare Communist Howar Kahini* and *Andaman Jail theke Muzaffar Ahmad Bhavan* (*The Story of Being a Communist in the Prison* and *From Andaman Jail to Muzaffar Ahmed Bhavan*; Muzaffar Ahmed Bhavan is the Bengal CPIM headquarters) perpetrate this story that the revolutionaries chose Marxism because it was a scientific doctrine, indispensable for carrying forward the revolutionary momentum. In reality, the superior scientific credentials of Marxism were put to the use of subversion of nationalism, as we shall see later in this article: the neophytes were motivated by their party (that was in turn instructed by its Soviet bosses to collaborate with the British) to surrender the national interest under the guise of internationalism.

No one can deny that at that time, the Communist movement was at its charming best; those were its heydays. The mouthpiece of M N Roy's Communist Party in exile, titled *Vanguard* (so titled from 15 May 1923 onwards; first published as *Vanguard of the Indian Independence* in 1922), which made a clear mention of its affiliation with the Communist International in Moscow on its front page, was regularly posted to Pratul Ganguly (who was included in Roy's mailing list at

Muzaffar Ahmed's behest) of Anushilan Samity whose activists once taunted the Jugantar boys belonging to Jiban Chatterjee's group, "We have connection with the Communist International. So these magazines are coming to us. Why, they never come to you." Then Jugantar boys spoke of their resentment to their leader Jiban Chatterjee who in turn requested Muzaffar Ahmed not to exclude their group from *Vanguard's* mailing list. Muzaffar Ahmed obliged readily (as he notes with some pleasure and satisfaction in his autobiography) and henceforth Jiban Chatterjee's Jugantar group was added to the list of postal recipients of *Vanguard* (Ghosh: 1987: 44).

Conversions to communism could have been facilitated by some inherent problems of the revolutionary movement; for instance, the caste question. Pulin Bihari Das's autobiography mentions Hemchandra Das Kanungo's (Mahishya by caste) frustration over the caste-ridden, Brahmin-Baidya-Kayastha dominated bhadralok society of Kolkata revolutionaries (333). It may not be entirely gratuitous for me to mention here that the Mahishya caste is considered to be the founders of the renowned dynasty of the Ganga kings of Orissa, according to noted Oriya scholar Harihar Kanungo (orissa.gov.in). The *artificial* caste hierarchy of Bengal (a handiwork of the Sen kings) and the social inequality of the traditional Hindu society were not sufficiently addressed by most revolutionary nationalist thinkers, barring a few exceptions. But the Indian Communist movement offered an imaginary solution to the problems of caste. In effect, Indian communism has become an idealizing, religion-like soothing and brainwashing practice (a la Marx's description of religion as opium of people) that has been the castelessness of a casteist condition, egalitarianism of a regimented hierarchical world. A resolution (however illusory, as posterity will know) of the problems of social inequality available in the communistic collective might have won the revolutionaries away from the existing Hindu concepts of collective.

Disillusionment with the shortcomings of the revolutionary movement is recorded by Bhupendranath Dutta in his book in Bengali, *Swami Vivekananda* where Dutta records his eye-witness account of Aurobindo's "nationalist" myth making with some frustration; according to him, Aurobindo told a young revolutionary that "the monks meditating on the banks of Narmada have known by the power of *yoga* that the future emperor of India has been born in a Solar (Suryavanshiya) royal family. The revolutionaries are working by crowning him as leader" (20). As individuals living in a postmodern age, our response to how Bankim's robust intellectualism was replaced by appeals to myth and superstitions by later day nationalist intellectuals might be mixed. Aurobindo's approach was perhaps an expedient appropriation of mass psychology. National awakening was no longer contained within the intellectual phenomenon that was started by the likes of Bankim. What was earlier limited to the elite intellectuals, now spread to the masses and became a people's movement. Some problems inevitably accompanied this process.

The policy of political assassinations alienated many humanists from revolutionary nationalism. Shibram Chakraborty registers in his autobiography his experience as a teenager schoolboy recruited into a revolutionary group (such group veterans usually chose young boys as assassins to carry out operations, a practice that was morally and ethically denounced by many); he records his innocence, emotion and melancholy at being chosen as the assassin (who in turn will also be murdered on the spot by a second assassin so that police won't be able to take Shibram alive into custody) for the British Superintendent of Police. Shibram writes this episode in a way that is worthy of the greatest masters of literary art. The teenage boy finally escaped his fate of being both a martyr and a suicide in an absurdly humorous manner (99-114), but he continued his association with the nationalist movement and wrote regularly for *Jugantor*. So here was a critique of the revolutionary nationalist movement's politics of individual assassination, a critique that was just, valid, artistic and humanitarian, a critique by someone who by no means was a deserter.

M N Roy, whose original name was Narendranath Bhattacharya, was the first revolutionary who was converted to the cause of communism. It happened after he was sent abroad with some overseas assignment (regarding the Indo-German conspiracy; Narendranath was a close associate of Bagha Jatin) by the revolutionaries of Bengal, and his conversion to communism (that took place between 1917 and 1919) came at the time of high disillusionment with the national revolutionary movement in Bengal. This conversion coincided with the success of the Bolshevik capture of power in Russia. Roy had a perception of Marxism as a more comprehensive ideology in times of a general decline and desperation that prevailed among the nationalist revolutionaries as he speaks of his early association with the revolutionary nationalist movement in a dismissive tone (his following recollection appears in the anthology *Ognijug* edited by Shailesh Dey): “We were in an ambiance of a vague idealism. Many did not have any clear idea about the road and ration of life, nor was there any specific philosophical ideology. Only the supreme desire in our consciousness was this – to find a place on the pages of history as a hero, and to leave footprints on the sandy shores of time.” (2: 149).

Thus, the story of Indian Communism grew out of the loose ends of the revolutionary movement. A telos of an inevitable journey of the revolutionaries towards the destination of Marxism is carried forward by the oeuvres of the gifted Bengali playwright and intellectual of the left, Utpal Dutt. Dutt, a renowned thespian and actor, had performed this ideological and intellectual task of Indian left throughout his works, and in order to examine how this Bunyan-like narrative of *the revolutionary's progress* was conceived by the communists, we can turn to Dutt's unfinished novel “Phanshir Opekkhay”, published posthumously in a Sharodiya issue of a left-leaning Kolkata daily. It is a classic illustration of the narrative of historical determinism that communists wanted to tell about the conversion of the national revolutionary movement into scientific class struggle oriented communist movement. This novel traces this trajectory of Dhananjay, a young

revolutionary from Masterda Surjo Sen's revolutionary organization in Chittagong. The young revolutionary is in a condemned cell, living the last few days of his life with a renewed zeal only because he has discovered the intellectual and revolutionary promise of Marxism. The novel has a number of Muslim characters living in the harbour areas of Kolkata who are depicted as the harbingers of the international message of a classless, religion-less, communistic revolution. The novel employs the strategy of flashbacks, as the story is narrated through the remembrances of Dhananjay. M N Roy's *Vanguard* makes an appearance in Dutt's novel as a banned periodical which is secretly smuggled into India, and a Muslim communist character brags that it is more powerful than pistols; needless to repeat that *Vanguard* was not banned and used to be circulated through regular postal mails, as Muzaffar Ahmed himself tells us in his autobiography. Here is an example of reworked memory.

Dutt kept writing on the nationalist struggle for independence throughout his career. According to the editors of his collected works, the first play that he wrote in Bengali was *Mirkashim*, written between 1952 and '53. Mir Qasim, the Nawab of Bengal, who rebelled against the British is the protagonist of this play. The struggle of Tipu Sultan against the British is the subject of Dutt's play *Nil Shada Lal (Blue White Red)*. The title is an acknowledgment of Tipu's strategic alliance with the French, and there is an enactment of a play on French revolution at the behest of Tipu within this play. The oppressive regime of Warren Hastings after Bengal's colonization was complete and the legal murder of Maharaja Nandakumar (called Nuncomer by British) by the Chief Justice of the newly established Supreme Court at Calcutta Sir Elijah Impey form the dramatic substance of Dutt's play *Boniker Mandondo (The Merchant's Scale)*. The title is taken from a poem of Rabindranath, where he talks of the colonization of India by a mercantile British East India Company.

Tiner Toloyar (The Tin Sword) re-visits the nineteenth century emergence of nationalism (evoking Derozio's lines, "My Fallen Country, one kind wish from thee") at the backdrop of Bengali theatre. *Titumir* is a historical play set in nineteenth century where the eponymous Islamist/Wahabist/Farazi character Titumir organizes a rebellion against the British imperialists and Hindu zamindars alike; Dutt rather anachronistically depicts him as a patriot and a fighter for independence and that is in tune with the standard left liberal version of Indian history. But Dutt's play *Neel Rokto (Blue Blood)* portrays the famous indigo rebellion of Bengal without any such idealizing agenda and the indigo farmers' rebellion (that was spearheaded by Harish Mukherjee's journal, *Hindu Patriot*) appears there without any imposition of left-liberal/idealist paradigm, making it interestingly human, sans the forced patriotism of *Titumir*. Dutt's play *Dnarao Pothikbor (Halt, Passer-by)* deals with the life and nationalist writings of Michael Madhusudan Dutt, and the indigo rebellion makes an appearance. Vidyasagar is rightly shown as an embodiment of Bengali nationalist pride, and Michael Madhusudan's *Meghnadbadh Kabyo* is justly depicted to be an allegory of India's loss of freedom. The Afghan war of independence (against British imperialism) in 1838 is the topic of Utpal's play, *Shimanto (Border)*. This play is an interesting celebration of feudal values and ethics over the capitalist-colonialist greed, hypocrisy, cowardice and brutality. The great rebellion of 1857 is Dutt's subject matter in the play *Mohabidroho (The Great Rebellion)*, while his play *Shonnyashir Torobari (The Monk's Sword)* is on the famous Sannyasi (Monks) rebellion, that once inspired Bankim Chandra to write *Anandamath*. The infamous Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919 is the subject matter of Dutt's eponymous play, *Jallianwalabagh*. In the very beginning of the play a narrator (a narrator who directly addresses the audience is both in tune with the *sutradhar* of Indian theatre and the *verfremdung* of Brechtian epic theatre) evokes the "roars of the pistols of Aurobinda and Barindra", "the pistols of Bagha Jatin and his comrades at Buri Balam that challenged a British force ten times bigger", "the attempt at an all India armed insurrection under the leadership of Rashbehari Bose, the great hero" and Congress's post-Independence attempt

to erase the names of Rashbehari, Jatin Mukherjee, Surjo Sen and Subhash Chandra from the pages of history. This play offers severe criticism of Gandhi and ends with Michael O'Dwyer's assassination by Udham Singh in 1940. Udham's final dialogue thus concludes the play, "The martyrs of Jallian, listen! The eunuch practice of arousing pity by lying helplessly with blood soaked bodies are over. Let the Indians be awakened with revolutionary vengeance by shooting at the bosom of the tyrants. Victory to armed struggle, victory to revolution, victory to revolutionary India!" Dutt's cult classic play *Kallol* evoked the memory of Naval rebellion, celebrated the valiant role of Communist Party and denounced the treachery of Congress. The play made history. Dutt had to remain silent about the treachery of Communist party in the immediate years preceding Naval rebellion, but anyway, selection of events is a writer's choice, so to say.

A very popular play of Utpal Dutt about Ognijug (the foreword written by noted dramatist Manmatha Roy literally and categorically puts a case for ognijug and claims that the play will keep the spirit of ognijug alive) was *Ferari Fouj (The Absconding Army)*. The play opens with patriotic songs sung by the troubadour of Bengali nationalism, Mukunda Das who as a character makes a brief appearance in this play. The rest of the characters are imaginary. An Anushilan Samiti type insurrectionary group's failure is portrayed, with a subtle message in favour of mass revolutionary practice, the absence of which makes the group vulnerable, while a closed hierarchy and blind methods of secrecy are shown to be particularly prone to breaches and betrayals. Dutt's stint at *jatra* (Bengali folk theatre) led him to compose *Rifle*, another play on Ognijug that shares some of the themes of *Ferari Fouj*. Dutt wrote a play with Subhash Chandra Bose as the protagonist at the backdrop of INA, titled *Dilli Chalo (To Delhi)*; the title is taken from one of the famous slogans of INA given by Subhash Bose). Dutt wrote about the abortive attempt at organizing a mutiny among the Punjabi soldiers British Indian Army (an initiative taken by Rashbehari Bose in February 1915, renowned in history as the Ghadar conspiracy) in his play

Kripan (Sword). Rashbehari Bose is the main character in this play that depicts his legendary exploits in north India before he left the country. Dutt's book of non-fictional prose *Girish Manosh* is a historical analysis of Ramkrishna-Vivekananda movement at the backdrop of Girish Ghosh's theatre, and this book is very interestingly nationalist, acknowledging the resistance of Hinduism against imperial oppression. Dutt writes, "Thus Ramkrishna told his contemporary Bengalis, 'Your dharma itself is superior, so you do not need to hang your head in shame. You are not barbaric, they (the British) are barbaric.' No one is prepared for a struggle unless one holds his head high. It was Ramkrishna's indirect and best achievement – to give back the ideological self-respect to Vivekananda and the twentieth century revolutionaries" (51). This book is remarkably pro-Hindu, though Dutt is very careful to omit, suppress and deform Bankim, the thinker who fathered Hindu revival in Bengal. There a cursory dismissal of Bankim as a Victorian middle class sentimental revisionist who wants to reduce the epic character of Krishna into a uni-dimensional "Premier Thakur" – a God of mere love (176), which is as wrong, as muddled and as false as it can get on the part of Dutt. Dutt partially quotes and thereby maliciously misquotes Bankim in order to castigate him as a superstitious person who believed in miracles (59). But the original passage of Bankim Chandra (from the nineteenth chapter of *Dharma Tattva*) talked of a miracle made by a talented human being (whose faculties have flourished because of *anushilan*; devotion, practice and exercise are together given the name of *anushilan*), entirely by *natural means* (2 546). Historically, Bankim has been a steady target for left-liberal-universalist-Islamist slanderers, while Vivekananda mostly suffered attempts of appropriation.

Shailesh Dey's book *Ami Subhash Bolchi* records the life long inspiration that Vivekananda's writings provided for Subhash. In particular, Vivekananda's message influenced Bose at a critical moment when he chose to leave India in early 1941, a journey that led to the INA's struggle of independence (2: 46). Vivekananda was a figure of singular importance for the nationalist

revolutionary movement in Bengal, and it is but normal that communists would be anxious to appropriate him. Vivekananda's brother Bhupendranath Dutta wrote a book titled *Socialist Vivekananda* back in 1928/29. It was a socialist appropriation of Vivekananda. Bhupendranath Dutta imposes a communistic telos on Vivekananda's project. He writes in his Bengali monograph, *Swami Vivekananda*: “only one thing needs to be stated clearly that the 'national consciousness' that was awake in the age of subjugation (preceding the age of Vivekananda) was nothing but a xenophobia against the foreign rulers. The ideals and agenda of Swamiji was unthinkable for them” (19). Any reader of Bankim will realize the mistake contained in this statement. Bhupendranath himself acknowledged that Vivekananda in early teenage came under the moulding influence of Bankim's “jatiyobhavoddipak” books, that is, books which evoked national feelings (2), but apart from this, his book is silent on Bankim. It should be noted here that the influence of Bankim on Vivekananda extended beyond the latter's formative years. *Ognijug*, a compendium (in two volumes, edited by Shailesh Dey) of recollections made by nationalist revolutionaries themselves and writings on them, opens with a reminiscence of Hemchandra Ghosh, the founder of Bengal Volunteers and close associate of Subhash. He remembers meeting Swami Vivekananda in 1901, who told him in a restless manner, “Read Bankim Chandra – Bankim Chandra – and Bankim Chandra only” (1: 2). Surely Vivekananda did not mean that other thinkers and writers were not to be read. Vivekananda was physically ill, probably he realized that he was nearing his end (he died in 1902), and he might have felt a certain restlessness about the unfinished mission of his life that could only be materialized in an independent India. He was an avid nationalist, and throughout his life continued to draw inspiration from Bankim, and it is only natural that he would advise others (particularly those with a nationalist dispensation) to study Bankim in depth.

Going back to Bhupendranath's *Swami Vivekananda*, a book that attempts a communistic appropriation of Vivekananda, we see that words like class, proletariat, historical materialism and

dialectical materialism appear almost on every page, every now and then. It appears that Vivekananda underwent a purification rituals at the hands of communist ideology, in order to gain a generous accommodation within the gracious narrative of communism, where his prophecies about impending Russian and Chinese revolutions (as pointed out by Bhupendranath) somehow redeem this fallen spiritualist with an adequate materialist vigour.

Communists appropriated the Bengali revolutionaries as well. Amalendu Ghosh expresses his indignation at the over-stretched narrative that the communists wanted to tell:

But in this regard a comment made by Muzaffar Ahmed in an article titled “The Terrorist Revolutionaries Came to Communist Party” in a Sharodiya issue of *Nandan* (note: *Nandan* is CPIM's intellectual organ on art, aesthetics and ideology in Bengal) was thoroughly ludicrous. In Muzaffar Ahmed's language: “The Government of India declared the Communist Party illegal in 1934. Therefore those who were terrorists came to the Communist Party risking great hazards.” Against this statement, the comment of the eminent revolutionary leader of Jugantar Party Bhupendra Kumar Dutta is, “About whom Muzaffar Saheb is saying these words? About them, who came to the revolutionary parties thinking of the hangman's noose as an object of desire, and who used to vie with each other, saying “I shall go, I shall go” when one had to be chosen between two (for an operation)? Possibility of a fifteen day or one month imprisonment for sticking the posters of the illegal party on walls was risking great hazards for them!”

And the self gratification that used to be attained by the communists by saying that so many of the communist party members were in Andamans, as they still do and speak elaborately to their followers that leaves this truth unuttered that the prisoners indoctrinated into communist ideology were transported because of participating in nationalist armed

struggle, not for any communist activities. (*Bharote Communism* 108)

There was an immediate access to and capability of expedient falsehood for the communist party as the Indian experience shows, since in addition to God and the traditional way of life, ethics, morality and values were disposed too, and man the ultimate master of his surroundings was no longer answerable to anyone but the party. Alister McGrath comments in *Twilight of Atheism* “Soviet atheism is the true religious philosophy of modernity – a totalizing worldview which demanded that all else give way to its claims. As the history of the atheist state makes clear. This inevitably sets an agenda for repression and oppression.” (232). *The Black Book of Communism* first published in France in 1997 suggests that communism was “a tragedy of planetary dimensions”, with its total number of victims between 85 and 100 millions (McGrath 233).

There was a certain license to immorality for the communist party that might not be easily available with the (mostly God-fearing) nationalist revolutionaries. But apart from that, since the Enlightenment triumphalism that thoroughly informs classical Marxist Leninist Maoist discourses came to consider communal bonding, mutual human love, morality, ethics and values to be redundant and to be discarded as relics of a bygone feudal era, Communist movement becomes a strange mirror image of the vulgar bourgeois materialist fantasy of an exploitative world (the only subversion that occurs in this regard is the casual change of position between left and right, so to say; as the famous joke goes, capitalism is the exploitation of man by man and communism is the opposite). So end will justify the means. Truth for a communist is always party truth. No basis of humanity is left unsullied by the iron hand of the party, and every violation can be justified under the guise of the progress of history.

This is not to suggest that the communists were unique in their collaborations and the nationalist movement did not have its fair share of agent provocateurs and moles and double agents. But it was not essentially a movement of collaborators. In fact, one continuum revealed in the entire history of this period is the intrigues and workings of power, which are hidden as a result of dominant ideologies which are basically narratives (grand and otherwise). The revolution never comes, because there will always be powers which will act against mass emancipation and individuals will betray their community. In the twentieth century Bengal, betrayal was done under the name of Marxist science of revolution. For certain social-historical reasons, surrender of sovereignty to foreign interests existed as a very strong current in Bengal for a long time, longer than we usually care to think. The celebration of the West by the Bengali bhadraloks (representing the rational, pro-Enlightenment, pro-Europe currents among the radically westernized intellectual sections of the Bengalis) exists within an established tradition of collaboration. But since Bengal renaissance, we find an expression of national pride among the intellectuals (a movement of history that cannot be simply explained away by any Marxist dialectics of collaboration/resistance and that can only be understood in terms of nationalist, cultural revivalist agenda coming from within a community). The communist party's actions mark a relapse to an older phase of collaboration to a large extent.

It should be noted that the communists collaborated with the British much before the official Soviet dictum to this direction came (after the Nazi Soviet war broke out), that is, communists' collaboration with the British precedes the People's War phase. As the nationalist revolutionaries pointed out time and again in their writings, a full-fledged conversion drive was carried out within British prisons by the Communist Party, with an active aid from the British authorities during 1930s. Immediately coming to mind in this regard is the notorious Lt. Governor of Bengal (between 1932 and 1937), John Anderson (later First Viscount Waverley and Chancellor of Exchequer), who

was previously credited with brutalizing and terrorizing the independence movement in Ireland through his disreputable gang of oppressors named Black and Tan (according to Wikipedia, Black and Tan was a body of armed militia “composed largely of British World War I veterans, employed by the Royal Irish Constabulary as Temporary Constables from 1920 to 1921 to suppress revolution in Ireland. Although it was established to target the Irish Republican Army, it became notorious through its numerous attacks on the Irish civilian population”), in his capacity as the last Undersecretary for Ireland between 1920 and 1922, before the establishment of the Irish free state. In Bengal, Anderson was shot at by the revolutionaries (belonging to Bengal Volunteers) in 1934, in Darjeeling. After two years, the same Anderson sends two huge wooden boxes full of Marxist literature as a gift to the prisoners at Andaman, as Amalendu Ghosh notes (*Biplobider* 212).

Dr Parimal Ray, a prisoner from Deoli detention camp (Detention camps were meant to house non-convicted National Revolutionaries whom the government needed to keep in confinement; this particular camp at Deoli, however, became a hotbed of Communistic activities, thanks to the imperial policy) recalls that in 1934, an IB officer asked him, in a routine interrogation inside the detention camp, whether he read “communistic literature”. Ray did read them. In fact he started attending a class of Marxism inside the camp that was conducted by one co-detainee Comrade Kali Sen. But Ray did not want to further antagonize the IB officer by any more evidences of revolutionary activity, so he denied that he ever read them. What happened next surprised Parimal. The IB officer instantly replied, “Oh, that is why your ideas remain so narrow and parochial. You must read communist literature”. This is recorded in Ray's autobiographical book *Down Memory Lane*, from which Amalendu Ghosh quotes in his book (*Biplobider* 212-13). Elsewhere, Ghosh, himself a revolutionary nationalist (he was a member of Bengal Volunteers), speaks of the communist proselytes as those “[w]ho had abandoned the revolver for Marxism” (*Bharote Communism* 106). The irony of history was that while our communist forefathers were

being proud of being committed, scientific revolutionary vanguards in the worldwide struggle for liberation of the toiling masses, they were actually participating in the events of Soviet imperialism and British imperialism. Dange and Ahmed both gave away their comrades and confessed to British, but Dange's case was highlighted and it became the public reason for the break up of CPI in 1964, while Muzaffar's confession was never allowed to occupy centrestage (Ghosh: 1987: 212).

Communists' collaboration with the imperial forces of Britain and Russia is a huge subject of study, and the present article's scope does not allow us to cast more than a cursory glance in that direction. It is widely known that according to Mitrokhin Archives (volume 2), Promode Dasgupta, the leader of CPI (later CPIM) was an IB spy, a mole of the British planted into the Communist Party in its days of closeness with the British. Sunanda Sanyal and Soumya Basu's book, *The Sickle and the Crescent: Communists, Muslim League and India's Partition*, a book that chronicles the deep interrelationship between Communist Party and the Islamists, to a large extent which was a result of Soviet instructions (though balkanization of India was preferred by the British), makes a reference to the Soli Batlivala controversy that directly brought to the fore the dubious role played by the Communist Party:

Soli and his wife, Nargis Batlivala, were confirmed Communists. Disillusion with the policies followed by the Party during the War, both resigned from the CPI. Later, Soli went hammers and tongs against the Party. "I challenge Joshi", thundered Soli, "to contradict me when I say that he detained certain party members without the knowledge of the Central Committee or the rank and file of the party to be in touch with the army intelligence department and supply the CID chief with such information as they would require against nationalist workers, who were connected with the '42 Movement or against persons who had come to India on behalf of the Azad Hind Government (sic) of Netaji... As regards the 1942

Congress Workers who carried on the struggle secretly, all party units submitted lists of such workers to the police” (Batlivala, Soli, *Facts vs Forgery*, p9). (Sanyal and Basu 53)

Communist Party of India and the Kirti Kisan Party of Punjab both betrayed Subhash Bose in the aftermath of Germany's attack on Russia, under instructions from Russia. They divulged the names of Subhash loyalists in Bengal to the British, and as a result, most of the Bengal Volunteers leaders were immediately arrested and tortured in police custody for helping Subhash to escape. The role of the communists during this period was chronicled by Batlivala in some details. Eminent historian R C Majumdar is quoted in this connection by Amalendu Ghosh in his book *Bharote Communism*:

Batlivala added that Joshi had, as General Secretary of the Party written a letter in which he offered 'unconditional help' to then then Govt. of India and the Army G.H.Q. To fight the 1942 underground work and the Azad Hind Fauz (I.N.A.) of Subhash Chandra Bose, even to the point of getting them arrested. These men were characterized by Joshi in his letter as traitors and 'Fifth Columnists'. Joshi's letter also revealed that C.P.I. was receiving financial aid from the Govt., had secret pact with Muslim League and was undermining Congress activities in various ways. (166)

The question of foreign collaboration has been a standard charge against the communists and it became a very sensitive issue for them. Amalendu Ghosh quotes Meenu Masani in this regard: “The Indian Communists have always feigned righteous indignation at any mention of this fact [foreign aid]” (*Bharote Communism* 78).

Communist narratives were made in a manner so that nationalism, Indian identity and cultural sovereignty could be suppressed, struggle for national liberation could be diverted into class

struggle, while a class conception of society (not that such a conception is invalid) would be made to engulf the question of nation and community apropos the struggle against British imperialism. Omissions, absences and dark spots galore in the communist narratives as they are supposed not to see and not to show certain things. An example par excellence is *Nobanno*, a play that talked about the oppression of rich Bengalis on the poor ones, thus skilfully concealing the issue of national freedom. Amalendu Ghosh points out,

The play *Nobanno* authored by Bijan Bhattacharya and acted by IPTA in 1944 created a good response. Their acting skills were congratulated for being committedly realistic. In this play, the actors were Bijan Bhattacharya, Shambhu Mitra, Tripti Mitra, Sudhi Pradhan, Charu Prakash Ghosh et al. But *Nobanno* and the other plays which IPTA later staged had only the themes of exploitation and class struggle. They presented only the country landlords, profiteers and black-marketeers as the class enemies, hiding the oppressive foreign rules from their vision. The struggle of the exploited mass was only against those indigenous class enemies, not against the British. (*Bharote Communism* 158)

People's War was at its peak. One sample communist song in Bengali from those days is quoted by Ghosh:

Comrade take up the weapon, take up the weapon

No longer alone in the freedom struggle today

Revolutionary Soviet, invincible China

With us are the British, and fearless Yankees. (*Bharote Communism* 156)

It was still not Mao's China, as Ghosh reminds us, but it was Chiang Kai Shek's Kuomintang. Clearly the communists referred to the international alliance in WWII. P C Joshi reportedly wanted to send troupes of song and dance and theatre to the border so that the soldiers fighting against Netaji's INA could be motivated into believing that while fighting for British occupation, they were really fighting out a patriotic war (Ghosh: 1987: 156). It becomes evident that communists learned what worked and what did not at a very heavy cost, only after repeated failures to sell their collaboration with British imperialism to the masses as revolutionary activities. Here is a realization that dawned on Utpal Dutt, as he records it in his treatise on revolutionary theatre (titled *Jopen-da Jopen Ja* – that is, *What Jopen-da Utters*) written in a dialogue form:

I said – Did you see? All immature brats, at most newly entered colleges. Already they have hot the road with bombs. They have to be made into heroes in theatre? They are extremists, making hindrances in revolution. .. All extremist agent provocateurs.

Jopen-da said in lazy voice – that is a political analysis. Theatre or poetry does not walk that way.

– Why ?

– When politicians seat and estimate, they find so many faults in the acts of Khudiram, Bhagat Singh and Surjo Sen which cannot be enumerated. But the people compose songs right on them, and those songs spread to different corners of the country. Those who open up the windows of the immovable palace of politics to look outside, however hard we make them guilty for their sins, the people say to them, “we give you the right to know the truth by mistake.” How everyone of you buried Subhash beneath criticisms, but the moment he took the rifle, instantly he made his lifelong dwelling in the hearts of the people. In the eyes of the people the armed revolutionaries alone are felicitated. (*Godyo Shongroho* 136)

I remember having come across a couplet of Hindi poetry (from *Saket*, written by Mythili Sharan Gupta) once. It goes like this: “Ram tumhara vrita swayam hi kavya hai,/Koi kavi ban jaye, saha sambhavya hai” (bridge-india.blogspot.com). The lines mean, “Ram your history/story itself is poetry/Anyone (who narrates your life) will become a poet, that is an easy possibility.” The message encoded in this couplet, that certain lives are stories of an epic scale in themselves (irrespective of who narrates the story), partly explains why Shailesh Dey's mammoth, epic length docu-fiction *Ami Subhash Bolchi* (first published serially in *Ultorath* – a popular film and entertainment magazine of yesteryears – over 36 issues) became a cult classic despite several authorial weaknesses. For example, in this novel, at one instance Surjo Sen walks like a valiant knight in armour to the gallows, the next instance he is brought to the gallows senseless because of the terrible torture of British police. Dinesh (of Benoy Badal Dinesh trio) utters *karenge ya marenge*, at the time of storming the Writers' Building, which is anachronistic. At one point Subhash is credited with causing the first switchover of loyalty among the Indian soldiers, and a little after that, Dey's novel gives detailed descriptions about Rashbehari's partially successful design of establishing networks among the soldiers. Use of clichéd expressions, which is best avoided by any writer, runs riot in Dey's book. Every other line is invested with extremely hackneyed, melodramatic repetitions of slogans, jargons, wisecracks, idioms and shlokas. For example, Subhash's anxiety at the news of his father's illness is promptly explained with a Sankrit shloka, “*pita swarga, pita dharma...*”. It is the manifestation of an artistic profanity that might resemble the characteristics of a Jatra, that is always anxious to reach out to a mass who must be told every thing in a loud manner and things must be put in black and white.

Ami Subhash Bolchi records the entire historical sequence of Bengali revolutionary nationalism in the format of novel. This book is not just about Subhash, and the narrative goes back and forth in time to speak about the noted martyrs of Bengal. Subhash can indeed be a writer's

choice to trace the trajectory of the militant nationalism of Bengal, as Subhash's connections with the militant, revolutionary nationalists are well established. Parthasarathi Basu (in the compendium *Ognijug* edited by Shailesh Dey) speaks of British Intelligence sources that establish connections between Subhash and the Bengal “terrorists”. He quotes from the 'secret archive of police': “In 1924 the terrorist members of the Swarajya Party supported the candidature of Mr Subhas Chandra Bose as Chief Executive Officer of the Corporation and it is noteworthy that after his appointment to that post many jobs in the Corporation were given to terrorists.” Further, “[a]t this time there was an agreement between Subhas and the terrorists that the latter should run the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee under his guidance.” Moreover, “[e]arly in 1925 a prominent member of the Congress admitted during an interview with a high Government official that he knew personally of the existence in Bengal of a terrorist movement the members of which, were hand in glove with the Swarajist” (2: 237-38). Such revolutionary networks foreshadow the INA chapter of Subhash's life.

INA reminds us of Rashbehari Bose. The National Revolutionary movement was renowned for its international dimensions. Peter Heehs records the foreign influences on the Bengali revolutionaries since the days of Okakura and Nivedita with some details (68-95). Hemchandra Das Kanungo's networking and training with the anarchists of Europe is a glaring example. The Irish connection was always very distinct for the revolutionaries. When Jatin Das died after 63 days of hunger strike (a death that was refused the status of martyrdom by Gandhiji, who called it a “diabolical suicide”), condolence message was sent from Ireland, from the family of Terence McSwiney, the Irish martyr who gave up his life in a similar hunger strike. As Shailesh Dey records in *Ami Subhash Bolchi*, it read: “Family of Terence McSwiney have heard with grief and pride of the death of Jatin Das. Freedom will come” (1: 277). The aforementioned book records that Subhash was felicitated in 1936 by De Valera's government in Dublin (1: 298), and that he (Subhash) maintained a close contact with the German consul in Kolkata (2: 28). Bagha Jatin's

Indo-German conspiracy was a milestone event of Ognijug. Michael Silvestri in his book chronicles in details the Irish connection of the Bengali revolutionaries and quotes Amitav Ghosh: “The Indians were comparatively novices in the arts of sedition: it was the Irish who were their mentors and allies” (Silvestri 10). Silvestri himself suggests that Masterda Surjo Sen's Chittagong armoury raid was modeled on the Easter rising of Ireland (11). Unfortunately, what used to be a genuine international co-operation and exchange of ideas for the goal of independence changed into a blind allegiance to Russia (later China) as the revolutionary movement was hijacked by the communists.

However, it should not escape our notice that at this time, communists were emerging as the monopoly holder of revolutionary politics. Proselytizing other revolutionaries was a communist strategy not just in India. So Soviet diplomacy succeeded because it was a both way process, On one hand the Russians needed all foreign networks it could muster. On the other hand, Nationalist Revolutionaries too needed the support of foreign countries and Soviet was an inevitable choice. Even Subhash Bose acknowledged the favorable image of Soviet in the popular imagination in India and it is significant that the Azad Hind Govt, even when the situation became quite critical, refused to declare war against Soviet. In spite of all German persuasions, Subhash declared war against UK and USA only.

Koenraad Elst, a contemporary non-fictional writer both sympathetic and critical towards the cultural nationalism of India offers a very nuanced summary of the communistic conversions, and I am tempted to quote him in details:

...one important phenomenon, which was concentrated mostly in pre-Independence Bengal, viz. the shift of a large majority of revolutionaries -- particularly from the *Anushilan Samiti*

circuit -- from Nationalism to the Communist movement. An auxiliary reason for this development was British aid: revolutionary prisoners were given Marxist literature, because the British knew that the Communists opposed terrorist violence and aimed for a mass uprising in the long term, thus leaving British (and other oppressors') lives out of harm's way until the time of the Revolution, which moreover might never materialize. Hindu nationalists who easily resort to cheap blame-the-British scenarios ("Jinnah was brainwashed by the British into trading in nationalism for separatism"), tend to overplay the importance of this; the British could only reinforce a tendency already in operation. After the success of the Bolshevik revolution in 1917-20, it was but natural that activists of a revolutionary temperament worldwide would feel attracted to Marxism. At least, they did so wherever an alternative was lacking. In Italy, many joined the Fascist movement and grabbed power in 1923 on a very similar wave of revolutionary enthusiasm.

Did India have an alternative? The freedom movement was captured by M.K. Gandhi in 1920 and left no room for revolutionaries, whom Gandhi emphatically disowned and condemned. The fledgling RSS, founded by an *Anushilan Samiti* disappointment, Dr. K.B. Hedgewar, renounced politics and preferred work in the sphere of culture, social self-organization and "character building". Hedgewar rejected offers to integrate his volunteer corps with the Hindu Mahasabha in political work for national independence and for the safeguarding of Hindu interests. So, it is likely that many revolutionaries, initially motivated only by love of India and freedom, turned to Marxism not because of this ideology's intrinsic strengths, but for lack of a native ideological alternative. (koenraadelst.blogspot.com)

We need to understand that Indian communism was not simply the proverbial serpent entering Behula's nuptial room. It was a complex historical process, the outlines of which I have tried to draw in this article, I have attempted a rediscovery of *the truths of the events* of our nationalist

movement by re-reading the histories/stories/narratives/accounts/testimonies of the militant nationalists. There are certain retrospective narrative designs which left-liberal writers have tried to impose on the trajectory of our history, and I have tried to deconstruct them. And where I end, I believe, will be the take-off point where a whole new critical interest in Ognijug will be born, as we shall critically revisit this period again and again and examine its glories and its mistakes alike. As a political nationalist, I have attempted to challenge the Hobsbawm diktat and made a humble endeavor to re-establish academic nationalism at a time when India is facing huge neo-liberal and neo-colonial onslaughts which the worn out cliches of the reigning left/liberal pundits have been singularly incapable to resist.

It might baffle the vulgar materialists of both capitalist and communistic varieties that the people living in Ognijug gave up freely their lives in order to gain freedom, that is an immaterial, abstract, transcendent concept that defies all immediate material compulsions. An answer to that bafflement is not possible without taking recourse to the age old human instincts and values of ethics and morality (none of which can be adequately economical). It is here we meet another defeat of classical Marxist doctrines. It is well known that Subhash and the Bengal revolutionaries drew their tremendous moral courage from the teachings of Bankim and Vivekananda, from *Gita* and *Upanishad*. The idea of sacrifice is essentially spiritual, it dwells in the domain of ideas and instincts which have the capability to annihilate economic compulsions. Communal bonding, identity and fellow feelings can run contrary to all immediate class concerns. Partially, psychoanalysis addresses these issues. But one has to come to the questions of human identity, culture, community and dharma to understand these *events* Bengal witnessed in Ognijug.

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Re-living the New Theatres Nostalgia: Reading the Ideation of the Bengali

'Bhadralok' & the Nationalist-Civility Subtext with New Eyes

Kaustav Kundu



Over the course of the last two decades, scholars in the social sciences and humanities have dramatically refigured the ways in which we understand the rise of nationalism. One of those ways has been the attempt to re-locate the nationalist framework within the parameters of Indian cinema in its nascent stages. From this point-of-view, New Theatres, created in 1930 by Birendra Nath Sircar, had an important role in the creation of the Indian film industry. Functioning from Calcutta, it was not just a well-equipped studio; it was a system, a way of life for the people working with it – a pervasive, self-supporting, effectively-managed, supremely equipped, network of men and women and machines which would sell the celluloid dream like it had never been sold before in the country. For the Bengali '*bhadralok*', however, the romantic discourse surrounding New Theatres, remains one of the enduring nostalgias. In fact, the New Theatres ethos, glorified for its efficiency, commercial viability and machine-like coordination, is also celebrated as 'a way of life'. Herein the iconicity of New Theatres is informed by certain elements basic to *bhadralok* life. Chief among these is '*bhadrota*' which may be interpreted as cultured gentility. Kanan Debi, a leading star of the 1930s and 1940s, who worked at New Theatres between 1936 and 1942, commented, in her tribute to B. N. Sircar, founder-proprietor of New Theatres, "I was under contract with Radha films when I received the offer to play the role of Parvati in *Devdas*. I could not accept in spite of my enthusiasm for the offer. My regret was that I could not work with Mr. Sircar. He had by then earned a very high reputation in the film industry as a noble, erudite and respectable filmmaker."² In a similar

vein, actress Umashashi Debi, who made a name for herself at New Theatres, reminisced in later life:

When I was at New Theatres, we used to compare ourselves with a happy family ... What a wonderful feeling of goodwill and happiness permeated the studio. We would enter the studio in the early hours of the morning and would not leave till our work was complete. Since discipline and adherence to principles regulated our lives, projects were always completed in time. What intimate bonds held us together.³

These constructions of respectability and extended family came together in the public face of New Theatres. Herein, the imagination centering on New Theatres stands out as unique when placed against, for instance, the "electrified utopias" of America, studied by David Nye,⁴ where, electricity, as a symbol of technological progress, became a dominant icon in the first three decades of the 20th century.

That the legendary status of New Theatres was entrenched by the 1950s is evident from the following extract from an essay in the souvenir brought out on the occasion of the silver jubilee of the Indian talkie in 1956:

It was after that memorable film *Chandidas* was made when a Bengali pioneer, Shri B. N. Sircar, showed me one day around his New Theatres studio which has served for full 25 years not only Bengal but the whole of India as a veritable cradle of all-India talents on a national cultural basis. The studio invested a fortune not in rewarding or capitalising on 'artistes' but in building up new traditions for the

technique of artist acting, direction, photography, sound recording, etc. It is because of these that this pioneer Bengal studio has become a veritable institution and a promoter of talents that have largely influenced the whole course of Indian films. Bombay and Madras studios may have advanced further in some respects but the Bengal studio experts did the pioneering job on the technical side.⁵

This rhetoric has survived till date, not only in reminiscences of an older generation, but in much of contemporary writing on the subject, and in popular discourse in the tele-visual media.⁶ According to such accounts, New Theatres was the perfect organization till besieged by war (second world war), communal turmoil and finally the partition.⁷ It is my understanding that this unproblematic narrative derives partly from a nationalist-cum-civility subtext. In this essay, I probe the iconicity of New Theatres, exploring the hypothesis that its genesis, which I locate in the 1930s, was rooted in aspects of contemporary life that went much beyond the realm of cinema. The objective is to look deeper, and understand cinema as an institution rooted in the politics, economy and nationalism of early 20th century Bengal. The final section of the essay aims to provide a brief insight into the lasting iconicity of New Theatres in contemporary India, where the concern has lingered as a shadow of its former self. However, before embarking on an understanding of the icon, I would like to chart the history of the institution, from foundation to dissolution, and subsequent revival.

B. N. Sircar, founder-proprietor of New Theatres, sustained Bengal's leading film producing concern for 35 years, 1931-55. Sircar holds a record of film production in India, having produced 177 films under the New Theatres banner.⁸ B. N. Sircar, who belonged to one of the illustrious families of contemporary Calcutta, entered the film industry in 1930 when he formed International Film Craft in partnership with friend Amar Mallick and P. N. Ray, who had been associated with the making of Himanshu Rai's⁹ *A Throw of Dice* (1929). The concern folded up after making two silent

films *Chorkanta* and *Chashar Meye*. Following this, Sircar formed New Theatres in February 1931, a family concern with himself as managing director. In the same year, he opened New Theatres Studio in Tollygunge, in south Calcutta. Like other studios in contemporary Calcutta, namely, Bharat Laxmi Pictures, Devdutta Films, East India Film Co, Kali Films and Radha Film Co, New Theatres contracted artistes as salaried employees, generally on the basis of monthly payment. The company had three fully equipped units, and boasted of the best technicians and music hands. A stickler for quality, Sircar attracted directors such as P. C. Barua, Premankor Atharathi, Debaki Bose, Dhiren Ganguly, Bimal Roy and Phani Majumdar under his wings. Actors such as K. L. Saigal, Pahadi Sanyal, Amar Mallick, Kanan Devi, Chandrabati Devi, Lila Desai and Prithviraj Kapoor were on his payroll. Technicians like Mukul Bose (Sound Recordist-Director), Yusuf Moolji (Cameraman), Nitin Bose (Cameraman-Director) and Subodh Mitra (Editor) were well aware of the various technical innovations being introduced in Hollywood and Europe and were able to adapt many of these within the limitations of the New Theatres Studio lot. Music composers and singers such as R. C. Boral, Timir Baran and Pankaj Mallick too were associated with New Theatres productions.

New Theatres' first success was *Chandidas* (1932), based on the life of the Vaishnava¹⁰ saint of the same name. It was remade as *Puran Bhakat* (1932) in Hindustani for the North Indian market, setting a trend of bilingual and multilingual features, and finally turning the tide for B. N. Sircar who had been struggling to find a distributor in Bombay, by then the established nerve-centre of the Indian cinema industry.

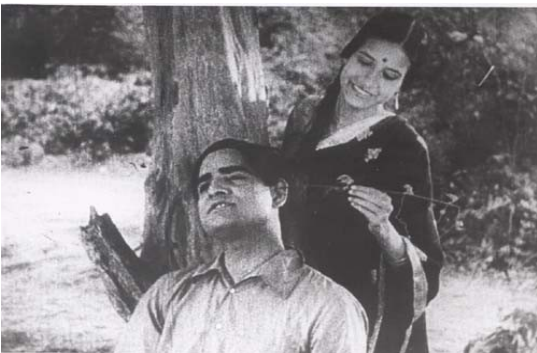
By 1934, New Theatres was a growing presence in parts of north, north-west and south India, as evident from the following report:



Mr. B. N. Sircar with Mr. I. A. Haffesji of New Theatres Ltd left Calcutta on the 7th instant for an all-India inspection tour for better distribution of N T films and rearrangement of existing areas and circuits. The area covered in this tour is extensive and we were given to understand that very important arrangements have been made with local distributors regarding better and more methodical publicity and distribution of New Theatres pictures. It was found out in this tour that distributors of Madras, Madura, Tricinopoly, Erode, Bangalore, Poona, Bombay, Cawnpore, Lucknow, Kangra Valley and Lahore are very very willing to take N T Films for their respective circuits. It is expected that this willingness on the part of provincial distributors will result in big business - which means big money for both the parties. *Puran Bhakat* and *Yehoodi-ki-Larki* have brought new ideas and new colours in the Indian filmdom.¹¹

New Theatres' Bengali films also had a market in non-Bengali speaking areas, primarily on account their music, which contemporaries have cited as one of the principal strengths of New Theatres' films. Aurobindo Mukhopadhyay reminisces:

In my student days, we lived in Manihari village in the Katihar district of Bihar. Like boys and girls now sing Hindi film songs, Bihari boys and girls then sang the songs of *Chandidas*. After the evening's play, Bihari boys went home singing the song 'Phire Chal Apan Ghare'. Many ustads from Bhagalpur would invariably sing the songs 'Chunyeona bandhu' and 'Shatek Baras Pare' at the end of each function. If they did not the Bihari audience would send up requests for these.¹²



Dena Paona (1932), based on the popular novel by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, was the first film to be released under the banner of New Theatres. The film, a 'talkie', directed by Premankor Atharathi and starred Amar Mallick, Durgadas Bandopadhyaya, Nivanani Devi and Haimabati Devi was a huge hit and laid the foundations of the glorious era that followed. The company became known for its excellent screen adaptations of works of litterateurs like Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore and noted writers such as Premendra Mitra, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Shailajaranjan Mukhopadhyay and Buddhadev Bose worked as story-script-dialogue writers and lyricists in various New Theatres' films. New Theatres' production of Sarat Chandra's novel *Devdas* (1935) is considered one of the landmarks of Indian cinema. Among the works of Tagore to be adapted for the screen were *Chokker Bali* (1934) and *Sesher Kabita* (1937).

The period 1935–1945 were the heydays of New Theatres and it produced a string of films which are now deemed as classics for their innovative content and technical excellence. *Dhoop*



Chhaon/Bhagyachakra (1935) was the experiment to use playback. *Mukti* (1937), the P. C. Barua masterpiece, was one of the first Indian sound films to be shot extensively on outdoor locations. The film, which had a young Bimal Roy as the cameraman, is also remarkable for its use of long tracking-shots, a rarity, given the substantial weight of the movie equipments of the period. *Mukti* also had the distinction of being the first film to use a Tagore composition in its soundtrack – the poet allowed Pankaj Mallick to set his poem “Diner Sheshe Ghumer Deshe” into music and the result was a song that continues to haunt generations.

A bulk of the Bengali films produced by New Theatres had Hindi or Urdu versions and so the company’s films had a pan-Indian audience. *Street Singer* (1938), a musical, directed by Phani Majumdar, starring K. L. Saigal, Kanan Devi and Prithviraj Kapoor was the Hindi version of the Bengali hit *Saathi*. *Dushman* (1938), *Sapera* (1939) and the Hindi version of the Bengali film *Udayer Pathe* (1944), *Humrahi* (1945) - both directed by Bimal Roy - were some other important bi-lingual films produced by New Theatres. *Udayer Pathe/Humrahi* is important in the

history of Indian cinema as it was one of the first films to incorporate a sense of 'realism' in its content and aesthetics.

New Theatres also produced a number of documentaries and newsreels. Among these were the coverage of the *AICC Kolkata Session* (1939) and *Premier's Appeal* (1939). *Earthquake Havoc in Bihar* (1934) and *After Earthquake* (1935) - two films directed by Debaki Bose are finest examples of documentary films made in the pre-independence period. The pioneering spirit of B. N. Sircar inspired him to produce two animated films – *P Bros* and *On a Moonlight* in 1934. These two one-reelers are among the earliest animation films in the history of Indian cinema. *Michke Potash* (1950) directed by Bhaktaram Mitra, was another major animation film produced by New Theatres.

The largest market for New Theatres' films was, however, concentrated in the east. At the beginning of 1940, New Theatres was a formidable presence in eastern and north eastern India, as revealed by a New Year's announcement of New Theatres' offerings for the coming week in *Amrita Bazar Patrika* titled 'New Theatres Extends Through Their Distributors'.¹³ Apart from Calcutta, New Theatres' films were showing in various mofussil towns and suburbs of Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Assam and other regions of the north-east. In East Bengal, New Theatres' films were showing in Dacca, Mymensingh, Barishal, Kusthia, Tangail, Chittagong; in West Bengal in Sreerampore, Chinsura, Krishnanagar, Nabadwip, Sreepur, Sonarpur, Malda, Barrackpore, Ghatsila, Bankura, Uluberia, Andul, Kidderpore, Behala; in Bihar in Patna, Gaya, Muzaffarpur, Dhanbad, Katihar; Cuttack in Orissa; Dibrugarh, Nowgong, Imphal and Burma in the north-east. 1940 was, on the whole, a good year for New Theatres and saw the release of some notable films, Phani Majumdar's *Dactar*, Pramathesh Barua's *Zindagi*, and Devaki Bose's *Nartaki*. However, at a time when New Theatres was at its peak, Pramathesh Barua, one of its biggest stars, left the fold, never to return. Barua's departure heralded the beginning of the end.

With the onset of Second World War, the government of India imposed a quota on the supply of raw film. During the initial months, producers were allotted only five reels a week, inflicting heavy losses on the studios, which had to maintain large establishments and salaried staff. At this time, B. N. Sircar's monthly expenditure on staff salaries alone amounted to about 40,000-45,000 rupees, a large sum by contemporary standards.¹⁴ Later, however, the government appointed an ad hoc committee that allotted quotas to producers on the basis of an average of films made till date. B. N. Sircar was granted a permit for the production of six films annually.¹⁵

Sircar mentions the 'excess profit'¹⁶ tax as a subsequent setback, but the devastating blow came in the form of the communal riots of 1946 and the partition of the country in 1947. All work remained suspended during the period of communal turmoil between August 1946 and August 1947, and studio-owners sustained huge losses. Finally, with the partition of the country, the East Bengal (which became East Pakistan and subsequently Bangladesh) market for Bengali films was practically destroyed. Following partition all commercial exchange between east and West Bengal came under international trade laws, which complicated the situation, making producers and distributors wary of sending out films to east Bengal. In the 1956 Silver Jubilee Souvenir of the Indian Talkie, the president of the Bengal Motion Picture Association in Calcutta, commented, "Even after their release, the pictures cannot be properly exploited because of the absence of adequate scope for their maximum exploitation. The East Bengali market is now lost to Bengali films as a consequence of the Partition."¹⁷ It may be mentioned here that the Bengali film industry was concentrated in West Bengal, in Calcutta. East Bengal had no organised film industry before 1947, the only known efforts at filmmaking in the colonial period being experimental ventures of members of the family of the Nawab of Dhaka.¹⁸

The tumultuous events of 1946-47 seriously affected the film industry in Calcutta, particularly the bigger studios. By the beginning of the 1950s, the halcyon days of New Theatres were over. In the words of Dilip Kumar Sircar, B. N. Sircar's son, who joined the studio in 1951, "Our people had left for Bombay; finances were in disarray; There were court cases...my father had virtually closed shop".¹⁹ In 1954, New Theatres ran into financial crisis following the liquidation of the Calcutta National Bank, creditor to New Theatres. In such a situation of crisis, the rights for the management of the New Theatres studios were handed over to Aurora Film Company in June 1954, on the basis of an arrangement that would allow the home concern to use the studio floors for its own productions 10 days every month. For the rest of the time, the studios were to be hired out by Aurora. Aurora managed the studios till December 1954. From January 1955, management passed into the hands of industrialist Deepchand Kankaria's Delux Films.²⁰ In August 1956, a Receiver was appointed by the Calcutta High Court to liquidate the dues of the Calcutta National Bank by a sale of the assets of New Theatres. In January 1956, New Theatres was closed down. However, Dilip Sircar, who, by this time, was working full-time at New Theatres, arrived at an agreement with the Receiver and the New Theatres studios were re-opened in December 1957.²¹ However, on account of legal complexities, during this period Dilip Sircar produced films under the name of Sircar Productions, a banner he launched in 1955. In his words, "Those were the crucial years, 1957 to 1961. It was a struggle just to keep the place alive".²² New Theatres scraped through the 1950s by making a few films and by hiring out their studios. In 1961, Dilip Sircar amalgamated with India Film Laboratories, which, at the time, had on its board some of the biggest names of Indian/Bengali cinema - actress Kanan Devi, who had risen to prominence during her stint at New Theatres, Bengali superstar Uttam Kumar and director Ajoy Kar.²³

New Theatres went into liquidation in March 1962. India Film Laboratories managed the NT studios through the 1960s to the present-day. Through the 1960s to the 1980s, Dilip Sircar made

films under various banners, namely, Sircar Productions, Sircar Productions Pvt. Ltd and New Theatres Exhibitors Pvt. Ltd. It was following his efforts, since the mid-1980s, that New Theatres Limited was revived on August 8, 1991, when the liquidation was revoked by an order of the Calcutta High Court. New Theatres has since existed as a skeleton concern, their only production in the last few years being a five-episode commissioned serial for the National Network of Doordarshan titled 'The Story of New Theatres'.²⁴

Significantly, in Bengal in the 1920s, cinema was being looked upon as a realm of nationalist assertion, as evident from the following extract from a contemporary film journal which berated the makers of a recently released film on the ground that they had not bothered to append a Bengali nomenclature:

British Dominion Films Ltd's new feature, *Flames of Flesh*, was shown in Pearl Cinema. They haven't given the film a Bengali name. A film produced by a Bengali company should have been given a Bengali name. People have called the film 'Kaamanar Agun', 'Lalashabanhi', or anything that suited them, but there was no sign of any such name on the screen. Well, it is only natural, that British Dominion will be loyal to the British dominion.²⁵

It is possible to situate New Theatres in this tradition. Nationalist sentiments were openly aired in *Chitra*, the New Theatres house magazine, lending credence to the hypothesis that apart from the obvious aspects of profit or the glamour of the medium, cinema was also alluring as space for self-assertion, and a covert challenge of the west, and was seen as such by at least a section of the bhadralok. In the May-October 1936 issue *Chitra* carried an essay exhorting Indian producers to develop technical expertise to avoid dependence on imported technology from the west. It was

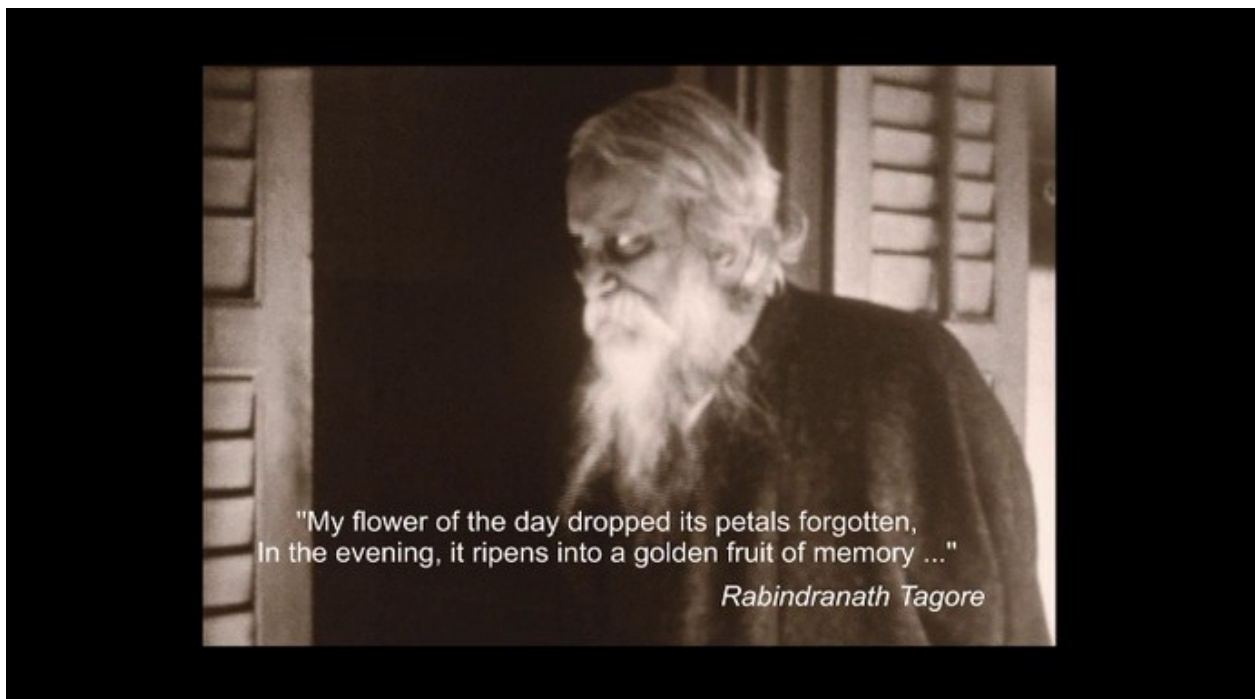
declared that Indian cinema had started out as an imitation of western techniques and methods of production, and continued as such even though contemporary technicians had proved themselves as adept as their western counterparts. The writer lamented that no encouragement/inducement had been offered to technicians to carry out independent research which could make the Indian cinema industry "really self-supporting, healthy and progressive".²⁶ Declaring that Indians would be "mere imitators and not creators" as long as they continued to work without co-ordinated effort, it was suggested that "our producers should...get together and have some kind of collaborate Research Institute...For, until and unless we are prepared to face facts and organize our resources so as to make our technical body a creative force, there can never be any hope of this industry being acclaimed as anything but one built and dependent upon imitation of others."²⁷ The writer concluded with the following plea for self- sufficiency, even if industry folk did not muster mutual trust to collaborate as suggested above:

Our suggestion for such cooperation will perhaps be considered too idealistic, in as much as our producers are too suspicious of one another ever to pool their own resources even for their own benefit. In which event we would suggest that every producer should at least for his own benefit make it a point to include in his production expenses, on every picture that he makes, a certain sum of money which will be set apart expressly for research work...which may make our industry independent of outside assistance in the future and also impart to it a reputation which will be respected throughout the world.²⁸

This essay is reminiscent of the trend of 'Atmasakti' or self-sufficiency propagated by Rabindranath Tagore during the Swadeshi Movement in Bengal.²⁹ New Theatres' 1938 hit *Deshar Mati* (The Motherland) had a storyline that drew directly on the Tagorean ethic of self-sufficiency and self-

help, in large scale agriculture,³⁰ and was publicized as follows:

'The Motherland' - Never to my knowledge has a bolder or more sincere effort been made in the history of the Indian screen to embody the ideals of *constructive and co-operative living, sane nationalism* (emphasis mine) and eloquent appeal to go back to the land of our forefathers as is being made by Nitin Bose in his latest venture, which he has titled 'The Motherland' - aptly enough, the Bengali title literally translated means 'our national soil'.³¹



In fact, New Theatres' Tagore connection is a much told story in histories of Indian/Bengali cinema. Towards the end of 1931 Tagore had arrived in Calcutta with a Visva-Bharati drama troupe to put up a stage production of his musical opera *Natir Puja*. Upon Birendranath's request for a film version Tagore obliged, consenting to the filming of the stage presentation. For five days, a 20-member New Theatres' crew, which included Subodh Mitra, who became a well known director in the 1940s, litterateur Premankur Atorthy and ace technicians Nitin and Mukul Bose, worked with

the Santiniketan team.³² Obviously, the project was expected to be a resounding success, as it had been decided that 50 per cent of the film's proceeds would go into funding Tagore's Sriniketan³³ project, and was vigorously publicized through the distribution of posters and handbills throughout Calcutta.³⁴ The 10,577-foot long cinematic version of *Natir Puja*, released on March 22, 1932, though a commercial failure, must have added significantly to the prestige of New Theatres, since contemporaries clearly identified the project as a Tagore handiwork. The *Bengalee* wrote:

Rabindranath has immortalised in poetry that sublime tragedy which the twilight of an autumn witnessed in a solitary corner of the king's garden at Magadha half a millennium before the birth of Christ. *Natir Puja* for that is the name of the film version of the poem performed by the students of Shantiniketan, started its run at Chitra on the 22nd, Vasanti Purnima day, the date of the birth of Lord Gautama.

As everyone knows, apart from the charm lent to it by the poet, the story has an intense appeal of its own. And considering the fact that the artistes were all amateurs in their teens, it may be said without hesitation that the charm has not suffered and the interest of the play has been maintained throughout. The songs, under the direction of Mr. Dinendra Nath Tagore, have been well sung and are sure to be appreciated by all, especially the swan song of the dancing girl.

But the most striking feature of the film is the interpretative dance of the artiste who played the role of Srimati. To Rabindranath belongs the credit for revival of this ancient Indian art and its inclusion in this film must give an opportunity to many who have not seen it danced by the poet and his pupils during the seasonal festivals he is in the habit of celebrating in Calcutta to see and admire these dances.³⁵

In fact, B. N. Sircar, though attributing the commercial failure of *Natir Puja* to the short shooting schedule,³⁶ nevertheless cited the project as a memorable episode in the history of New Theatres, making obvious the significance attached to this association with Bengal's leading light.³⁷

The prestige/respectability attained by New Theatres through the Tagore connection was buttressed by B. N. Sircar's own reputation of being a gentleman. In 1932, a letter to the editor of a contemporary film journal carrying the heading 'A Very Reasonable Man' contained the following appraisal of B. N. Sircar:

Referring to your comments in the leading article of your issue dated 24th instant regarding unfair treatment meted to the Bombay productions by Local Exhibitors, who are producers also, I presume this refers to New Theatres Ltd.

I am also an agent of one of the leading Bombay producers and I had the same impression in the beginning but on approaching Mr. B. N. Sircar personally I find that I was mistaken and that he is a very reasonable man and always fair and gives justice wherever it is due. To prove this I will quote the following example, which is self explanatory.

My picture *Saubhagya Sundari* is having a run at present in New Cinema and Mr. Sircar has given me better terms than what his own production *Puran Bhagat* enjoyed. To be more explicit *Puran Bhagat* was discontinued for further weeks when a gross taking amounted to a certain figure while *Saubhagya Sundari* will continue to run for further weeks even if the income is a couple of hundred rupees less than that certain figure of *Puran Bhagat*. This proves the justice given by Mr. Sircar to Bombay productions.³⁸

That New Theatres was identified with *bhadralok* Bengal becomes further evident from the following description of B. N. Sircar in the Indian Cinematograph Year Book of 1938, "He is the gentleman of the industry - his personality is at once inspiring and pleasing. Culture is written all over him".³⁹

It would be reasonable to assume that the nationalist-respectability subtext, in place since New Theatres' early days, and glorified in later literature/popular discourse,⁴⁰ was an important element in the coalescing of New Theatres' iconicity. It is my understanding, however, that the most decisive element which made New Theatres an icon was, as mentioned earlier, its success as a commercial concern. This paper intends to locate the birth of iconicity in the triumphs of a *bhadralok* enterprise at a time that may be characterized as one of general dystopia for the *bhadralok*.

The 1930s were a period of great flux in the political economy of Bengal. Bengal, which had been the key player in Indian nationalist politics till the mid-1920s, saw itself being marginalised by the 1930s, with the central Congress leadership displaying a growing apathy towards the *bhadralok* who dominated the Bengal Congress.⁴¹ In his two-volume autobiographical work published at the beginning of the 1930s, the noted scientist, Prafulla Chandra Ray, noted, "The Bengali is now awakening to the fact that his leaders are very old men, that no one is taking their place, and that whether in Delhi or inside the Congress his representatives have little influence. The political centre of gravity is shifting northwards and westwards."⁴² Marginalisation in national politics was accompanied by a minimisation of the *bhadralok*'s regional hegemony, an outcome of what Joya Chatterji has called "the emergence of the *mufassil* in Bengal politics".⁴³ Chatterji shows how the metropolis, which had dominated Bengal politics till the end of the 1920s, increasingly became less significant from the early 1930s, as political fortunes began to be determined by the Muslim vote

concentrated in rural and small town Bengal.⁴⁴ This transformation, an outcome of the Communal Award of 1932 and Government of India Act of 1935 which enlarged Muslim representation in the provincial assemblies at the expense of the Hindu vote, culminated in the accession of the Krishak Praja Party⁴⁵- Muslim League ministry led by Fazlul Haq in 1937.

The new ministry soon set in motion a series of reforms that affected the interests of the Hindu bhadralok. As Joya Chatterji enumerates:

In 1938, the Fazlul Haq ministry changed the rules about police recruitment so that "while enlisting Bengali constables the Superintendent of police must see that not less than 50 per cent of the recruits are Muslims". In the same year, the ministry passed legislation that stipulated that 60 per cent of all government appointments be reserved for Muslims. In 1939, the government instructed local bodies "not to propose for appointment to local bodies persons who were known to be actively opposed to the policy of the ministry", and slapped administrative controls on nominations to the union boards, which accounted for one-third of their total membership.⁴⁶

Rajat Kanta Ray, in his discussion of the end of Congress rule in the Calcutta Corporation,⁴⁷ a bhadralok bastion since 1924, notes that the shift in the balance of forces in the arena of municipal politics was clearly manifested soon after the new ministry came into power, in the new favourable position of the Calcutta Electric Supply Corporation vis-a-vis the Calcutta Corporation. From the beginning of the 1930s, the Congress had been pressing for a take-over of the Electric Supply Corporation arguing that it would reduce the total cost of consumption per year, a proposal repeatedly rejected by the government. The new Muslim ministry, which was backed by European

big business interests, rejected the take-over proposal in the legislature, even amidst scathing criticism from Congressmen. Thereafter, in 1939, the Calcutta Municipal Amendment Act formally put an end to Congress supremacy in the Calcutta Corporation. The next year, the ministry introduced the Secondary Education Bill, which wrested control of higher education in the province away from Calcutta University and vested it in a Secondary Education Board in which Muslims were to be given a greater say. As Chatterji puts it, "Higher education was not only a mainstay of bhadralok power and influence, it was also a symbol of their exclusive identity. In threatening their control over this vital asset, the bill also challenged the very basis of their 'cultural superiority'..."⁴⁸ Like higher education, administrative and political appointments had been bhadralok preserves, and this challenge in a hitherto uncontested public sphere greatly unsettled them.⁴⁹ The blow was all the more severely felt as bhadralok incomes from land had fallen drastically during the Depression, the crisis being compounded by the enactment of anti-zamindar legislation by the Haq ministry.⁵⁰

The 1930s also witnessed a shift of economic power in the region from Bengali entrepreneurs to the Marwaris, a business community of western India who migrated to Bengal in the late 19th and early 20th century. This process may be dated to the First World War and was consolidated in the 1930s. In his autobiography, Prafulla Chandra Ray lamented the economic conquest of Bengal by non-Bengalis, chiefly the Marwaris and Gujratis, and to a lesser degree the Punjabis,⁵¹ noting that businessmen from western India had been able to influence government policy through the capture of such bodies as the Federated Chamber of Commerce.⁵² Commenting on the commercial milieu of late colonial Bengal, Jawaharlal Nehru also observed, "Calcutta has been and continues to be the chief centre of British capital and industry, and the English and the Scotch dominate business there; but they are being caught up by the Marwaris and Gujratis. Even petty trades in Calcutta are most often in non-Bengali hands".⁵³ Though John Broomfield has argued that the relative absence of Bengali capital in Calcutta should be viewed as an indication that

Bengalis were responding to new opportunities in the hinterland,⁵⁴ the fact remains that Bengali entrepreneurship was now a thin presence in the economic/commercial nerve centre of eastern India.

Omkar Goswami has shown that the rise of Marwari enterprise was accompanied by the fall of a small group of Bengali *bhadralok* from earlier positions of affluence.⁵⁵ These firms, which had prospered for a while since the days of the Swadeshi movement,⁵⁶ lost their vitality and petered out from the city's economic landscape by the 1940s.

Broadly speaking, therefore, the Bengali *bhadralok* was undoubtedly at the receiving end of things, though, of course, the extent to which they were affected remains debatable. Given the above mentioned circumstances, however, it is my understanding that closer competition in the established spheres of public life, such as politics and government jobs, led the *bhadralok* to better appreciate opportunities thrown up by newer, relatively unexplored avenues like the cinema. In his autobiography, actor Dhiraj Bhattacharya, who started his career in 1929,⁵⁷ describes the following conversation with his uncle, clerk in a merchant office:

Suddenly, uncle asked, "How much are they giving you each month?" Fanning the flames of envy, I exaggerated somewhat, "One fifty now, it'll become five hundred once *Kalparinay* releases. Eyes wide open uncle gasped, "Five Hundred?" Nonchalantly I replied, O yes, what's great about this. The way cinema is becoming popular by the day, it'll be easy to earn thousand a month in a year's time". Dumbstruck uncle stared out of the window...Still staring out, he said dully, "What are you saying? People with BA, MA degrees consider themselves fortunate if they can earn hundred a month. And you people will earn that much by just colouring

your face and cavorting with those females?" Clearly I had destroyed uncle's peace for some time to come.⁵⁸

The above interaction indicates that cinema was opening up to the imagination of middle class Bengalis. Further, it may be surmised that though having to compete with the Marwaris, who, by the 1930s, were a formidable presence in the film industry,⁵⁹ the limited nature of Muslim involvement in Bengal's cinema industry made it a relatively safe investment for the *bhadralok*, otherwise challenged in all spheres of public life by the Muslim component.⁶⁰ At the same time, the cinema had also become an epitome of technological progress and 'modernity' to educated Bengalis. The *Filmland* Puja Special of 1935 carried an essay by the Maharaja of Santosh, a prominent member of Calcutta's elite circles, that extolled the cinema as representative of a new age, "if the present age indicates anything it indicates motion... The old modes of entertainments suggest static condition and that is why they are going out of existence. Cinema indicates motion. In a whirlpool of action, the total world is epitomised; its total knowledge is codified".⁶¹ Taking cue from the above observations, there is room for the argument that a growing awareness and appreciation of cinema, on the part of the *bhadralok*, produced sentiments of self-worth in the triumphant moments of *bhadralok* enterprise.

In the wake of the success of *Manzil* (1936) the New Theatres mouthpiece declared, "As I predicted, *Manzil* the Hindustani version of *Grihadaha*, has been declared another all-India triumph for New Theatres. With the release of this latest opus of Pramathes Barua, the stock of 'Jumbo' (the Elephant) has risen yet another score of points to a new high - as they say in the Stock Exchange at New York!"⁶² The jubilation in the above declaration is telling. New Theatres' strategy of double versions was bearing fruit at a time when it was increasingly being realized that it was imperative for Bengal's film industry to move beyond Bengal if it was to sustain commercial viability, and

there were calls for more undertakings in the direction of multi-lingual features. An article in the *Filmland* Puja Special of 1935 had made the following case in favour of diversification:

The language is a great drawback. A Bengali Talkie is a commodity which has a demand only in Bengal, Assam and in certain cities of northern India where a considerable number of Bengali immigrants reside...if the Bengali studios go on manufacturing Bengali films only, it will be hardly possible for them to keep themselves going on businesslike lines. Though Kali Films have been one of the pioneers in producing Bengali Talkies, they have produced a few Tamil-Telegu pictures as well as one Hindi-Urdu film *Amina*, in addition to their Bengali productions. Radha Films' *Manmoyee Girls School* has no doubt captured the Bengali public but the studio could not possibly flourish on production of this nature alone.⁶³

According to Pradip Krishen, it was the practice of making films in double version that had projected Bengali filmmakers like Devaki Bose to all-India standing.⁶⁴ Contemporary accounts testify that New Theatres was better organized and financially more stable than most concerns in Bengal, one of the few that could successfully compete with Bombay; one such account cited below clearly celebrates New Theatres as an exception to the rule:

Bombay studios know the marketing of the films all over India much better than the Calcutta studios. Excepting the New Theatres, whose publicity organization is much more perfect than any other studio of India, all other Calcutta studios suffer very seriously from improper publicity organization and the exploitation side of the films is practically at nil compared to the Bombay studios.⁶⁵

By the mid-1930s, New Theatres was being named one of the top studios in the country - "The major producers... number about 20...Amongst these major concerns Ranjit, Prabhat and New Theatres Ltd. are the leaders. The direction of progress depends upon them".⁶⁶ According to Baburao Patel, editor of *Filmindia*, a leading contemporary film magazine, "The best were the movies produced by B. N. Sircar. Santaram's were slightly crude but B. N. Sircar's films were very fine...B. N. Sircar's *Vidyapati*, *Manzil* were great films. He had these great people – P.C. Barua, Debaki Bose, particularly, and Nitin Bose...Bombay Talkies films were quite good, not great. Not on par with the films of New Theatres."⁶⁷ Such assertions assume significance when inserted into the political and economic milieu of late colonial Bengal. As discussed above, Bengal, in the 1930s, was beginning to lose its earlier prominence in national politics, and the *bhadralok's* earlier dominance in the regional politics and economy was being seriously challenged. It is my understanding that New Theatres, a leading concern that was clearly identified as '*bhadralok*', was on its way to acquiring an iconic status by the middle of the 1930s because it expanded and flourished at a time when, generally speaking, the *bhadralok's* fortunes were on the ebb. In fact, by the latter half of the 1930s, New Theatres was clearly anxious to negate all regional connotations. As publicity for the Hindi version of New Theatres' great hit *Mukti*, released in northern India in December 1937, the house magazine wrote:

Those who have been fortunate enough to have seen the Bengali version of *Mukti*, which was released three months ago, will have had their appetites whetted for the release of the Hindi version of this superb creation of Pramathes Barua. It is not necessary to understand the Bengali language to see this great picture. So simple has been the treatment, so delicate the touch on the artistes, so subtle the psychological reflexes, that the picture unfolds itself and you do not need to understand language at all, but you know the poignancy of the story that is unfolded before your eyes.⁶⁸

In a similar vein, a poster in the same issue declared that *Mukti*, which still awaited release at some centers had already "created a New Record at Delhi."⁶⁹ Evidently, the desire was to project a trans-regional/national persona, which, it may be assumed from the above discussion, had become crucial for the bhadralok at a time when they were being challenged/marginalized within the province and in the country at large.

The exaltation of the dead 'elephant'⁷⁰ has been pervasive in contemporary Indian popular media,⁷¹ more specifically in West Bengal. As concluding comments to this article, I would like to offer an insight into the enduring iconicity of New Theatres, viewing nostalgia against the backdrop of a flailing Bengali film industry. On his death, on November 28, 1980, an obituary to B. N. Sircar in a leading Calcutta daily informed, "New Theatres (also) made films in Hindi to cater to a wider market - a practice that is being advocated to tackle the current problems of the film industry".⁷² Economic crisis has been a recurrent note in the Bengali film industry since the end of the 1960s. Speaking of the crisis of Bengali cinema, Kironmoy Raha observes, "When by the late 1960s one indifferent film after another failed at the box office, Bengali commercial cinema did not know where to look for remedies".⁷³ The industry had been riding on the shoulders of a star system, that too, began failing in the 1970s, when even reigning matinee idols, Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen, failed to deliver the goods.⁷⁴ At the same time, from the 1970s the commercially viable Bombay/Hindi cinema became a closer reference and mainstream Bengali cinema began incorporating the 'masala'⁷⁵ elements of Hindi cinema, like fight sequences and archetypal villains, to somehow produce a more saleable package. *Amanush* (1974), and *Ananda Ashram* (1977), two of the most successful Bengali films of the late 1970s, both featuring Uttam Kumar, blended the Bombay formula with the Bengal landscape. However, *Amanush* and *Ananda Ashram* were exceptions and most of Uttam Kumar's later films lost out at the box office. Raha comments, "Only when a producer from Bombay, Sakti Samanta, came with his resources and experience... people

thronged the theatres...But the very success of these two films showed up the deficiencies when producers here tried out anything on their own".⁷⁶ Though a new 'formula',⁷⁷ inaugurated by Anjan Chowdhury's *Shatru* (1984) brought audiences back to the theatres in the mid-1980s, mainstream Bengali cinema had largely lost out on its mainstay, the Bengali *bhadralok*. Mainstream Bengali cinema now came to be characterized by a move beyond the metropolis of Calcutta in search of subjects and core audiences.

The Bengali film industry remained bogged down by economic crisis through much of the 1980s and 1990s, till the early 2000s. Through this period, mainstream Bengali cinema, by and large, came to be characterized by a *mofussil* and/or folk ethos. The Bengali cinema that had been characterized 'middle class'⁷⁸ (read *bhadralok*) was no longer the *bhadralok's*. Viewed against the above backdrop, one begins to comprehend the nostalgic tone of contemporary discourse on New Theatres that gloats over a golden era of Bengali cinema when the perfect marriage of economics and respectability ruled the roost.

NOTES

1. 'Bhadralok' is a generic term used widely in Bengal to refer to an educated, though not always affluent, middling and upper stratum of society. The historical data provided by scholars like S. N. Mukherjee and John McGuire provide room for the argument that the category *bhadralok* refers to both a class of aristocratic Bengali Hindus, and those of more humble origin. While some of them had made their fortunes through service to the Mughals, most of them "rose from poverty to wealth" in businesses and occupations as varied as shipping, indigo plantation, banyans to the British, purchasing zamindaris and flour mills.

- Below this group were the large shopkeepers, small landholders and white-collar workers in commercial and government houses, teachers, 'native doctors', journalists and writers. This group was referred to as the 'madhyabit' in early 19th century Calcutta. S. N. Mukherjee, *Calcutta: Essays in Urban History*, (Calcutta: Subarnarekha, 1993); John McGuire, *The Making of a Colonial Mind: A Quantitative Study of the Bhadrakalok in Calcutta, 1875-1885*, Australian National University Monographs on south Asia, no. 10 (1983).
2. Kanan Debi's tribute to B. N. Sircar on the occasion of the release of New Theatres' 100th film. For details see Bagiswar Jha, *B. N. Sircar: A Monograph* (Calcutta: The National Film Archives of India, Pune in association with Seagull Books, 1990), p. 53.
 3. Umashashi Debi's tribute to B. N. Sircar. For details see Jha, *ibid*.
 4. David E. Nye, *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology, 1880-1940*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, The MIT Press, 1990), pp. 29-84, 339-77.
 5. Kalidas Nag, 'Bengal's Cultural Contribution to the Screen' in *Indian Talkie 1931-56: Silver Jubille Souvenir*, (Bombay: Film Federation of India, 1956), p. 13.
 6. See Gourangaprasad Ghosh, *Sonar Daag* (Calcutta: Jogomaya Prakashani, 1982), pp. 141-43; Jha, *op cit*, pp. 3-25; Robi Basu, 'Talkie'r Swarnajug Ebong Chalachhitre Uttaran', *Anandalok*, March 31 1990; Ashoke Sen, 'Remembering New Theatres', *The Telegraph*, March 15, 1991; Telecast of coverage of B. N. Sircar's Centenary Celebrations, on ETV, September 17, 2001; 'Kathae Kathae', a live programme on New Theatres and B. N. Sircar on Doordarshan Calcutta, October 30, 2002.
 7. Jha, *op cit*, pp. 7-8; Arundhati Ray, 'The Drama of New Theatres, All Over Again'.
 8. *Cine Advance*, December 5, 1980.
 9. Actor/filmmaker; in 1934 founded Bombay Talkies, the best equipped studio of the country in the 1930s and 1940s.
 10. Popular religious cult in Bengal.

11. 'Notes and News' in *Varieties Weekly*, March 1934.
12. Arabindo Mukhopadhyay, 'Shastri Debaki Kumar' in *100 Years of Debaki Kumar Bose* (Calcutta: Eastern India Motion Picture Association, 1999).
13. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, January 1, 1940.
14. *Chitravas*, Vols 2 and 3 (14), p. 101.
15. Ibid, p. 101.
16. Ibid, p. 101.
17. M. D. Chatterjee, 'Rising Costs and Crushing Taxes' in *Indian Talkie 1931-56: Silver Jubilee Souvenir* (Bombay: Film Federation of India, 1956), p. 29.
18. For details see Anupam Hayat, *Bangladesher Chalachhitrer Itihas*, (Dhaka: Bangladesh Chalachhitra Unnayan Corporation, 1987), pp. 9-12.
19. *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, November 20, 1983, p. 28.
20. *Jugantar*, July 26, 1984.
21. Ibid.
22. *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, November 20, 1983, p. 28.
23. Ibid, p. 28.
24. Till date, the only feature on a filmmaking concern commissioned by the government of India.
25. *Bioscope*, Vol 18, March 8, BS 1330 (1923).
26. *Chitra*, Vol 2, No 2. May-Oct (1936), pp. 1-3.
27. Ibid, pp. 1-3.
28. Ibid, pp. 1-3.
29. Anti-colonial resistance movement against the Partition of Bengal, 1905-08. The movement has often been seen as the initial coming together and subsequent parting of ways of Indian nationalists. Sumit Sarkar has identified four strands within the Swadeshi Movement. First,

the old moderates, Surendranath Bannerjee and Gopal Krishna Gokhale who believed in constitutional methods but were deeply offended by Curzon's aggressive measures. Second, leaders of society who until 1905 had called for a process of self-strengthening or 'Atmasakti'; Rabindranath Tagore is the best example of this legion. Third, a new generation of assertive leaders who propounded passive resistance and boycott and also violence if repression became intolerable. Among the main votaries of this form were Lala Lajpat Rai, Tilak and Aurobindo Ghosh. Finally, there were small bands of angry young men who took to the cult of the bomb, believing revolutionary terror to be the only language the colonialists would understand.

30. For the storyline of 'Deshar Mati'/'Dharti Mata' see Rajadhyaksha and Willemen (eds), *The Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*, p. 236.
31. *Chitra*, December, 1937.
32. Ashoke Nag, 'The Reel Tagore', *The Telegraph Magazine*, March 18, 1990, p. 10.
33. One half of the twin campus of Visva-Bharati, Sriniketan, 3 km distant from Santiniketan, is made up of a cluster of institutes/Bhavanas and centres engaged in tackling the different aspects of rural rejuvenation and reconstruction. The genesis of Sriniketan lays in Tagore's scheme for rural reconstruction started in his ancestral estates as early as 1905. The present-day campus was established in 1922 with focus on rejuvenation of village society through the development of village crafts, upliftment of health and improvement of agriculture through the methods of science.
34. Nag, op cit, p. 10.
35. *The Bengalee*, March 28, 1932.
36. The Santiniketan group could only allot five days as Tagore was then preparing to leave for Europe to raise funds for the Sriniketan project. The trip was eventually cancelled, when Mahatma Gandhi, hearing that Tagore was undertaking the long journey in failing health,

dissuaded the latter, and arranged for funds.

37. *Chitravas*, Vols 2 and 3 (14), p. 102; Also see B. N. Sircar, 'Films Are Made in a Crisis All Over the World' in Jha, op cit, p. 44.
38. *Filmiland*, July 1933.
39. B. D. Bharucha (ed), *The Indian Cinematograph Year Book*, p. 74.
40. Ghosh, *Sonar Daag*; Jha, op cit; Tributes to B. N. Sircar by film personalities at a programme at Nandan on the occasion of B N Sircar's birth centenary, June 9, 2002.
41. For details on the Bengal Congress' growing rift with the central leadership see Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994), pp. 18-54, 103-49.
42. Prafulla Chandra Ray, *Life and Experiences of a Bengali Chemist* (Calcutta: Chuckervertty, Chatterjee & Co, 1932), Vol 1, p. 471.
43. Chatterji, op cit, pp. 55-102.
44. Ibid, pp. 18-102.
45. Led by Abdul Kasem Fazlul Haq, the Krishak Praja Party drew its strength from the mass following it enjoyed among Bengal's Muslim peasantry and intermediate shareholders.
46. Chatterji, op cit, pp. 107-08.
47. Rajat Ray, *Urban Roots of Indian Nationalism: Pressure Groups and Conflict of Interests in Calcutta City Politics, 1875-1939* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1979), p. 194.
48. Chatterji, op cit, p. 108.
49. Ibid, pp. 18-54, 103-49.
50. Joya Chatterji points out that while such legislation equally affected Muslim zamindars, "(For the) Muslim elites such as the Dacca Nawabs, economic losses in their estates promised to be amply compensated for by the rewards of office. But the Hindu zamindars faced the prospect of further economic loss without corresponding political gains", ibid, p.

107.

51. Ray, op cit, Vol II, pp. 433-35, 451, 470.

52. Ibid, Vol II, p. 472.

53. Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (OUP, New Delhi, 2002), p. 333.

54. John Broomfield, 'The Rural Parvenu: A Report of Research in Progress' in *Mostly About Bengal: Essays in Modern South Asian History* (Manohar Publications, New Delhi, 1982), pp. 240-57.

55. Omkar Goswami, 'Calcutta's Economy: 1918-1970: The Fall From Grace' in Chaudhuri (ed), *Calcutta: The Living City*, pp. 88-96.

56. For details see Sumit Sarkar, *Swadeshi Movement in Bengal: 1903-08*, (Mcmillan, New Delhi, 1973).

57. Bhattacharya's first film was Madan Theatres' 'Sati Lakshmi' (1925). This was followed by a long pause, and his film career actually started in 1929 when he joined Madan Theatres as a salaried artist.

58. Dhiraj Bhattacharya, *Jakhan Nayak Chilam* (New Age Publishers, Calcutta, 2000), p. 45.

59. Marwari and Gujrati businessmen had been quick to appreciate the scope for profit in the fast growing cinema industry. One of the first to invest in the industry was Lalji Haridas, a businessman from Kathiawar, who founded M/S Lalji Hemraj Haridas in Calcutta, a firm dealing in piece goods. In 1918 he secured the Bengal agency for the Kohinoor Film Company of Bombay, and became agent for Sharda Pictures in 1926. In 1930 he was managing Jupiter Cinema in Calcutta. With the advent of the talkies, he secured the distributing rights of, among others, Bombay's Wadia Movietone, Paramount Film Company and Shree Vishnu Cinetone. In 1936-37, Haridas managed the Bharat Laxmi Theatre in Calcutta. By 1937-38, he was one of the leading distributors of Indian films in eastern India, Burma and the Far East, with offices in Calcutta, Rangoon and Singapore respectively. In

1938, Lalji Hemraj Haridas were the sole agents of Wadia Movietone, Paramount, Indian Liberty Pictures, Shree Vishnu Cinetone, Jaybharat Movietone, Diamond Pictures, Daryani Productions and Wishvakala Movietone for Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Assam.

Similarly, Bajrang Lal Khemka, one of the first among the Marwaris to go into the film business, had been dealer in piece goods, jute, hessian, importer of sugar and motor spare parts and invested part of his profits therein in the fast expanding film industry. In 1932, soon after New Theatres was formed, Khemka started the East India Film Coy. In 1937 he launched the Metropolitan Pictures in Calcutta. Soon he owned cinema houses in various parts of the country. Radha Kisen Chamria of Radha Film Co, Babulal Chowkani, proprietor, Bharat Laxmi Pictures, and exhibitor/distributors H. M. Chamria and Chandanmal Indrakumar were other Marwari business magnates who claimed a plum share of profits accruing from Bengal's film industry. These businessmen were close competitors of the Bengali bhadralok, men like B. N. Sircar, Anadi Bose, proprietor of Aurora Film Corporation, P. N. Ganguly, proprietor, Kali Films, P. C. Tagore, chairman of the Board of Directors of the Film Corporation of India, or producer/ distributor Prafulla Ghosh, proprietor of Prafulla Pictures formed in 1936. Aurora, for instance, though one of the leading 'Bengali' distributors in Calcutta was evidently operating on a much lesser scale than Lalji Hemraj Haridas. Compared to the latter's holding of sole distributing rights of eight Bombay concerns, Aurora, in 1938, was distributing for New Theatres, Radha Film Co, Bharat Laxmi Pictures and Kali Films. Further, Aurora was not distributing for New Theatres in the most significant eastern region, as revealed by Dossani Film Corporation's claim of being the sole distributing agent for Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Assam and Burma for New Theatres. B. D. Bharucha (ed), *The Indian Cinematograph Year Book* (The Motion Picture Society of India, Bombay, 1938).

60. Till the mid-1920s, there is no evidence of Bengali Muslims involvement with the cinema.

The first involvement came in 1927-28 when members of the family of the Nawab of Dhaka made an experimental short film *Sukumari*. In 1929, the same group embarked on the project of a full length film, released as *The Last Kiss* in 1931. These initiatives apart, Bengali Muslim involvement in the film industry, through the 1930s, was confined to solitary figures like Kazi Nazrul Islam and Abbasuddin Ahmed. Though later initiatives like the Chalachhitra Darshak Samiti (1939) and Bengal Tiger Pictures (1941) were patronised by some Muslim elites like Fazlul Haq and Humayun Kabir, they were marginal projects, and Bengali Muslims, by and large remained detached from the film industry, so much so that Dhaka had no organised film industry till after independence.

61. Raja Sir Manmatha Nath Ray Chowdhury, 'Does Cinema Read the Spirit of the Age', *Filmland Puja Special* (1935).
62. *Chitra*, Vol 2, No 2, May-Oct (1936), p. 4.
63. P. Trivedi, 'Indian Film Industry: Our Difficulties', *Filmland Puja Special*, 1935, p. 42.
64. Pradip Krishen, 'The Heady Thirties', *Fifty Years of Indian Talkies (1931-81): A Commemorative Volume* (Indian Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Bombay, 1981), pp. 40-44.
65. K. P. Ghose, 'My Impressions of Bombay', *Filmland*, Puja Issue (1934), reproduced in Bandopadhyay (ed), *Indian Cinema: Contemporary Perceptions from the Thirties: A Celluloid Chapter Documentation* (Celluloid Chapter, Jamshedpur, 1993), p. 41.
66. Jatindra Nath Mitra, '4th Feb 1931 to 31st Dec 1934: What Happened and What Will Happen?', editorial, *Moving Picture Monthly*, Annual Issue, (1935), reproduced in Samik Bandopadhyay (ed), *Indian Cinema: Contemporary Perceptions from the Thirties*, p. 29.
67. Baburao Patel, 'Film Journalism Down the Ages', *Fifty Years of Indian Talkies (1931-81)*.
68. *Chitra*, December (1937).
69. Ibid.

70. The New Theatres' emblem.
71. News item titled 'Ajke' on the occasion of B. N. Sircar's centenary, on Doordarshan Calcutta, July 5, 2000; A documentary film on B. N. Sircar, titled 'The Renaissance Man of Indian Cinema, B. N. Sircar' on Doordarshan (national network), July 9, 2000; repeat telecast of the documentary on Doordarshan Calcutta, July 15, 2002 and August 21, 2002; telecast of first episode of docu-serial 'The Story of New Theatres', on Doordarshan, July 28, (2001); second episode, February 4, 2001; third episode, February 11, 2001; fourth episode, February 25, 2001; fifth episode, March 4, 2001; Telecast of press coverage of B. N. Sircar's centenary celebrations, on ETV, September 17, 2001; news item on New Theatres on Star News, September 6, 2002; a live programme 'Kathae Kathae on B. N. Sircar, on Doordarshan Calcutta, September 30, 2002.
72. *The Sunday Statesman*, November 30, 1980.
73. Kironmoy Raha, *Bengali Cinema*, (Nandan West Bengal Film Centre, Calcutta, 1991), p. 72.
74. From 1976-77, most of Uttam Kumar's films failed at the box office. For details see Gourangaprasad Ghosh, *Amar Ami*, (Calcutta: Dey's Publishing, 1980). Suchitra Sen's last film was *Pronoy Pasha* (1978).
75. A generic term used to refer to the formulaic Hindi film.
76. Raha, op cit, p. 72.
77. "He made no attempt to copy Hindi popular films and did not rely on stars. He invented his own Bengali formula of escapist entertainment and served his fare in a manner which the Bengali viewers liked"; Raha, *ibid*, p. 72.
78. "The films that were made in Calcutta, by and for the middle class, were mostly inspired by literature...Bengali cinema became Bengali middle class sentiments peppering romance and music"; Rajat Ray, *Banglar Chalachhitra Sanskriti* (Srishti Prakashan, Calcutta, 2001), p. 15.

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SPIRITUAL CURRENTS OF THE INDIAN REVOLUTION:

PERSPECTIVES FROM THE EARLY NATIONALIST MOVEMENT IN BENGAL

ANIRBAN GANGULY

Addressing aspiring ‘servants of India’ on 12th June 1905 at Pune, the ultra-moderate Indian leader Gopal Krishna Gokhale (1866-1915) made an interesting exhortation; he called for the spiritualizing of public life. He saw this as happening essentially when a greater number of his countrymen would come forward to ‘devote themselves to the cause in the spirit in which religious work is undertaken.’ In this, Gokhale, to whom the British connection was an ordained one, did not hesitate to use the ‘religious spirit’ parallel – while describing the expected attitude for national service – and to call for the spiritualization of public life. It would be instructive to read what the arch-constitutionalist, with no known or publicly displayed denominational propensities, described as the essential spiritual attitude in those who wished to take up public life and national service. ‘Love of country’, observed Gokhale, ‘must so fill the heart that all else shall appear as of little moment by its side. A fervent patriotism which rejoices at every opportunity of sacrifice for the motherland, a dauntless heart which refuses to be turned back from its object by difficulty or danger, a deep faith in the purpose of Providence which nothing can shake...’ⁱ

It was a period of our national history when terms like Providence, spiritual, sacrifice, religious spirit, etc were freely invoked or referred to in order to bring to the masses the twin possibilities of emancipation and the eventual creation of a national destiny in full freedom. The other reason for these repeated references was perhaps that it was meant to generate and sustain an *ethical-spiritual* outlook self-binding on those who were to lead the movement and eventually the free nation. In short, there appeared to be no confusion, bewilderment or moratorium on the usage

of the religious imagery or the expression of the nation's spiritual aspirations. The fact that the extremely cautious Gokhale could use it without feeling stifled or pilloried speaks volumes of the atmosphere of the Indian political discourse in the not so distant past. In fact Gokhale's political heir was to become one of the staunchest proponents of the spiritualization of public life and one of those who freely and effectively imposed the *ethical-spiritual* measure to most of his temporal dealings.

I

The Spiritual and the Temporal: the Indian civilisational experience

The inspiration by the spiritual of the temporal was never really absent in India. There was a period in the public life of this country – a rather long period at that – when the spiritual-temporal interface was a habitual and natural part of the system. I am not entering into discussing this tradition as evidenced in the major national epics and Indian foundational texts but propose to confine myself to the recent past when Indian nationalism was trying to work itself out through a variegated series of public movements. It would be interesting to note that most of the past leaders of consequence in this country, especially those who fought as soldiers of Indian nationalism and brought about attitudinal and ideational changes in large movements, were inspired or instructed by a spiritual preceptor and were themselves adherents or practitioners of some spiritual discipline or the other.ⁱⁱ These preceptors inspired, directed and influenced principal actors in the movements and proved to be one of the major sustaining forces of the whole effort.

It would be useful, however, to make here a brief allusion to the distant past in order to establish this Indian tradition of interface between the spiritual and temporal. The institution of the *Rishi* in the scheme of Indian polity was a unique one and symbolized this natural interface. The

Rishi exercising an authority over all through the force of his spiritual personality was ‘revered and consulted by the king of whom he was sometimes the religious preceptor and in the then fluid state of social evolution’ was the one who could ‘exercise an important role in evolving new basic ideas and effecting direct and immediate changes of the socio-religious ideas and customs of the people.’ⁱⁱⁱ The habit of consulting or eliciting advice and direction of the spiritual head in affairs temporal was thus not an alien concept in the classical Indian scheme of governance. Ancient Indian history abounds with examples of the *Rishi* influencing major public events and ushering in watershed alterations in governance and royal decisions through the power of his personality and *tapas*. But as I have said above, this was not a phenomenon confined only to the pre-modern Indian setting but rather percolated robustly into the middle of the last century. A survey of the actions of some of the leaders of the early part of the Indian nationalist movement, especially in Bengal, would help substantiate my point that many of the principle leaders and organisers of that period were themselves initiates of spiritual disciplines or took recourse to spiritual direction whenever they reached crucial phases in their public action. A clear indication of a spiritual current to the revolutionary movement seems to exist. While this is also true for the nationalist movement in other parts of the country, for the discussion here I shall focus on Bengal and the early nationalist movement there.

Seeking the counsel of the sage has been an established practice in the saga of world civilisations and it was also an active practice in the Indian civilisational context too. An overlooking of this time-honoured tradition has only served to further confuse public discourse on the role of the spiritual in affairs temporal. It is only those who prefer to study Indian civilisation and tradition into segregated zones are those who appear to be wary of such practices or confusedly insert the issue of *sampradaya*-less swamis intruding into public space and attempt to set boundaries to the functioning of spiritual personalities in public affairs. At least in India, such a

boundary never seemed to have existed until artificial barriers were erected in the name of a flawed and sclerotic secularism sometime in the not so distant past.^{iv} In fact there have been attempts of late to define the frame, form and terms of references of Indian spiritual personalities and most of these assessments are unfortunately based on meager knowledge of the lives and thought of these personalities themselves^v and therefore do not paint the clear and exact picture. In my attempt to contest such assessments I shall provide some alternative evidences in the present discussion in support of the early Bengali nationalists and their movement.

II

The Monk as Sustainer of Political Revolution: Vivekananda and the Revolutionaries

To start with, two spiritual personalities – mighty monks – through the power of their thought appear to have influenced the Indian nationalist struggle in the first decade of the last century when the movement itself was in its first confused throes. In fact the debt of one among them has at times been acknowledged. In his work on the ‘*Prophets of the New India*’ celebrated French philosopher, Romain Rolland (1866-1944) conceded this mighty influence when he wrote that, ‘the Indian nationalist movement smouldered for a long time until Vivekananda’s breath blew the ashes into flame and [it] erupted violently three years after his death in 1905’^{vi} when the province of Bengal was partitioned. The act of that breath changed the face of the country within a few months.^{vii} The colonial Intelligence Department in their independent assessment of Vivekananda’s influence on the developing nationalist movement seemed to agree with Rolland’s assessment of the monk’s role. Their careful and meticulous observations and intelligence inputs convinced them of the electrifying effect of Vivekananda’s thought on the nationalist youth and the nationalist movement in general. Interestingly in one of his rare political confessions the Swami himself clearly observed how he had traveled the length and breadth of the country trying to plan a campaign to throw off the foreign

yoke. 'I had the idea', he once told one of his trusted Western disciples, 'of forming a combination of Indian princes for the overthrow of the foreign yoke. For that reason, from the Himalayas to Cape Comorin I have tramped all over the country. For that reason I made friends with the gun-maker Sir Hiram Maxim [1840-1916]. But I got no response from the country...' ^{viii} This national political inertia initially seems to have made the Swami develop other plans of regeneration and awakening. Speaking to Sakharam Ganesh Deuskar (1869-1912), a leading nationalist ideologue in Bengal whose book on the economic drain of the country had galvanized youth, the Swami seems to have observed, displaying his underlying political nature, that the country had become a 'powder magazine' and that 'a little spark may ignite it.' When asked whether Indians in their struggle for freedom would seek external assistance, the Swami seems to have categorically omitted that possibility, 'No', he said, '...I know several princes who can successfully carry on the revolution.' ^{ix} The Swami's majestic appearance had attracted the notice of the intelligence department as early as 1892 when he was touring the states of Kathiawar region and it was noted 'that he took an interest in politics.' ^x This interest in politics was the outer manifestation of the covert activism of trying to link the Indian princes for a national revolution. Even his speech delivered on his return to Calcutta sometime in early March 1897 was recorded and it was noted that a number of leading lights of the Congress had attended the event. ^{xi} The Swami by this period was indeed a much watched public figure in India and his capacity to rouse national consciousness and stir the young minds towards some sort of revolution or at least unrest was clearly being anticipated by the colonial law-enforcers. In a detailed note on the speeches delivered by him the colonial intelligence observed how the youth were taking after the Swami's words and how these were encouraging them towards revolt and anarchy. The Swami's speech delivered at the Triplicane Literary Society at Madras came in for scrutiny as did his lecture on the 'Future of India' in which he advocated developing a national network of dedicated band of teachers and preachers who would eventually extend the work of national awakening and regeneration. This proposal of the Swami, the report noted, was

‘subsequently adopted by Barin Ghosh and his followers’^{xii} all of whom were accused later of waging war against the Emperor. Of particular concern to the administration was the content of one of the Swami’s talk in which, it noted, the monk ‘did not confine himself to religious subjects, but discussed in somewhat bitter language the present position of the Indians in their own country.’^{xiii} It accepted that the main principles of the Swami’s teachings ‘appealed to the revolutionary part of the present’ who have been ‘able to use his sayings and writings to sow the seed of revolution and anarchy in the minds of the Indian youths’.^{xiv} Vivekananda’s articles in the fortnightly ‘Udbodhan’ and their slant were also closely watched by the Bengal Intelligence Department. The monk, it appeared, had launched a multi-pronged operation to awaken, support and sustain the revolutionary fervour in the Indian youth. Referring to one such article, a confidential CID report noted that one of the articles was considered ‘highly objectionable’ because in it the author directly addressed the Indian youth in a rather non-conciliatory manner, ‘You have all been hypnotised, your ruler tell you that you are low, subjugated and weak, and [that] you believe to be true. I am made of earth of this country but I have not learnt to think of myself like that. So those people who used to look down upon us, by God’s will, are respecting me like God. What is wanted is keen-edged sword and war to death.’^{xv} A number of sources point to the fact that the Swami was being closely watched, in a letter written from Almora dated 22nd May 1898, Sister Nivedita mentions having received such intimation. ‘One of the monks’, she writes to Mrs. Hammond, ‘has had a warning this morning that the police are watching the Swami, thro’ spies – of course we know this – in a general way – but this brings it pretty close, and I cannot help attaching some importance to it, tho’ the Swami laughs. The Government must be mad – or at least will prove so if he is interfered with. That would be the torch to carry fire through the country...’^{xvi}

The revolutionaries of the early nationalist phase in Bengal were conscious of this contribution to the general awakening made by Vivekananda and his spiritual brothers. The intelligence note accepted as much when it noted that ‘the teachings of Arabinda Ghosh, the leader

of the Maniktala Conspiracy, were modelled on the same lines as Swami Vivekananda's, but with a more definite appeal to force or Sakti, which he maintained as necessary for the regeneration of India.^{xvii} Commenting on the spiritual current that inspired and sustained the early nationalist movement in Bengal, Sri Aurobindo observed, years later, that the 'influence of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda worked from behind' and the whole movement and secret society 'became so formidable that in any other country with a political past they would have led to something like the French Revolution.'^{xviii} Thus Vivekananda's political-revolutionary aspect can never be totally rejected or overlooked – as some have done. Moral-spiritual-political activism seems to have blended into his personality.^{xix}

The Swami's spiritual activism in the West was another direction taken to awaken and unite an otherwise divided and somnolent Indian people. It had the desired effect, and as Rolland observed, seconded by many a mighty minds of the period, it ignited the young minds to take to revolution. There are specific historical instances of young revolutionaries meeting the Swami and seeking his guidance and benediction; it would be useful in support of our stand to have look at some such instances in order to buttress our point that the revolution in Bengal right from its inception received strong spiritual support and also that Vivekananda had definite ideas of the need for a political revolution in India.

Hemchandra Ghose one of the widely accepted revolutionary leaders of eastern Bengal, had, during his youth, met the Swami with a band of his young followers and had engaged him in a conversation. It was during the Swami's Dhaka visit in 1901 that the interaction took place. In a written statement to Bhupendranath Dutta (1880-1961) Hemchandra recalled the Swami's reply when asked directly in private as to what he wished young Bengal 'to do in reality for Humanity and Patriotism.' It requires quoting at some length:

In the course of the 'intimate exchange of heart, rather communion,' the Swami 'emphasised on the

fundamental unity of the universal aspects of all religion. ‘Expression is life, Contraction is death. And what is religion after all, if it is not the realisation of the divinity in man?’ He questioned, and asked us for the pursuit of a dynamic life dedicated to the cult of Humanism, - ‘*Manava Dharma*’ and the doctrine of synthesis ‘*Samanyavada*’, to build a base of National character in Bengal for India and the world ...He stressed on cadre-building for a noble cause. He was not happy with the ways of the then Indian National Congress. ‘That is not the way to build up Patriotism anywhere. Beggar’s bowl has no place in a Banik’s (merchant’s) world of machine, mammon, merchandise.’ The primary concern ‘before the buoyant young Bengal ought to be ‘body-building and dare-devilry (*Sariram Adyam*). This urgency of physical fitness must take the top-most priority even to reading the Bhagavata Gita itself. And in the pursuit of dare-devilry – *Paurusha*, the spirit of chivalry that is *Vir-niti*, must be observed in siding always with the weak and rescuing them. Honor women-folk, as the physical embodiment of the Mahamaya herself, and the Motherland itself in human form. Know ye not, *Janani Janma-bhumischa Swargadapi Gariyashi?* ...I must ask all of you to take to organise social service – *Sanghavada*, *Sevabrata*, - with humility and devotion, side by side with study as the fulfilment of all education, for Jiva is Siva, this idea of ideas which will rejuvenate the lowly and make them holy – the *Daridra Narayanas*, with throbbing pulsations of life and vigour with infusion of confidence enough to build their own destiny...’ Hinting at the need for self-reliance, the Swami ‘roared’ ‘As you sow, so you reap, and *Mahamaya* helps those who help themselves. The *Tamas* has enveloped the psyche in us, or else, how could it be possible for any foreigner to come and kick at sweet will the land and people that is India, for centuries? Oh, it is no *longer* the *Punjabhumi*! It is the land of downright *Don’t touchism* and *Jo-Hukums* (subserviency to the master will)! It is *Dasa-Bhumi* – the land of serfs and slaves, of hewers of wood and drawers of water,’ he moaned.’ The Swami, typical to his style, now assured Hemchandra and his co-workers of the rise of India and held forth on the method of seeing it through, ‘Swamiji held hopes before us. ‘India had a glorious past, India will have a future certainly more majestic. Or else, the Lord of God in Nature will lose all meaning...An extra dose of *Rajas* only will serve as the elixir of life in India; so the pressing need of the moment is to pursue consciously the quality *Rajas* that is dynamism. The soul-stirring death

defying Mantram *Abhi* - fearlessness, will shake off age-long vestiges of slave mentality, superstition and inferiority complex. In order to march boldly in equal pace side by side with other materially advanced nations of the world – ye, young Bengal, emulate the manly ways of Lakshmi Bai, the Rani of Jhansi, whose gallantry the English commander has recognised... Imitate the virtues of other nations, cultivate their technical skills and qualities of life, ... And then, with a modern standard of morale and efficiency attained, pay them, the foreign usurpers, in their own coins in your own country to unfasten the alien octopus-hold on the citadel of Oriental Culture.’ The Swami then gave these young enthusiasts a fourfold programme of action: ‘Going-in among the masses, eradication of Don’t-touchism, opening of Gymnasium, and Library Movement.’ In a parting observation, he exhorted the young Hemchandra, ‘Man-making is my mission of life. Hemchandra! You try with your comrades to translate this mission of mine into action and reality. Read Bankimchandra and Bankimchandra, and emulate his *Desha-Bhakti* and *Sanatana Dharma*. Your duty should be service to motherland. India should be freed politically first.’^{xx}

Evidences of the Swami’s direct exhortation to challenge and end alien rule can never really be completely ignored and eradicated. For example, in a letter dated 30th October 1899 written to Mary Hale, the Swami himself puts on record his impression of the alien system in the country of his birth in rather strident tone, saying that the only redeeming feature, though unconscious, of British rule in modern India is that ‘it has brought India out once more on the stage of the world; it has forced upon it the contact of the outside world.’ Otherwise it was simply a long, degenerative tale of woe. The letter actually gives a poignant insight into the volcano that erupted within the Swami while surveying the state of his land under colonial rule but it has been mostly ignored by those who wish to blanket the political revolutionary within Vivekananda and who wish to erase evidences of a spiritual sustenance to the political revolution in Bengal:

‘On the whole,’ wrote the Swami discussing first pre-British India, ‘the old regime was better for the

people, as it *did not* [sic] take away everything they had, and there was some justice, some liberty. A few hundred, modernized, half-educated, and denationalized men are all the show of modern English India – *nothing else* [sic]. The Hindus were 600 million in number according to Fersishta, the Mohammedan historian, in the 12th century – now less than 200 million. In spite of the centuries of anarchy that reigned during the struggles of the English to conquer, the terrible massacre the English perpetrated in 1857 and 1858, and the still more terrible famines that have become the inevitable consequence of British rule (there never is a famine in a native state) and that takes off millions, there has been a good increase of population, but not yet what it was when the country was entirely independent – that is, before the Mohammedan rule. Indian labour and produce can support five times as many people as there are now in India with comfort, if the whole thing is not taken off from them... This is the state of things – even education will no more be permitted to spread; freedom of the press stopped already, (of course we have been disarmed long ago) the bit of self government granted to them for some years is being quickly taken off. We are watching what next! For writing a few words of innocent criticism, men are being hurried to *transportation for life*, [sic] others imprisoned without *any trial*; [sic] and nobody knows when his head will be off. There has been a reign of terror in India for some years. English soldiers are killing our men and outraging our women – only to be sent home with passage and pension at our expense. We are in a *terrible* [sic] gloom – where is the Lord? Mary, you can afford to be optimistic, can I? Suppose you simply publish this letter – the law just passed in India will allow the English Government in India to drag me from here to India and kill me without a trial. And I know all your Christian Governments will only rejoice because we are heathens. Shall I also go to sleep and become optimistic? Nero was the greatest optimistic person!...’.^{xxi} The one thing that the Swami constantly transmitted into his young disciples and admirers was an ardent will to liberate oneself from all forms of slavery, including as a first step the liberation from political slavery.^{xxii}

Sensing the widespread effect these kind of actions were gradually having on the youth, the 1918 Sedition Committee Report noted it and observed how a section of the Bengali *bhadralok* was

‘perverting’ the teaching of Vivekananda and his spiritual preceptor Sri Ramakrishna to suit their revolutionary agenda. It could not overlook Vivekananda’s exhortation to the young Indians that ‘Vedantism was the future religion of the world, and that, although India was now subject to a foreign Power, she must still be careful to preserve the faith of mankind. She must seek freedom by the aid of the Mother of strength (*Sakti*).’^{xxiii} In his historical review of Swami Vivekananda, the doyen of Indian nationalist historiography R.C.Majumdar (1888-1980) describes the four rocks on which the ideal of nationalism as preached by the Swami rested. He saw them as: ‘(1) The awakening of the masses who form the basis of the nation, (2) Development of physical and moral strength, (3) Unity based on common spiritual ideas, (4) Consciousness of, and pride in, the ancient glory and greatness of India.’^{xxiv} It was thus natural, as Biman Behari Majumdar (1899-1969) observed, that ‘In every gymnasium, i.e. exercise cult of the revolutionary party of Bengal, His [Vivekananda’s] work entitled, ‘From Colombo to Almora’ was read.’^{xxv} A firsthand account of the effect that the Swami had on the young revolutionaries that perhaps sums up the entire argument on the spiritual currents of the Indian revolution may be relevant here. Nolini Kanta Gupta (1889-1984), Sri Aurobindo’s revolutionary co-worker during the early nationalist phase, in a ‘personal reminiscence’ feelingly recalled:

‘A young man in prison, accused of conspiracy and waging war against the British Empire. If convicted he might have to suffer the extreme penalty, at least, transportation to the Andamans. The case is dragging on for long months. And the young man is in a solitary cell. He cannot always keep up his spirits high. Moments of sadness and gloom and despair come and almost overwhelmed him. Who was there to console and cheer him up? Vivekananda. Vivekananda’s speeches, *From Colombo to Almora*, came, as a godsend, into the hands of the young man. Invariably, when the period of despondency came he used to open the book, read a few pages, read them over again, and the cloud was there no longer instead there was hope and courageous and faith and future and light and air.’^{xxvi}

II

‘India and her People’: Abhedananda’s Political Concern

Swami Abhedananda (1866-1939) was the other monk whose influence on the revolutionary nationalists was no less effective. For a revolution for self-determination to be successful Abhedananda saw two essential lines of action, ‘organisation at home and propaganda abroad.’^{xxvii} It was in the second line of action that he himself excelled for years together starting with a ‘series of impassioned lectures on the diverse phases of Indian civilisation’ in 1905 at the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, New York. In them Abhedananda spoke of India in two dimensions, on the one hand ‘he revealed...the greatness and profundity of Indian civilisation through the ages, and exposed, on the other, the picture of chronic famine and impoverishment of India under British rule.’ The intellectual monk-revolutionary made such an impact with his audiences in the West and his readers in India, that when a compilation of these lectures were published for the first time as a book entitled ‘*India and Her People*’ in 1906, the Bombay government promptly banned it for being seditious.^{xxviii} But such a move seems to have hardly deterred the Vedantin-revolutionary, who on his return to India in the same year was given a rousing welcome by the youth wherever he went. At all gatherings that he spoke, Abhedananda focused on the fallen condition of the motherland, her past glory and continued subjection. In his ‘*Note on the Ramakrishna Mission*’ Charles.A.Tegart (1881-1946), Commissioner of Calcutta Police, then Special Superintendent of the Intelligence Branch, observed how Abhedananda worked to spread ‘sedition’, ‘...when Abhedananda Swami... arrived at Howrah from America’, wrote Tegart, he was met at the Howrah railway station by several members of the extremist party, and was greeted by loud shouts of “Bande Mataram.” This man published in that year, [1906] under the title “India and Her People” a series of lectures he had recently delivered in America. The book is in many parts objectionable and, in some cases, clearly

sedition, and has been proscribed under the Press Act by the Govt. of Bombay.’^{xxix} In fact Abhedananda dedicated his book to ‘*The People of India with deep fellow-feeling and earnest prayers for the restoration of their ancient glory and national freedom.*’^{xxx} From the first sentence itself he displayed a magnificent spirit of defiance. ‘Centuries before the Christian era,’ he wrote, and long before the advent of the ‘prophet and founder of Judaism, when the forefathers of the Anglo-Saxon races were living in caves and forests, tattooing their bodies, eating raw animal flesh, wearing animal skins, - in that remote antiquity, the dawn of true civilisation broke upon the horizon of India, or *Bhârata Varsha*, as it is called in Sanskrit.’^{xxxi} Tegart’s ‘in many parts objectionable’ was indeed amply proved!

The defiant spirit that Abhedananda exuded may be seen from his exposition on political institutions in India. In that section he launched a scathing attack on the British system and spoke of how it destroyed the existing structures of governance in India. ‘Before the advent of the British rule’, he argued, ‘the administration of justice, the repression of crime, and other functions of the police, the collection of cesses and taxes, were all carried out by the government of the village community. To-day in British India this self-government of the Hindus has been destroyed by the short-sighted policy of the British autocrats, and its place has been given to a most costly system of judicial administration, unparalleled in the history of the world.’ Pouring scorn over the notion of British justice, he attacked it unsparingly, ‘They talk about English justice. Of course there is justice in English government, but it is very expensive and one-sided. Indians have justice among Indians, but if an Indian’s rights are outraged by a European he cannot hope for similar justice. [And] The present oppression of the police and the cruelty of revenue collectors under British management have already driven the masses to the verge of absolute despair and rebellion.’^{xxxii} His exposé of the economic-wealth drain of the country was equally masterly. Abhedananda cited works and comments of Western observers and scholars on the condition of India and their concern for her present plight and future impoverishment, e.g. he quoted noted English Orientalist H. H. Wilson

(1786-1860) as saying that the abstraction of Indian capital ‘is an exhausting drain upon the country, the issue of which is paid by no reflux; it is an extraction of life- blood from the veins of national industry, which no subsequent introduction of nourishment is furnished to restore.’^{xxxiii}

On his return to India in 1906 Abhedananda also spoke of the need to create a spiritual basis to political action, on the need to discover the political unity by basing the movement on the Vedanta – in short he called for the spiritualization of politics, for in that alone he saw India’s true salvation. In his address to the students of Bangalore in August 1905, Abhedananda talked of the necessity of establishing ‘National industries, national schools and colleges and citing the example of the Japanese triumph over Russians in the Russo-Japanese war of 1905 he hinted at the need of making a determined effort to achieve results. The early Bengali revolutionaries, especially those among them editing the *Jugantar*, constantly reiterated this triumph of an Asian power over a European one.’^{xxxiv}

‘Nothing can resist a determined effort’, Abhedananda told his young audience. Look at the Japanese; in forty years they have become a nation by the force of character and unity of purpose. These are two of the grandest virtues which a nation can possess, and by these forty-eight millions of Japanese have become ten times stronger. There is no power on earth which can resist their onward progress...’^{xxxv}

Replying to the chairman of the Reception Committee in Calcutta – by when he was being intensely watched by the administration – Abhedananda spoke of the need to develop a greater and deeper unity that he thought Indians could find in Vedanta:

‘In attaining our political freedom we must have one mind. We have eighty millions of Bengalees and eighty millions of minds; in the United States the population is eighty million and they have one

mind. Go to Japan and you will find that forty-eight millions of people have one mind. ...But what do we find in India? ...The leaders are not of one opinion, whether social, political or religious. But, my friends, if you study Vedanta, there you will find the foundation of unity, because unity is the starting point, and unity is the goal... When I first heard of the *Swadeshi* movement I was delighted. Then I found that *Swadeshi* was not spread all over India, and when I came near Calcutta I found several leaders criticising and finding fault with other leaders without uniting in the common cause. But where can a movement succeed without unity? If you want to make any success, political or industrial, you must try to attain it through spirituality, because there is our life, there is our vitality – there is our religion...^{xxxvi}

The dominance of the Brahmos (who derived their theology from Vedanta) among the educated middle classes, and Vivekananda's celebration of Vedanta as the spiritual foundation of a new India might have led Abhedananda to believe that Vedanta will provide the basis for political unity. If we set aside the specific question of Vedanta, we shall see that Abhedananda's argument is that there could be no political, educational or industrial regeneration without the spiritual base. The spiritualization of the political action and basing it on a deeper spiritual conviction and realisation was thus the keynote of the early revolutionaries of Bengal. And some of the leading spiritual personalities of the age actively supported them in their hard political actions and schemes. Historical instances point to that direction.

IV

Amra Morbo-Desh Jagbe: Jatindranath Mukherjee's Spiritual Spirit of Sacrifice

The other instance, now become part of the Bengali nationalist lore, is that of Jatindranath Mukherjee (1879-1915) (Bagha Jatin), whose revolutionary urges received a mighty fillip after his

meeting with Vivekananda. Easily one of the most astute planners of the early attempt at a pan-Indian armed revolution, and seen as ‘perhaps the boldest and the most actively dangerous of all Bengal revolutionaries’^{xxxvii} by the colonial administration, Jatin first met Vivekananda while assisting the latter’s mission of relieving Calcutta of a plague epidemic in 1897-98. The Swami’s compelling words on India had deeply roused the young Jatin who met him through Swami Akhandananda (1864-1937). These interactions with the Swami became regular and led Jatin to plunge into the plague relief work that the Swami started under the direction of Sister Nivedita (1867-1911). Nivedita noticing the young man wrote, ‘A young man came to me whose one idea is to make Swamiji’s name the rallying point for young India. He is wild about him, and he is such a strong man himself...’^{xxxviii} She eagerly spoke of Jatin to the Swami and again took him in the monk’s presence. The Swami suffused Jatin with the spirit of sacrifice. It was not for Jatin, he indicated, to take to the ascetic life; India had to be freed if her eternal message was to spread the world over and it was for that freedom that he had to aspire and strive for.^{xxxix} Jatin himself appeared to be an intensely spiritual person and seemed to have combined his political action with his spiritual pursuits. Later in life he came under the influence of Bholananda Giri of Haridwar and received his initiation. Giri, a monk in tune with Dayananda’s teaching, told Jatin that the greatest spiritual goal of the present was in effect the political liberation of the motherland and gave his full support and benediction to Jatin’s revolutionary schemes.^{xl} Amidst the exacting preparations for the pan-Indian revolt, Jatin was also ‘seen meditating at the dead of the night: his eyes fixed at the sky, he used to go to a trance and tears flooded his cheeks.’^{xli} Even in the spot of his final struggle, on reaching Balasore, ‘despite a very busy time-table, Jatin Mukherjee used to retire in the forest and meditate before the setting sun. [And] Only one evening breaking his silent communion, Jatin spoke out to an aged companion about the vision of Krishna he had been having.’^{xlii} His comrade in the revolt, M.N.Roy (1887-1954), was to recall later, that ‘He tended to accept the reformed religion preached by Swami Vivekananda – a God who would stand the test of reason, and a religion which

served progressive social and human purpose. He believed himself to be a Karmayogi...and recommended the ideal to all of us.’^{xliii} It was perhaps from this spiritual base of his that Jatin eventually developed his final view of the situation – the individual had to sacrifice himself in order to awaken the collective yearning for liberation and self-hood. ‘As I see it,’ he confided to one of his young lieutenants, ‘putch after putch will be required to make the country arise. If we die fighting, it will lead to the awakening of vast numbers. The process will continue until the masses come up for the last desperate struggle. *Amra morbo, desh jagbe* (We will die, the nation will awake).’^{xliv} It was this unwavering sense of sacrifice that Jatin had perhaps imbibed in his first meeting with the ‘cyclonic Hindoo monk’ and with which he eventually entered martyrdom. The spiritual currents of revolutionary nationalism finds one of its best symbolization in Jatin and his scheme of revolution. Unfortunately Jatin and his co-revolutionaries are mostly segregated today as regional leaders, their deep spiritual base mostly misunderstood or misinterpreted and their contribution to Indian nationalism largely ignored. Veteran scholar of the Indian nationalist movement Prithwindra Mukherjee is perhaps right when he observes that ‘Trying to forget the genocide that accompanied India’s independence, we are still taught to glorify the Mahatma’s tactics of a bloodless non-violent action.’^{xlv} Jatin and his early revolutionary comrades in arms have become victims of that glorification.

V

India’s Freedom and Humanity’s Emancipation: a Revolutionary’s Vow

Veteran *Jugantar* leader Surendra Mohan Ghose (1893-1976) for example, talks of a very dominating urge in life to ‘see God and come to know Him’ and of how the core aim of the revolutionaries – the liberation of India – was always linked to humanity’s welfare. He recalled his

political mentor asking him to remember that if India did not gain freedom she would be incapable of working towards removing humanity's suffering. India's liberation was needed for humanity's, man's liberation – '*manusher mukti*' –^{xlvi} it was an axiomatic truth with the Bengali nationalists, which sprang from the core civilisational, spiritual and metaphysical thoughts of India. Ghose also talks of his initiation into spiritual life while in politics at the hands of one of the last direct disciples of the legendary Trailanga Swami. The sanyasi also told Ghose that India's freedom was a thing ordained, it was to happen in its time and by the Will of God and advised him to practice the art of secrecy in his political work – a quality that he saw missing in the Bengalis! Having been assured of a silent communion by his master, Ghose recalled how he was saved from many a political *cul-de-sac* by his forewarnings.^{xlvi}

Public activism and political opinion-mobilisation most naturally blended with the vow of asceticism that the above monks - Vivekananda, Abhedananda, Bholananda Giri and others– took, there appears to be no *sampradaya* induced conflict in them in this matter. The Bengali nationalists sought their direct spiritual sustenance and salvation from them – symbolizing the path of *Karmayoga* – blending revolutionary activism with their spiritual quest.

VI

Political Action and Spiritual Realisation: Sri Aurobindo and His Contemporaries

But perhaps the defense of my central thesis shall be incomplete without a mention of another central figure of the early nationalist movement in Bengal, one whose name regularly cropped up in the intelligence reports, one who was seen as the 'most-dangerous' man in the British Empire, one

who, it was believed, had given practical shape to the revolutionary political ideals of the chief monk of the Ramakrishna Order, one under whose inspiration and guidance, it was suspected, the entire armed revolutionary movement was being conceived – Aurobindo Ghose or Sri Aurobindo – was one of those revolutionary nationalists who embodied in his life and action the spiritual currents of Indian nationalism. His ‘fundamental spiritual realisations were concurrent with his gross political action.’^{xlviii} Recalling certain aspects of that concurrence may be relevant here. Sri Aurobindo had started his yoga sometime around 1904-05 which is by when he had also initiated his revolutionary work in Bengal. Prior to this, he had a series of spiritual experiences already. Some of these fundamental early experiences were his feeling of ‘an immense calm as soon as [he] landed in Bombay’ followed by the ‘experience of the Self, the Purusha’. The other major early experience was that of a contact with the ‘Infinite’ – one at Poona on the Parvati hills and the other on the Shankaracharya hill in Kashmir. It was an experience in which he ‘saw in an image of Kali the living Presence.’^{xlix} The spiritual process in him thus unfolded early and it does not appear to have been conjured later, as some have argued, solely for the purpose of an ‘honourable retreat’ from political debacle.¹ Interestingly most of Sri Aurobindo’s early fundamental spiritual realisations came amidst hectic political activities, for example, the split at the Surat Congress (1907) was followed by the *nirvanic* experience at Baroda. His next momentous spiritual experience came during his incarceration at the Alipore Jail. This phase saw him ‘practise the Yoga of the Gita’ and meditating with the help of the Upanishad and realising the truth of the ‘Divine as all beings and all that is.’^{li} It was during his meditation sessions while at detention at Alipore that ‘he was hearing constantly the voice of Vivekananda speaking to him for a fortnight ‘on a special and limited but very important field of spiritual experience.’^{lii} For historians who perceive secularism in opposition to religion such a situation may appear indecipherable but to the vast majority of the Indian masses such a situation was quite understandable and appeared to be in tune with their spiritual ethos. The masses, it can be argued, did confer on Sri Aurobindo the dual role of political

leader and spiritual mentor. Nolini Kanta Gupta who had accompanied the leader on a tour of Assam and eastern Bengal (in 1909) recorded how common village folks who did not understand English ‘came in crowds...just to hear him [Sri Aurobindo] speak and have his *darshan*.’ Nolini Kanta also recalled that Sri Aurobindo did not limit himself ‘to political matters alone’ for ‘there were many who knew that he was a Yogi and spiritual guide and they sought his help in these matters too.’ During these tours, he remembered, how Sri Aurobindo would sit up meditating the entire night and ‘go to bed only for a short while in the early hours of the morning.’^{liii} It was also during this intense political period that Sri Aurobindo, interestingly, also found time to maintain a record of his spiritual experiences and progresses.^{liv} Referring to this synthesizing aspect of Sri Aurobindo’s personality, Benoy Kumar Sarkar (1887-1949) who had known him from their days of the national education movement, perceptively observed that ‘revolutionary Aurobindo and Yogi Aurobindo co-existed in his [Sri Aurobindo’s] personality side by side’ and the ‘two Aurobindos flourished simultaneously for a long time.’^{lv} Owing to such a tradition of synthesis, Abhedananda could freely speak of the need to achieve spiritual unity for political action. Sri Aurobindo himself observed how most nationalist leaders who made decisive intervention in the early part of the movement ‘were either Yogis or disciples of Yogis’^{lvi} and were motivated by their spiritual preceptors to dedicate their all for national liberation and welfare.

Such examples abound, Satish Chandra Mukherjee (1865-1948) pioneer of the national education movement in Bengal, Manoranjan Guha Thakurta (1858-1919) Sri Aurobindo’s ‘fellow-worker’ in the nationalist movement and chief resource mobiliser of the secret societies and Bipin Chandra Pal (1858-1932) were all disciples of another legendary Bengali Yogi Sri Bijoy Krishna Goswami (1841-1899). Satish Mukherjee was asked by his Guru to ‘devote himself wholly to the education of the youth of the country. He was told that his mission in life was to propagate education’ and was directed to adhere to the path of ‘*Akash-Vritti* (sole dependence on God for material necessities) and not follow any occupation as a means of livelihood’ in order to achieve

fruition in his mission.^{lvii} While in detention in Buxar Bipin Pal accelerated his spiritual practices; his biographers refer to these six months of seclusion from public life as a period of ‘marked internal changes in Bipinchandra himself’ and of his having discovered in the solitude of his cell ‘a deeper meaning of India’s battle for liberation.’ In his flashes of insight Bipin Chandra saw ‘in the national movement the manifestation of the Divine Will, the working of a mightier force’ and realised that the ‘*Swaraj* or Independence for which India was passionately struggling was meant not only for her own sake but also for the sake of the world’^{lviii} – a view that most of the above discussed spiritual preceptors also stressed upon. Bipin Chandra also spoke publicly of his metaphysical realisations. At an informal reception meeting held at the College Square in Calcutta (March 10, 1908), he described the spiritual current, the spiritual *raison d’être* of the revolution:

‘Remember this that the struggle, in which we are engaged just now, is calculated not only to secure the highest good to our own country or nation, but to further equally the universal ends of the race. We are fighting not for ourselves, not for India alone, nor even for Asia, but for England, Europe and the whole world. The issues of this struggle involve the emancipation of India and the salvation of humanity.’^{lix}

The huge corpus of Sri Aurobindo’s writing of the period also talks of the larger goal of the Indian revolution.

VI

In Conclusion

One may refer to the above expressions as fantasies generated by failed political programmes, mental stress or strain or even extreme repression; whatever may be the reading of such phenomena

through the prism of a particular ‘rational’ methodology, it cannot be ignored that there existed a clear liaison, a distinct connect between the spiritual and the political among the early revolutionaries in Bengal – and I have not entered into a discussion here on those in other parts of India.. Those responsible for the spiritual awakening of India and for placing her on the world stage of religions concerned themselves with her political welfare as well. The brief *tour d’horizon* above seems to converge on that fact. Perhaps M.K.Gandhi too, in keeping with that long tradition was conferred the honorific of ‘Mahatma’ by a people used to the blending of the spiritual with the political in their national life. The spiritual sustainers of the early revolutionaries however had no fetish with non-violence – *Ahimsa*, for them ‘*ghoram karma*’ in furthering the cause of national liberation could be done with a perfect spiritual spirit and equanimity. The spiritual currents of the Indian revolution were thus strong and path defining, and especially in Bengal they gave crucial turns to some of the leading figures in their respective fields of action. In order to truly understand the dynamics of revolution and revolutionary movements in Bengal this aspect ought to perhaps never be lost sight of. Developing a false disjoint between the spiritual and political – at least in this case – serves only to create a reductionist reading of the age and to the evaluation of its fundamental contributions to the Indian struggle for emancipation. Our principal protagonists however never displayed any confusion or bewilderment while quite clearly giving rise to and maintaining the spiritual currents that sustained the revolution in their age and at times even beyond. It is perhaps one of the banes of a materialistic polity that its principal interpreters and trendsetters have failed to see this essential link between the spiritual and the temporal that has always formed a natural and integral part of the Indian civilisational experience.

Endnotes:

- Speeches of Gopal Krishna Gokhale*, (Madras: G.A.Natesan & Co., 2nd ed., 1916), pp.1230-31.
- ii Nirodbaran, *Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, vol.1, (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2001), p.26.
- iii Sri Aurobindo, *The Renaissance in India and Other Essays on Indian Culture*, (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1997), pp.388-89.
- iv See e.g., Christophe Jaffrelot 'Ramdev: Swami without Sampradaya' in *The Caravan Magazine*, vol.3, Issue.7, July, 2011 for a confused exposition of the role of spiritual personalities in public affairs in India.
- v See e.g. Ramchandra Guha, 'Performance Artists' in *Hindustan Times*, June 6th, 2011 for the attempt to set parameters for the functioning of Indian spiritual personalities in public affairs. In fact Guha who bases himself on scarce material when referring to Sri Aurobindo omits the fact that even in his retirement Sri Aurobindo was actively interested in political developments in the country, more than once proffered advice when approached by members of the Constitution Drafting Committee of the Constituent Assembly, tirelessly guided some members of his erstwhile revolutionary group in constitutional politics, encouraged in 1949 the launching of a political-cultural affairs fortnightly by his disciples in Bombay, himself rewrote or dictated most of its political editorials between its launch and his passing in end 1950 and was approached on more than one occasion by the veteran liberal Minoo Masani for guidance in his efforts to form a broad anti-Communist coalition just after independence which was to include the likes of Jayaprakash Narayan and Morarji Desai. (see e.g. Adhir Bhattacharjee, *Great Revolutionary Leader Surendra Mohan Ghose*, Calcutta, 1976, K.D.Sethna, *India and the World*, Pondicherry, 1997, Sri Aurobindo, *Autobiographical Notes and Other Writing of Historical Interest*, Pondicherry, 2006.)
- vi Romain Rolland, *Prophets of the New India*, (London: Cassell and Company Ltd., 1930), p.497.
- vii *Ibid.*, p.498.
- viii Bhupendranath Datta, *Swami Vivekananda: Patriot-Prophet-a study*, (Kolkata: Nababharat Publishers, 1954), p.ix.
- ix *Ibid.* The possibility that some sort of a princely revolutionary network existed, at least along the Western Indian coast, may be quite real. Towards the end of his stay in Baroda sometime around 1902 Sri Aurobindo came in contact with the leader of a secret revolutionary society whose chief purpose was 'to prepare a national insurrection.' The leader, Thakur Saheb, a nobleman of Udaipur, working along these lines for quite some time, had, it was said, succeeded in winning over one or two regiments of the Indian army. The society's West India Circle was one of the most active one and Sri Aurobindo and his brother Barin Ghose (1880-1959) attended a secret conclave of revolutionaries in 1902 at Bombay. Thus the revolutionary network in the Western part of the country had achieved a certain degree of consolidation; at least the awareness and a network existed among certain groups, however limited their reach and capacity. (Sri Aurobindo, *On Himself*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 6th imp, 1995, p.4, Peter Heehs, *The Bomb in Bengal*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, rpt, 2004, pp.43-44.) It may also be mentioned that around the time that Vivekananda was touring the Kathiawar region, it was again reported that after an interlude of around four decades following the 1857 revolt – when the 'sanyasi agency' was at work inciting the Indian soldiers – the Sadhus had become active once more. In a report submitted sometime in 1893 Sir E.R.Henry, then Inspector General of Police, Bengal, observed that during the 'anti-cow-killing movement' 'Sadhus and Sanyasis were begging to carry out religious and other propaganda in which they were not so systematically engaged until the last four or five years. Their activities synchronized with the anti-cow killing agitation and the Sadhus were unusually numerous and active in the locality just before the outbreak of any movement in connection with the above.' 'Political Activity of the Sadhus upto 1909' – secret intelligence report cited in Sisir Kar, *Biplabi Andoloner Nepathye Nana Kahini (Behind the Scene Stories of the Revolutionary Movement)*, (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 1992), p.77. It appeared to be a pattern that wherever possibilities emerged of organising or inciting peoples' resistances to the colonial administration the monks and ascetics came forward with their support and counsel. The Swami as a wandering monk with a striking appearance and articulation may have attracted the attention of the colonial intelligence on that ground. That there existed a continuous religious-spiritual undercurrent to Indian expressions of resistance to the alien yoke becomes evident as one goes on to scan the role of the religious preachers in the Indian revolution.
- x C.A.Tegart, 'A Note on the Ramakrishna Mission' (1914), in Amiya Samanta, ed. *Terrorism in Bengal*, vol.4, (Kolkata: Govt. of West Bengal, 1995), p.1342.
- xi *Ibid.*, p.1344.
- xii *Ibid.*, p.1348.
- xiii *Ibid.*
- xiv *Ibid.*, p.1350.
- xv Bengal Govt. Home (Pol.) Conf-Fl. Sl.100, 1912 cited in Sisir Kar, op. cit., p.47.
- xvi Sankari Prasad Basu ed. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, Vol.I, (Calcutta: Nababharat Publishers, 1982), p.11.
- xvii Tegart, op.cit., p.1350.
- xviii *Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, op.cit.

xix R.K.Dasgupta (1915-2009) e.g. argues that ‘Vivekananda was never a revolutionary in the political sense of the

term’. (R.K.Dasgupta, ‘Global Prospect of Vivekananda’s Revolutionary Vision’, in Santi Nath Chattopadhyay ed. *Swami Vivekananda: His Global Vision*, Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 2001, p.33.) While that is quite true, yet one cannot rule out the Swami’s interest in Indian politics of his time and shall have to accept that he did make attempts to bring about a political revolution of sorts. His formula of a social and spiritual revolution found a deep resonance with the political revolutionaries who followed him and many of whom were, as I have tried to argue in this paper, themselves deeply spiritual. Therefore, at least in the early nationalist phase in Bengal, the political and the spiritual revolution were often intertwined and mutually supporting. One cannot refute or disown altogether Vivekananda’s thoughts and efforts for the political revolution in India. S.C.Sengupta in a survey of Vivekananda and Indian nationalism makes an interesting observation while referring to the Swami’s attitude to the then Congress policies and approach. Sengupta observes that the occasional reference to the Congress and Congressmen in Vivekananda’s speeches and writings ‘are not complimentary.’ While ‘he was glad that the Congress had tried to take all Indians within its fold, he did not like the westernized ways of the leaders and their sole gift of ‘shouting’ at public meetings, and he had no patience with their politics of mendicancy, their begging the foreign Government crumbs of favour, and he knew, too, that most of these people had very imperfect knowledge of the Indian masses who form the vast majority of the population.’ Sengupta argues that the Swami must have had ‘these leaders in view when he wrote to one his leading disciples, Alasinga, ‘that he would have ‘no political nonsense.’ (S.C.Sengupta, *Swami Vivekananda and Indian Nationalism* (1984), Kolkata: The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, rpt, 2001, p.67.) In support of this it may be mentioned that sometime around early 1902 the Swami had asked Ashwini Kumar Datta(1856-1923) the front ranking Swadeshi leader from Barisal ‘Can you tell me what the Congress is doing for the masses? Do you think merely passing a few resolutions will bring you freedom? I have no faith in that. The masses must be awakened ...the essence of my religion is strength... Strength is religion, and nothing is greater than strength.’ (Prithwindra Mukherjee, ‘Sri Aurobindo and Bagha Jatin: Elements of the Pre-Gandhian Struggle for Independence’, in *The Asianists’ Asia Vol.V, Autumn 2008*, p.69) The Swami’s approach to politics thus does not appear to be a general repudiation of that field of human action but rather a disapproval of the political methods then used for national regeneration.

xx Hemchandra Ghose conveyed the entire conversation to Bhupendranath Dutta, Vivekananda’s younger brother and once an active revolutionary himself, in a note dated 18.5.1954. (*Patriot Prophet*, op.cit., pp.331-335). Most of those boys who had attended this session with the monk became latter active revolutionaries themselves, e.g., Srish Pal was to later assassinate inspector Nandalal Banerjee who had got Prafulla Chaki arrested after the Muzaffarpur bomb attack in May 1908, Maulavi Alimuddin an active participant in the Swadeshi movement, and Harish Datta of the Rodda Arms Case of 1914. (*Patriot-Prophet*, op.cit., p.331). For those who doubt the veracity of a statement written about five decades after it had actually taken place, it may be mentioned that Satish Bose, the one to actually start the Anushilan Samiti in 1902 had himself reported an interaction along similar lines. (ibid.)

xxi *Letters of Swami Vivekananda*, (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 16th imp, 2007).

xxii Prithwindra Mukherjee, *Les Racines Intellectuelles du Mouvement d’Indépendance the l’Inde (1893-1918)*, (Paris: Éditions Codex, 2010), p.95. (Translation mine from the original).

xxiii *Sedition Committee Report – 1918*, (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, 1918) p.17. Also known as the Rowlatt Committee Report on Sedition, the Committee had four members excluding the President and the Secretary. Two out these were Indians, C.V.Kumaraswami Sastri, Judge of the Madras High Court and P.C.Mitter, Additional Member of the Bengal Legislative Council. Interestingly the report also excerpted the following speech of Swami Vivekananda in order to support its interpretation of the use of strength for gaining freedom, “Oh India, wouldst thou, with these provisions only, scale the highest pinnacle of civilisation and greatness? Wouldst thou attain, by means of thy disgraceful cowardice, that freedom deserved only by the brave and the heroic...O Thou Mother of strength take away my weakness, take away my unmanliness, and make me a man!” – *Vivekananda’s Works: Part IV – Mayavati Memorial Edition: pp. 970-71. (sic.)* (Ibid.)

xxiv R.C.Majumdar, *Swami Vivekananda: a Historical Review* (1965) (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, rpt, 2004), p.108.

xxv Biman Behari Majumdar, *Militant Nationalism in India* (1966) cited in Sisir Kar, op.cit., p.38.

xxvi ‘Vivekananda’ in *Collected Works of Nolini Kanta Gupta, Vol.II*, ((Calcutta: Nolini Kanta Gupta Birth Centenary Celebrations Committee, 3rd ed., 1989), p.103.

xxvii Haridas Mukherjee, ‘Swami Abhedananda: An Outstanding Personality’, in *Prabuddha Bharata*, June, 2010, vol.115, No.6, (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama) p.386.

xxviii Ibid.

xxix Tegart, op.cit., p. 1354.

xxx Swami Abhedananda, *India and Her People*, (New York: Vedanta Society, 1906).

- xxxi Ibid., p.9.
- xxxii Ibid., pp.136-137.
- xxxiii Ibid., p.147.
- xxxiv For a detailed review of the *Jugantar* articles and editorials see e.g. Angshuman Bandyopadhyay ed., *Agnijuger Agnikatha*, (Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, 2001).
- xxxv 'Address to the Students of Bangalore, Aug 5, 1906' in *Abhedananda in India in 1906*, (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math (1968), rpt, 1996), p.144.
- xxxvi Ibid., p.197.
- xxxvii Prithwindra Mukherjee, 'Jatin Mukherjee (1879-1915) – Indo German Conspiracy (1914-1918), *Extract from the Indian Historical Records Commission – Proceedings of the 45th Session, Vol.XLV*, Mysore, February 1977, p.248.
- xxxviii Prithwindra Mukherjee, *Sadhak Biplabi Jatindranath*, (Calcutta: West Bengal State Book Board, 1990), p.32.
- xxxix Ibid.
- xl *Les Racines Intellectuelles*, op.cit., pp.23-24, 141
- xli Mukherjee, *Indo-German Conspiracy*, op.cit., p.250.
- xlii Ibid., p.251.
- liiii Ibid. Interestingly Roy himself, after a long détour via-Communism-Secular Humanism-Radical Humanism, in his last days seems to have returned to the spiritual fold. In 1950 when mostly bed-ridden and barely able to walk, Roy implored 'those taking care of him to drive him to the Hindu holy town of Haridwar for the Kumbhamela festival... Roy's protestations were so strong that only the firm intervention of a doctor, insisting that the trip would do harm, could put plans in abeyance.' (see. e.g. Kris Manjappa, *M.N.Roy: Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism*, (New Delhi: Routledge, 2010), p.168.)
- xliv Interview with Bhupendra Kumar Datta, (1892-1979), *Oral History Transcript (No.390)*, Nehru Memorial Museum & Library (NMML), New Delhi cited in Manini Chatterjee, *Do & Die: The Chittagong Uprising (1930-34)*, (New Delhi: Picador ed. 2010).
- xlvi 'Protecting India's History from a Distant Land' interview of Prithwindra Mukherjee in *The Undercurrent.ca* at : <http://theundercurrent.ca/canada2A.htm?id=8522> (20.10.2010)
- xlvi For a detailed narration of spiritual urges and experiences see e.g. Interview with Surendra Mohan Ghose (1893-1976), *Oral History Transcript (No.301, 1968)*, NMML, New Delhi.
- xlvi Ibid.
- xlvi See e.g. Anirban Ganguly, 'Interventions-II: Previsions of Partition and Other Issues' in *Mother India, July 2010*, (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram) for a discussion of Sri Aurobindo's spiritual life amidst his political action.
- xlvi See for beginning of yoga, *On Himself*, op.cit., p.19, Nirodbaran ed. *Talks*, op.cit., p.106.
- l See e.g. Sumit Sarkar's unsubstantiated stand on the matter in his *Modern India (1885-1947)*, (New Delhi: Macmillan, rpt,2010), p.125.
- li *On Himself*, op.cit., p.19.
- lii Vide a detailed note in Nirodbaran ed. *Talks*, op.cit., pp.136-38, for the experience of hearing Swami Vivekananda's voice in the Alipore Jail.
- lii Nolini Kanta Gupta, *Smritir Pata* (Beng.) cited in Rishabchand, *Sri Aurobindo: His Life Unique*, (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1981), p.328.
- liv Vide *Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo, Vol.10*, (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2001), pp.33-37 for Sri Aurobindo's diary notes on yogic visions and experiences kept between 17 and 25 June 1909.
- lv For Sarkar's observation see Prof. Haridas Mukherjee's S.P. Sen Memorial Lecture, appendix II in *Sri Aurobindo & The New Thought in Indian Politics*, (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 2nd ed., 1997), Haridas Mukherjee, ed. *Binoy Sarkar's Baithake* [Beng], (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, rpt, 2003, p.68.
- lvi Nirodbaran ed. *Talks*, op.cit., p.26.
- lvii Haridas & Uma Mukherjee, *The Origins of the National Education Movement*, (Calcutta: National Council of Education, Bengal, 2nd revised ed., 2000), pp.191-92
- lviii Haridas & Uma Mukherjee, *Bipin Chandra Pal and India's Struggle for Swaraj*, (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, rpt., 2007) p.81.
- lix Ibid.

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Bengal's Revolutionaries and the Muslims of Bengal. What Went Wrong and How ?

Saradindu Mukherji

Introduction

The revolutionary movement in modern India began in Maharashtra in late 19th century. The memory of Maratha domination over many parts of India, and the subsequent loss of political power following the 4th Anglo-Maratha War(1818), and the Shivaji tradition were the bedrocks of this revolutionary movement. The assassination of two British officials Rand and Ayerst in Poona in 1897 marked the beginning of this movement that was carried forward by the activities of Marathi revolutionaries. Bal Gangadhar Tilak played a huge role in consolidating the nationalist struggle in Maharashtra.

Bengal Revolutionaries Outside Bengal

In the initial period, some Bengali revolutionaries were also operating from outside Bengal: some of them were based in Bihar, United Provinces, Delhi and elsewhere. There were also many revolutionaries from Bengal who worked from foreign soil. Their works constitute one of the most glorious chapters in the history of India's freedom movement and there is no dearth of literature on this theme.¹

It is a sad commentary on post-independence India's academic and political culture that these soul stirring stories of dedication and selfless sacrifice for the independence of India are being deliberately smothered in the political discourse, media coverage and the concerned

academic disciplines that are taught/researched in contemporary India.²

Uniqueness of Bengal's Revolutionaries

David M. Laushey in his well known work points out that, “That terrorist movement in India had deep roots only in Bengal. Wherever it broke out in other provinces, it was quickly suppressed through ordinary criminal procedures. Only in Bengal did the movement have organizational continuity and popular appeal and support.”³

Objective of the paper

The paper is not on the entire gamut of the history of the revolutionary movement in Bengal or its causation. Neither does it seek to analyse the various strands in our national movement-their strengths, weaknesses and their overall role in the attainment of independence. Its objective is to find out as to why the Bengali speaking Muslims generally kept aloof from this unprecedented revolutionary movement which was almost exclusively dominated by the Bengali Hindus.

Origin and Early History:

One may begin with a brief mention of the protest and uprisings of the Hindus of Bengal against the Islamic conquerors and rulers of their land. Sir Jadunath in his numerous writings and many others have written on this aspect. Dinesh Chandra Sen had shown as to how the people of Bengal had resisted the foreign revenue collectors and tyrants.⁴

The roots of this revolutionary (or as imperialists called them, “terrorist”) strand in Bengal is traced to Atmonnati Sabha (Self Developing Society) set up in 1897. This was an organization devoted to literary and physical culture.⁵ Thereafter, a revolutionary organization in Bengal was set

up in Calcutta in 1900 by Pramathanath Mitra, a practising barrister, Sarala Devi Ghoshal of the Tagore family, and a Japanese gentleman named Okakura. Their objective was to put up an armed resistance against the colonial administration. The assassination of Ayerst and Rand in Poona in 1897 by the revolutionaries of Maharashtra might have been the source of an immediate inspiration, besides, of course, the on-going example of the Irish revolutionaries against their British colonial masters might have influenced them.

Their countrymen called the revolutionaries militant nationalists, and they were known as “terrorists” in the colonial lexicon. Revolutionaries were one of the three anti-colonial groups; these three groups stood on a different ideological and activist plain than the Moderate Congressmen. The two others were the Extremists in the Congress as represented and led by Bipin Chandra Pal, Aurobindo Ghosh (later Sri Aurobindo of Pondicherry fame) and Rabindranath Tagore’s Swadeshi Samaj group. The revolutionaries had set up their network independently of other two groups all over Bengal.⁶

Since an account of the activities of the armed revolutionaries and all those who helped them with all kinds of resources including the firearms, preparation of pamphlets, booklets and revolutionary literature is beyond the remit of this paper, we avoid all specifics of such revolutionaries from these pioneers to Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and many others, and their sufferings in the British gaols- from Andamans to Lahore and Mandalay to Calcutta and numerous other place.

A Definition: Nature and Character of the Revolutionary Movement

As H.W. Hale, then associated with the Intelligence Bureau in the 1930s described it, “Terrorism, as

distinct from other revolutionary methods such as Communism or the Ghadr Movement, may be said to denote the commission of outrages of a comparatively “individual” nature. That is to say, the terrorist holds the belief that Indian independence can best be brought about by a series of revolutionary outrages calculated to instil fear into the British official classes and to drive them out of India”.⁷ Hale further adds that the “terrorist” also “commits other outrages for the purpose of collecting funds for the purchase of arms, for the making of bombs and for the maintenance of his party, hoping that the masses will be drawn to his support either by fear or admiration”.⁸

As R.C. Majumdar remarks, “In the first place, the so-called terrorist activities were neither sudden and isolated reactions against any specific measures of the Government, nor designed as a remedy against any particular grievance. The overt acts of secret societies were the outward manifestations of a determined and violent resistance to the British with a deliberate view to overthrowing their rule in India”⁹ Majumdar further clarifies, “The real genesis of these secret societies is to be traced back to the growth of new nationalism... and is merely a further development of the same spirit in an extreme form. Save in methods of operation it is hard to distinguish the terrorists from the true nationalists of the new school. The essential and fundamental ideas are the same in the two cases ; but while the nationalists relied mainly on passive resistance or other forms of self-assertion on an organized basis, the extreme left school had no faith in these methods and activities, and regarded armed resistance as the only feasible way of destroying British power.” He further elucidates, “As the immediate or open organization of such resistance was not practicable, they had to prepare the ground by secret-societies. For these reasons, this new cult of violence, forming the left wing of the new nationalism, may be termed militant nationalism”.¹⁰

In light of this credible bench-mark set by himself, Majumdar, has rightly dismissed the

tendency on the part of the colonial authorities to call this revolutionary upsurge as “terrorism” or ‘anarchism” (ibid. p161). He further clarifies that “the members of the underground movement in Bengal were not anarchists or nihilists whose only aim was to create chaos or confusion. However their methods might differ, they were all inspired by the common aim of driving away the British from India and establishing Swaraj, i.e. the Government of the people, by the people, for the people”.¹¹

Muslim non-participation: Problems of an Artificial and Imposed Identity.

The apathy to the nationalism and national interest which I believe was evident among the Islamists (we need to distinguish them from common Muslims) in Bengal, may provide the theological-ideological-social backdrop to the problem we are going to discuss which would put it in proper historical perspective.

There was a growing tendency to work for the consolidation of the Ummah – the so called world-wide fraternity of the Muslims, and set up a transcontinental Islamic state of Khilafat/Qaliphate. It is a well known fact that despite the then Muslims being half of Bengal’s population, we do not find many Muslims from Bengal among the freedom fighters of any shade, though there were many Muslim political activists who used to pursue anti-British politics. This strand could be explained by various factors, which according to the present researcher had deep socio-psychological roots in the Islamic/Arabized segments of Bengal/India of that time.

The principal reason is to be found in the Bengali-speaking Muslims’ perception of their identity, and a dilemma as to whether they were Bengalis/ Indians, or Muslims – representatives of a distant conquering imperialist creed, with no attachment to the land where they have lived since time immemorial. While a small proportion can justly claim to be descendants of Central Asian

Muslims, an overwhelming majority of them were descendants from the local Hindu, Buddhist, animist forefathers. The people of foreign origin – Ashrafs were a small percentage while people of indigenous origin, the atraps/ajlafs were numerically much larger.¹²

One of the classic examples of this identity crisis and resultant mindset has been vividly described by Nirode Chandra Choudhury :

Many Indian Muslims, even those from East Bengal who were overwhelmingly converts, hardly regarded India as their country and affected to be colonists from the Islamic Middle East. I still remember the answer I got from a Muslim of my own district (Mymensingh) when I asked him what fruit he considered best and liked best. “Date of Iraq’ was the prompt reply. Of course to me this deliberate insult to the mango seemed both insufferable and ridiculous.¹³

All those former “Unbelievers” who went through conversion to Islam and the resultant Arabization – minimal initially, and more subsequently, whether in Persia or Algeria, India or Indonesia, underwent drastic radicalisations. Besides, in addition to a change in inherited family names, they were expected to discard their traditional belief systems. This did not happen in a day. In certain parts of the newly conquered Islamic territories the new dictates were quickly accepted by the converts being often forced to follow the Arabic/Islamic rituals while in many places it took centuries to be accepted and that too not ungrudgingly. The overwhelming majority of the Muslims of Bengal like other Muslims elsewhere were reluctant converts.¹⁴

Initially, in Bengal, Islam sat lightly on the new converts. They simply refused to change, not even their family names as the colonial officials noted with much surprise during the course of

census enumeration in the twentieth century. It is this persistent refusal to transform themselves into Arab or any such Central Asian clones and follow their way of life and share their world-view that explains the dogmatism of the Faraizis and Wahabis in Bengal whose basic objectives were to cut off the converted Muslims of Bengal from their Hindu-Buddhist-Animist-Pagan roots and impose on them an Arabic/Islamic identity. In most cases this was crude and painful for all those who wanted to participate in the indigenous culture even after their forefathers had been converted to Islam.

There is a conceptual problem that relates to the conscious policy of our mainstream intelligentsia to suppress the truth about the history of conversion to Islam, and smother the history of anti-Hindu policies and pogroms pursued by Islamic marauders-preachers, propagandists, military commanders and rulers. Constraints of space does not permit any further discussion on this crucial aspect.

For the sake of illustration one may mention a typical example. Titu Mir (1782-1831), one of the “icons” of Bengal’s “progressive” intelligentsia, is often projected as a genuine peasant leader and anti-British fighter, and hence an early “freedom fighter”. While Titu Mir’s political repertoire had a certain agenda for the poorer peasantry, yet it also had a larger content of Islamic ideological baggage, including contempt for the polytheists. The scriptures sanctioned a Jihad against them. Titu was more of an Islamist partisan than anything else. A devoted disciple of Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi (1786-1831), the founder of the Tariqah-i-Muhammadiyah, and a well known Jihadi leader, Titu Mir, while opposing the landed gentry, who in most cases happened to be Hindus, also opposed the idolaters for religious reason. Once, his followers while attacking a village owned by the a Hindu landlord killed a cow in a public place and desecrated the nearby temple.¹⁵

Strengthening the extra-territorial sentiments and loyalty was further achieved by the Pan Islamic movements and the visit to various parts of India, including Bengal by Jamal al din Afghani.¹⁶ During this period there existed an elite group of Islamic supremacists who thought that they alone had a right to rule India, keeping it perpetually as a dar-ul-Islam, and prevent it from degenerating into a dar-ul-harb, have been trying to establish a bond between the Islamic and British imperialists on the specious ground that they being people of the “Book”, must have cordial relationship at the cost of the people who were without a “Book”. From the mid 18th century to Syed Ahmad Khan this approach is very clear. But it did not have much impact on the British, though they would turn against the Hindus gradually after the initial stirrings of Indian nationalism came to the surface in the late nineteenth century.

James Campbell Ker, who served in the ICS (1902-1930), and held many senior positions in the Intelligence Dept in India, and author of “Political Trouble in India 1907-1917”, also observed the following factors on the non-participation of Muslims in this movement:

Though persistent endeavours were made by the Hindu agitators from 1907 onwards, to induce Mahomedans to join the revolutionary movement, they with a few insignificant exceptions, consistently held aloof. The Partition agitation in Bengal, as already pointed out, was largely a question of Hindu or Mahomedan supremacy, and in the west of India Shivaji movement, on account of its historical association, was equally distasteful to Mahomedans. The war between Italy and Turkey, however, which began in 1911, led to a certain amount of Moslem feeling against Government, for it was considered, out of deference to their religious susceptibilities, the British Government might have backed Turkey in the war.¹⁷

The politically active Muslims of India were more involved in Pan Islamic activities and showed greater concern for distant Muslim countries. Abul Kalam Azad spoke of the “war between the Crescent and the Cross”.¹⁸ There are also examples of Muslims from Rangpur and Dacca districts in Bengal (now in Bangladesh) involved in the Wahabi uprising in the North-Western province, with money being provided by someone from Rangpur district (now in Bangladesh).¹⁹ Ker cites from a letter written by a Bengali revolutionary involved in the “Dalhousie Square bomb outrage”; the letter was addressed to a “person of great authority in revolutionary circles” which noted with great concern the fact, that “Indian Mahomedans have awakened, but they incline towards pan-Islamism which is ruinous to our cause. They want to bring in Turkey and Afghanistan.”²⁰

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, son of an Arab immigrant, who later became Minister for Education in Nehru’s Cabinet, was living in Calcutta in the early 20th Century. He writes about his experiences: “In those days the revolutionary groups were recruited exclusively from the Hindu middle classes. In fact, all the revolutionary groups were then actively anti-Muslim.” Azad elaborates in a quite straightforward manner,

They saw that the British Government was using the Muslims against India’s political struggle and the Muslims were playing the Government’s game. East Bengal had become a separate province and Bampfylde Fuller, who was then Lieutenant Governor, openly said that the Government looked upon the Muslim community as its favourite wife. The revolutionaries felt that the Muslims were an obstacle to the attainment of Indian freedom...

Azad offers further explanation:

“One other factor was responsible for the revolutionaries’ dislike of Muslims. The Government felt that the political awakening among the Hindus of Bengal was so great that no Hindu officer could be fully trusted in dealing with these revolutionary activities. They therefore imported a number of Muslim officers from the United Provinces for the manning of the Intelligence Branch of the Police. The result was that the Hindus of Bengal began to feel that the Muslims as such were against political freedom and against the Hindu community”.²²

Following Azad’s contact with Shyam Sunder Chakravarty, a revolutionary, the former met Sri Arabindo Ghosh on “two or three occasions”; he was “attracted to revolutionary politics and joined one of the groups.”²³ We have no other information about the names of the groups or the kind of activities he was associated with, or the names of his associates. Azad provides no other details of his “revolutionary” days, nor does any official record show anything more on this aspect. So it must have been a minor association.

Rajat Ray’s explanation on the non-participation of Muslims in the revolutionary movement in Bengal as a result of the exclusive “Hindu domination” of the revolutionary movements and their use of Hindu ‘ritual and symbolism’,²⁴ offers a partial answer. The fact remains that the Islamic leadership in Bengal held extra-territorial loyalty, as mentioned above; the leadership included loyalists and followers of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and his Aligarh movement, and people like Syed Ameer Ali.

Ray chooses to overlook this simple fact of history in an impulse of “secular” and “progressive” history-writing that ignores empirical data in a propagandist line of argument. Ray also ignores the fact that most rituals which are called Hindu are basically of indigenous cultural

origin and they are hardly scriptural in nature. They are cultural customs and conventions rooted in the historical evolution of the Bengalis. How could they become intolerable and unacceptable for the local Muslims?

Coming back to Azad, I tend to accept Francis Robinson's opinion, that Azad's relationship with the nationalist movement was dictated by his political opportunism.²⁵ It is a matter of record that Azad the so called "nationalist" Muslim was more in the Deobandi mould whose prime concern was with Islam and the overall interest of the ummah, and not so much with the interest of India as a whole.²⁶

There were not many followers of stalwarts like Kazi Abdul Wadud (1894-1970) in his own community. Critical of the khilafat movement and people like Syed Ameer Ali and an admirer of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee,²⁷ Wadud was without any significant support base in his own community. Unfortunately, among the Muslims of Bengal, there were not many voices like Wadud's.

Towards a Conclusion

Channelising the Muslim mindset and politics against their Hindu compatriots and towards separatist tendencies continued throughout the nineteenth century and became more assertive and strident through Islamist associations, the movements in favour of Bengal partition (1905-9), setting up of the Muslim League in Dhaka in 1906, Aga Khan's Simla deputation in 1906, separate electorate, Khilafat movement and many such developments culminating in the atrocities against Hindus in Calcutta and Noakhali, and then partition of Bengal in 1947 and the accompanying holocaust.²⁸ As I wrote elsewhere,

Given this – history of fierce blood-letting, conversion, destruction of Hindu heritage and systematic decimation of the Bengali Hindus at the hands of his compatriots, who had embraced an alien faith and Perso-Arabic culture, even while retaining the Bengali language with an ever-increasing inputs from Persian-Arabic vocabulary, it would be inappropriate to treat the Bengali speaking Hindus at par with the Bengali speaking Muslims. An over-emphasis on the latter's artificially created differences to the exclusion of the inherent and the original, makes the assumed identity both unnatural and absurd.²⁹

Radicalisation and regimentation have been going on in the Muslim societies all over the world, particularly in the Indian subcontinent for a long time.³⁰ The non-participation of the Muslims in Bengal's revolutionary movement, individual exceptions apart, constitutes a chapter within a long history of the radicalisation of Islam.

Endnotes:

1. Majumdar, R.C. Chapter V11. "Militant Nationalism", pp. 265-327", pp160-174, in History of the Freedom Movement in India, Vol.ii. (Firma K. L. Mukhopadhaya, Calcutta, 1963), still remains one of the best accounts on this aspect of India's freedom movement. No wonder, Majumdar was an anthem to India's ruling class of all hues.

Haldar Jibantara, Anushilan Samitir Itihash, Sutradhar, Kolkata, B.S. 1416, 2009, a reprint of the original published first in B.S. 1356, 1950. I also recall with respect and immense gratitude the privilege of a long meeting with this revolutionary in his Calcutta residence in 1986. I am grateful to his son Nirupam Haldar, for a copy of this remarkable account as penned by Jibantara Haldar himself. McLane John, Indian Nationalism and the Early Congress, Princeton University Press, 1977, ch.11. "The Hindu Martial Revival and the Chapekar Terrorist Society", pp.332-358.

2. In course of a discussion on the scrapping of a sacrilegious article on Ramayana in the Delhi university syllabus and the politically motivated history that is promoted by the government in the Rajya Sabha T.V. channel(18 Oct, 2011), this writer had pointed out as to how the role of the Indian revolutionaries in our freedom movement is virtually ignored. Also Saradindu Mukherji's book review in The Sunday Pioneer, 13 July 2008, "Two Poles of Truth" on this graceless political-academic policy of India's "eminent" public sector historians.
3. Laushey David M, Bengal Terrorism and the Marxist Left : Aspects of Regional Nationalism in India 1905-1942(Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyaya, Calcutta, 1975), p.1.
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8. Ibid, p.1.
9. Majumdar, R.C. op.cit. p.160.
10. Ibid. pp.160-161.

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NATIONAL AWAKENING THROUGH THE SWADESHI JATRAS OF

MUKUNDA DAS

KALYAN SARKAR

Overview

Mukunda Das has traditionally been regarded by historians as a marginal character that deserves no more than a passing mention. His role has variously been described as marginal, and limited to rural Bengal, especially to the district of Barisal. While, in the rare few discourses on his life and achievements he has been described as the connecting media between the urban Bhadrakol leadership and the intellectually impoverished rural masses through his Swadeshi Jattras, precious little has been done in analyzing Mukunda Das' own thoughts on national awakening and the methodology that he applied in order to implement his ideas in practice.

Whatever may have been the reason behind the neglect, it may be well argued that it has been gross injustice to the contribution of the great patriot towards the national awakening in India in the early 20th century. The present discourse attempts to break free from the shackles of institutionalized historiography of post-Independence India and evaluate the multi-faceted personality of Mukunda Das in a non-conformist manner from the perspective of the nationalist ideology on the very foundation of which he flourished as a playwright, composer, actor and a patriot.

Influence of Mahatma Ashwini Kumar Dutta

Mukunda came from a modest background. His grandfather was a boatman who plied in the

Vikrampur – Barisal route. His father was a small time grocer, who later took up the job of an orderly at the Barisal district court. He was born Yajneshwar De, the first of two children to Gurudayal De and Shyamasundari Devi in the year 1878, in the village of Banari on the banks of the Padma, in the Vikrampur Pargana of erstwhile Dhaka district. At the age of seven his family settled in Barisal as an environmental refugee, when his ancestral village was lost to river erosion. He attended the Barisal Zilla School for a few years, where he was an irregular pupil who spent most of time fishing, bird trapping and playing with the neighbourhood boys.

When he was fifteen, his father admitted him to Brojomohun School in the second grade. The Brojomohun School was the brainchild of Ashwini Kumar Dutta, who had already laid down the foundation stone of national movement in Barisal. He had quit his materially benefitting law practice for a more spiritually rewarding vocation of social work. He pioneered the national education in Barisal through the establishment of Brojomohun School, and later Brojomohun College, that went on to become one of the premier educational institutes of British India. He took the lead in the struggle against social injustices through a successful movement for the entry of lower castes into the Kapil Muni's temple.¹ He was instrumental in the relief work during the devastating famine in Barisal. Though these noble acts of benevolence he endeared himself towards the masses and came to be known as the *Mahatma* – the great soul. Bipin Chandra Pal had once commented that if there has to be one true leader in Bengal, it has to be none other than Mahatma Ashwini Kumar Dutta.

Dutta, with his towering personality and down to earth attitude, was like a father figure to the youth of Barisal. He was instrumental in moulding the lives of many young men gone astray, by drawing them in the running stream of national movement. The life of Bhagai Halder underwent a positive change with the magic touch of Dutta. He went on to pioneer the spread of modern

education among the Namashudras. He established schools both for boys and girls,² the latter standing out as the most impressive hallmark of the progressiveness that permeated in him from his educationist mentor (Dasgupta 147). Hem Chandra Mukhopadhyay, too, was resurrected by the Mahatma in a similar manner and he went on to emerge as a poet. Not only he was acclaimed by the Kolkata literati, he was also lavishly praised by none other than Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose (Dasgupta 147).

Young Mukunda found a welcome change in the new environment. One of the many facets of the national movement had been the emphasis on national education through the foundation of national schools and the framing of a national education policy, as opposed to the colonial education imparted at the government sponsored schools. During the Durga Puja at the school, for example, the pupils would sing national songs in chorus. Mukunda, gifted by a melodious voice from his childhood soon found himself in the thick of things. As a student of the fourth grade he led the chorus for ‘চল রে চল রে ও ভাই, জীবন আহবে চল’ by Manomohan Chakraborty and impressed Dutta. Formal education, however, failed to attract Mukunda. After six years in the school, he dropped out, failing to clear the eighth grade final examinations. That Yajneswar De, a student of the Brojomohun School failed to appear for the Entrance, made Dutta take a serious note of it, not only as the founder of the premier institute that had set very high standards in imparting quality education to its pupils and made a mark of itself with a stunning success rate, but more as the true guardian of the youth of Barisal. Realizing the potential of a different nature in the energetic youth, the Mahatma called for a special counseling of Yajneswar. He sat with Yajneswar in the seclusion of his study and what transpired in the meeting can be gauged for the positive impact that it had on young Yajneswar’s life in the years to come. Not only it was baptism into nationalism, it was an initiation of transformation at the personal level too .

From Kirtan to Swadeshi Yatra

At the age of nineteen, Mukunda had joined the *kirtan* group of Bireshwar Gupta,³ the leading *kirtaniya* of Barisal. When famous *kirtanias* like Nilkantha Adhikari performed in Barisal, he used to take down notes. Soon he formed a group of his own, with himself as the lead singer as well as the performer.

In 1905, during the height of anti-Partition movement, Mahatma Ashwini Kumar Dutta delivered an inspiring speech at a meeting at the Barisal Town Hall, appealing to the masses to rise against the imperialist move of partitioning Bengal. He further expressed his desire that his message should be spread and wide, to the villages of Bengal, to each and every person. Mukunda Das was deeply moved by the words of his mentor. He resolved to fulfill the wish of his political guru, through the vehicle of village jatra. Within a period of three months, he composed his masterpiece - *Matripuja*, a nationalist drama themed on the freedom movement.

Mukunda raised a drama troupe, mostly drawn from his *kirtan* group, with himself as the lead actor and singer. In early 1906, Mukunda staged *Matripuja* in different parts of Barisal district. Then he travelled with his troupe to the eastern districts of Noakhali and Tipperah,⁴ returning to Barisal before the monsoons. In June, he staged *Matripuja* at the Swadeshi Utsav in Barisal, where it received high praises and acclaims from the national leadership. From October, he toured Faridpur. In April 1907, Mukunda staged *Matripuja* at the palace of Rai Bahadur.

As with village yatras, Mukunda's Swadeshi Jatra *Matripuja* too was staged on an open stage, usually in the village fair grounds. An image of the time devouring, all conquering and awe inspiring Kali would adorn the back of the stage (Goswami 333). The drama would start with the beating of the drums in chorus, as if a war cry against the imperialist forces. Mukunda, the general

of the mission would appear in a saffron robe and a saffron turban, with eyes full of determination and a body language full of positive intent. With the beating of the drums, Mukunda would sing the opening patriotic song, urging the ‘effeminate’ Bengali Hindus to stand up and be counted as a nation of heroes (Chanda 654). The central theme of the play was the freedom from India from the yoke of imperialism. The children of *Bharat Mata* would lay down their lives in order to liberate their motherland.

The impact that it had on the rural masses was phenomenal to say the least. The day of the *Jatra* was like an auspicious day for the village folks. People would come from far off places, in country boats, bullock carts and on foot. Nobody would be left out. Children would accompany their parents, young mothers would carry their little ones and even old men and women would trudge with their walking sticks (Chanda 854). The scene of the drama was as if a holy place, where the audience would gather like pilgrims for a holy dip. Listening to *Matripuja* would as if earn them the virtue earned by listening to a recitation of Ramayana. However, the success of Mukunda Das lay in the visible impact it had on the audience. Through his songs he would urge the womenfolk to boycott foreign made glass bangles, and at the end of the show one would find broken glass bangles scattered the floor.

Imprisonment on charges of sedition

As the anti-Partition and Swadeshi movements flooded the partitioned halves, the imperial authorities launched a violent crackdown on the activists. Most of the Swadeshi organizations including the Barisal based Swadesh Bandhab Samiti was banned (Dasgupta 155). The houses of many respectable Hindus of Barisal were searched by the police. Even the ashram of Sarat Chandra Sen was searched.⁵ Mahtma Ashwini Kumar Dutta (along with seven other leaders) was banished outside Eastern Bengal and Assam and barred from entering the province. *Matripuja* was banned.

The government of Eastern Bengal and Assam promulgated thirty six back to back injunctions banning the staging of the *jatra*. Mukunda Das was banned from entering the places where his programmes were scheduled. He had no other option but to disband his troupe, albeit temporarily.

Mukunda Das however could not remain idle for long. As soon as the tension eased a little, he slipped out of the province. Regrouping his troupe he successfully staged *Matripuja* in Bagerhat in the district of Khulna.⁶ Emboldened by the success, he set sail for Uttar Shahbazpur on the banks of Meghna for his next performance in the November of 1908. He was arrested on board his boat near Dadpur railway station by a patrol of the river police and produced to the Barisal court. The police filed a case, but Mukunda Das was released on bail of six thousand rupees. Soon he was arrested again, this time on charges of sedition under clause 124 (A). Mukunda Das' act of sedition constituted of a verse in a song in the *Matripuja* that read – ‘ছিল ধান গোলা ভরা, শ্বেত ইন্দুরে করল সার’ that translates into the following – ‘the granary was full of rice, now eaten up by the white mice’. Bhabarajan Majumdar, the principal of Brojomohun College too was arrested for reproducing Mukunda Das's seditious song in his anthology of nationalist songs titled *Deshar Gan*, literally meaning ‘songs of the country’. The very next day, Nibaran Mukhopadhyay, the owner of Adarsha Press where *Matripuja* was printed was arrested. Along with him was arrested Mukunda Das's younger brother Ramesh Chandra, without any apparent reason.

The patriotic fervor that ran high in the veins of Barisal bought the innumerable sympathizers of Mukunda Das to the court to stand in his defense. Nabin Chandra Dasgupta came from the remote island of Bhola while Sarat Chandra Sen, who later became Swami Purnananda Giri, came out of his spiritual seclusion at the trial of Mukunda Das. Mukunda Das was awarded a sentence of three years rigorous imprisonment together with a fine of three hundred rupees. Majumdar was

awarded a sentence of one and a half years, while Ramesh Chandra De and Nibaran Mukhopadhyay were let off with six and four months of imprisonments respectively (Dasgupta 157).

Mukunda's family had to suffer many hardships on his imprisonment. His wife passed away. Mukunda's father, who had earlier quit his job as an orderly at the Barisal court, was left with no other option than to sell his grocery store to pay the fine. Without the job and the grocery, Mukunda's parents were reduced to penury. After his release from the jail, Mukunda took the initiative to establish a grocery store once again. Mahatma Ashwini Kumar Dutta, who had returned to Barisal by then, compensated Mukunda with a sum of hundred rupees. The retail businesses agreed to supply goods to Mukunda on credit, on the assurance of payments in periodic installments. However, the loss of Mukunda's brief conjugal life was not to be compensated. He remained a lifelong widower.

Release and Later Life

Mukunda however could not keep himself from the *jatras*. With a renewed vigour he staged *Samaj* before the Durga Puja in 1910. But the chord had been broken by then. With the first phase of revolutionary nationalism over and most of the leaders and revolutionaries languishing in jails, the patriotic life current had come to a standstill. Occasionally, he would perform as a singer, but his *jatras* became less eventful.

Mukunda was always in touch with the national leadership though. In 1917, he sang at the marriage party of Chittaranjan Das's daughter. Immediately after that, he sang the songs of *Matripuja* at the University Institute Hall of Calcutta University, at a special request from the Kolkata intelligentsia. Deshbandhu Chitta Ranjan Das awarded him with a gold medal and Sir Asutosh Mookerjee awarded him a walking stick (Sen 55).

During the Non-Cooperation Movement, Mukunda once again returned with his *Swadeshi jatras*. However, during this period, instead of a nationalist theme he chose a social theme. After the Movement was called off in 1923, Mukunda Das permanently settled in Kolkata with his troupe. In 1932, all his dramas were banned. He was restricted to musical performances only. During this period his health deteriorated rapidly, he died quietly after a late night performance in the summer of 1934.

Syncretism of Vaishnava and Shakta beliefs

Mukunda Das was born in a Vaishnava family. *Kirtan* and *naamgaan* ran in his blood. It was the melodious voice of his father Gurudayal that had impressed a deputy at the Barisal court, who offered him the job of an orderly at the Barisal court. The family had permanently moved to Barisal, formerly known as Bakla and in the medieval period it belonged the Hindu kingdom of Chandradvipa. It was the seat of Vaishnava culture, the birth place of Rupa and Sanatana Goswami and *karmabhumi* of Shrijeeva Goswami. At the break of the twentieth century, Bireshwar Gupta the brother of Vaishnava *bhakta* Ramdas Babaji of Nabadwip was a renowned *kirtan* singer of Barisal, carrying on the legacy of his illustrious predecessors. Apart from him, eminent *kirtan* singers like Nilkantha Adhikari, Srinivas Adhikari and Govinda Kirtania would come to Barisal during the *Rasa* and the *Ganesh Puja* of Kalashkathi. The flower of Vaishnava culture was in its full bloom and Mukunda Das was soon drawn to its divine nectar. Not content with having formed his own *kirtan* group, Mukunda would read the Chaitanya Charitamrita and discuss with his friend and Vaishnava *bhakta* Kaliprasanna Kar. However, Mukunda's quest remained unfulfilled and he was yearning for more. It was the autumn of 1900, the townsmen of Barisal had gone to their country homes on the occasion of the Durga Puja, when Mukunda was visited by a Vaishnava monk by the name of Ramananda Abadhoot a.k.a Rasananda Thakur who formally initiated him into Vaishnavism. Yajneswar De was rechristened as Mukunda Das. His guru had no ashram and he too didn't

confine himself to any particular Vaishnava sect.

After being drawn into the Swadeshi movement, he began to compose patriotic songs using the theme the dominant nationalistic iconography, where Shakti was symbolized as the feminine embodiment of India. Meanwhile, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay had envisioned the motherland as the mother goddess. If we look in *Anandamath*, we will find how Jivananda explains to Mahendra the protagonist, that Mother India had been the *Jagaddhatri* in the past, *Kali* in the present and how shall she become *Durga* in the future. While personifying their motherland as the incarnation of Shakti on one hand, Jivananda and other members of the *Santan Dal* are devout Vaishnavs who would scout from village to village gathering volunteers for community Vishnu Puja. The syncretism of Vaishnavism and Shaktism in the founding literature of nationalism was manifested in reality through Mukunda Das. The stage enactment of *Matripuja* was interleaved with extracts from Vaishnava *Palagaan*. After returning from the tours, Mukunda would first visit the *Kali* temple at the ashram of Sona Thakur. In his house he built both a *Kali* temple as well as a *Radha Govinda* temple.

While Mukunda had synthesized Vaishnava and Shakta beliefs in his own way, he had respect for other faiths as well. During the anti-Partition meetings Mukunda would speak about the importance of ablutions, prayer and sacrifice in Islam to the Muslim crowd. He would often heartily participate in the Eid al-Adha celebrations. He had even built a mosque for his Muslim gardener, and made arrangements for the latter's daily recital of the Qur'an (Dasgupta 152).

On Hindu-Muslim unity

Mukunda Das strongly advocated communal harmony through his ballads and speeches, he not only equally denounced communal and anti-national activities; he fought the communal forces with all

his capacity. The latter trait of Mukunda Das had manifested itself, when he reportedly combated a column of communal elements, during the Comilla riots of 1906, an incident, narrated by Manomohan Nag (Goswami 85-88). Bengal was partitioned in 1905 in a shrewd imperialist move that sought to disempower the Bengali Hindus by reducing them to minorities in either of the halves – Bengal and Eastern Bengal and Assam. The latter emerged as a Muslim-majority province.

After the formation of the new province, the Nawab of Dhaka undertook a tour of the districts. On the arrival of the Nawab in the town of Comilla, a communal riot broke out over a petty incident. It was alleged that a worker from a garments store of one Dukhiram Kapuria had insulted the Nawab,⁷ while his procession was passing by the store. The predominantly Muslim crowd that had gathered to receive the Nawab began to attack the Hindu merchant establishments of the district town. After looting the garments store and the adjacent Hindu shops, the mob threatened to abduct the Hindu women the very next day. Mukunda Das was at that time in Comilla on a tour. Sensing trouble he immediately sent his troupe to Noakhali. The next morning the Hindu women of Comilla took refuge in the residence of a prestigious Hindu family and young Swadeshis maintained guard.

While the *Bhadralok* leadership was perennially confused on the matter of Hindu-Muslim unity and frequently capitulated to the evil designs of the communal forces, Mukunda Das was clear and unambiguous in his view on Hindu-Muslim unity. Through his *Swadeshi jatras* and patriotic songs, he always envisioned the combined struggle of the Hindus and Muslims in liberation of their motherland. At the same time he believed in zero tolerance of the communal elements.

Conclusion

The over-emphasis on the few elite and handpicked characters, and the relegation of true mass

leaders into the oblivion in the narration of national movement has been the bane of official historiography of post-Independence India. Mukunda Das is one such character who deserves more than just a passing mention. He was not just the second rung leadership, who merely parroted what the Bhadrakalok leaders preached. The national leaders like Chittaranjan Das, Subhas Chandra Bose and Mohandas Gandhi would often spend time with him, enjoying his melodious songs.

He was not only limited to the rural audience, he had influenced the urban leadership as well, and certainly not limited to Barisal or Bengal. The fame of his *Swadeshi jatra* reached the other provinces in India, notably Bombay. Ashwini Dutta while returning from Surat Congress halted in Mumbai for a few days. There he met a young man who had so deeply been moved after hearing about Mukunda, that he took the effort of learning Bengali, in order to understand the mood of Mukunda's songs and drama (Dasgupta 145).

While it has been argued that Mukunda Das was a unique of his kind who had bridged the gulf between the urban leadership and the rural mass through his *Swadeshi jattras* and facilitated the transformation of the anti-Partition movement from an essentially class based movement to a mass movement, he was not just a medium who simply carried the message from the sender to the recipients. He of course did carry the message of *Swadeshi* and boycott to the masses, but did not act only as a mediator. The significance of Mukunda's life and works was acknowledged by Mahatma Ashwini Kumar Dutta. Many a time, he was requested by his friends and co-workers to write an autobiography. He would brush aside any such suggestion and state that if someone's biography had to be written, it had to be Mukunda Das (Dasgupta 145).

Through his *Swadeshi jattras* he had preached his own ideas on social and economic reforms. Through *Palliseva*, he proposed the concept of collective farming, co-operative banking and

promotion of cottage industries. He visualized the formation of co-operative unions consisting of five villages that would collectively own and cultivate an agricultural farm. It would have a co-operative bank for the people to have their deposits and issue loans to someone who needs it. In *Brahmacharini*, he envisioned an institution of the Hindu women, who would lead a celibate pre-marital life. He even founded an ashram in Barisal and placed it in charge of Anandamoyee Ma, who later gave him mantra *diksa*. In the ashram he established a girls' school, the Adarsha Valika Vidyalaya and a *Kali* temple. His daughter Sulabha spent her girlhood in the ashram. Thus, in his character, thought and action we find certain traits, which may appear a bit contradictory as per our modern understandings (like stress on a model womanhood, and at the same time the idea of women's education), to coexist in harmony. One may or may not accept all his visions, but that he was enriched with a rich, complex vision is not to be forgotten and thus his role is beyond doubt proved as more of visionary than a mere mediator.

NOTES:

- 1 The ancient sage Kapil, who founded the school of Sankhya Darshana, one of the six schools of Hindu philosophy was a native of southern Bengal.
- 2 Female education was still a dream in *mofussil* Bengal.
- 3 *Kirtan* is a kind of Hindu religious song, sung in praise of the deity and his/her *leela*.
- 4 The erstwhile district of Tipperah, now divided into the districts of Comilla, Chandpur and Brahmanbaria, should not be confused with the Indian State of Tripura, which was then known as Hill Tipperah, a princely state in British India.
- 5 Later took sanyas and came to be known as Swami Purnananda Giri
- 6 In the 1905 Partition of Bengal, the entire Presidency Division including the districts of Jessore and Khulna was awarded to the western half i.e. Bengal, while the Dacca Division including the districts of Barisal and Daridpur were awarded to Eastern Bengal and Assam.
- 7 In some other sources his name is given as Yogiram Pal.

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A Life Apart:

A Review of *Bose of Nakamura, An Indian Revolutionary in Japan*

Abhijit Mukherjee

A recent novel by Haruki Murakami, 1Q84, which has created much sensation in the literary world, has the following paragraph at the beginning:

Janacek composed his little symphony in 1926. He originally wrote the opening as a fanfare for a gymnastic festival. Aomame imagined 1926 Czechoslovakia: The First World War had ended, and the country was freed from the long rule of the Hapsburg Dynasty. As they enjoyed the peaceful respite visiting central Europe, people drank Pilsner beer in cafes and manufactured handsome light machine guns. Two years earlier, in utter obscurity, Franz Kafka had left the world behind. Soon Hitler would come out of nowhere and gobble up this beautiful little country in the blink of an eye, and at the time no one knew what hardships lay in store for them. This may be the most important proposition revealed by history: “At the time, no one knew what was coming.” Listening to Janacek’s music, Aomame imagined the carefree winds sweeping across the plains of Bohemia and thought about the vicissitudes of history.

Hmmm...vicissitudes of history indeed! Any description of that time loses much of its appeal without the connect that ‘at the time no one knew what hardships lay in store for them.’ Vicissitudes of history thus becomes the essence of history which is lost when a period, a certain development in that period is viewed segregated from the perspectives of all the other times. A conscious, objective and honest adherence to this principle transcends mere chronological character of history and there emerge the essence of man and invaluable truths of life. There are elements in the annals of history that illuminate a timeless confirmation of what height human spirits can attain to mark the glory of

the historical man—THAT LIFE CAN BE LIKE A FLAME OF MISSION!

Takeshi Nakajima received the Third Asia-Pacific Research award for his doctoral thesis and subsequently won the prestigious Osaragi Jiro Rondan Award, given by the Asahi Shimbun when the thesis was published as a book in 2005. Nakajima has written a biography of Rashbehari Bose, the original name of which in Japanese is, 'Nakamura no Bose' that means Bose of Nakamura's shop (restaurant). It is translated into English by Prof. Prem Motwani who needs no introduction as a translator from Japanese to English. Takeshi Nakajima informs us that his 20s had entirely been eaten up in pursuit of documents on Bose and in steadily conceiving the book.

If I am allowed to discuss the book and Rash Bihari Bose therein following my perception of the book, let me start with a list of names: Ryohei Uchida, Sakujiro Miwa, Nagatomo Kaya, Shu Hirayama, Yasutaro Honjo, Hansuke Matono, Yoshinori Ohara, Shokichi Ozaki, Baigyo Mizuno, Ikkan Miyagawa, Yoshio Shiroishi, because perhaps nowhere else will these names ever be mentioned outside this book but we need to know about them as our commitment is to the 'essence of man'. Yes, they were common men, as happens with most Japanese, patriotic, and took upon themselves saving Rash Bihari Bose from the wrath of the British and the then Japanese Government, risking everything that could befall anyone charged for conspiring against the state. Guess why they went to that extent! They were worried what image will form of Japan to the people of India if their representative is not extended support in his fight against the repression of the occupying British power. Plain and simple, that is what each of them considered the duty of a patriot who must hold the image of his country high. It was 1915, not from the pages of an Epic. For those unaware of Japan's foreign policy during this, it may be mentioned that there was an Anglo-Japanese Alliance in force and after initial procrastination, on 28th November of 1915, the Japanese Govt. decided to handover Bose and another fugitive revolutionary Heramba Lal Gupta to the British after repeated pressure from them. Lala Lajpat Rai was then present in Japan to attend

the coronation ceremony of the new Emperor of the Taisho era.

After the failed army rebellion at Lahore following an attempt on the life of Viceroy Hardinge, in both of which he was the master-mind, Bose was desperately being hounded by the British and though being originally a resident of a French territory, Chandannagar, saved him on occasions, it was decided that Bose would leave India to reach Japan and work from there to raise resources for the armed struggle. On that journey,

Far distant in the sea, a faint light could be seen. The captain said, ‘That is Andaman!’ Hearing this I felt a chill of horror. Many of my comrade-brothers were jailed there and were just waiting for their death in vain. These brave people did what Garibaldi and Washington did for the respective countries. But, they are destined to wait for their death, as they were unsuccessful. Thinking thus, I shed tears of indignation and grief.

On May 22, his ship approached Singapore where just a few months ago at the request of the British, the Japanese troupe overpowered the revolting Indian soldiers (inspired by the Gadar Party) in the city and handed them over to the British. Destiny only knew that the next time something similar would happen, Bose would assume a unique role, nearly unparalleled in history, in that. While Bose’s unbelievable feats at escaping the clutch of the British police in India have already been hair-raising and became legend, he never really got a chance to settle in this journey too on successive occasions. Miracle could be the only word to explain those occurrences and even cautioned Horatio would have failed to check his incredulity on witnessing those.

Bose got a surprising depth of support from the journalists in Japan. Without knowledge of Japanese it was not possible to address the Japanese people. What else could an unknown Indian,

fugitive at that and unable to speak the local language, have done under such absurd circumstances! He approached a few journalists and got spirited response from them and through them from certain eminent political personalities as well. Then when his arrest became inevitable, one evening those patriotic citizens, I have already mentioned, assembled at politician Toyama's residence and during an apparently high pitch party Bose was shifted to the Nakamura restaurant in the guise of a cook and there started an intolerable life of confinement spent in making most of occasional scopes of learning the language from the other employees who happened to pass by.

Bose ultimately married Toshiko, daughter of the owner couple. The request for this match came from none other than a respected veteran politician Toyama. It was not an easy decision :

Kokko (the mother) was anguished, as she 'she prayed for her daughter's happiness like any other common person' and 'as a mother in general'. If Toshiko married Bose, considering that he was always tailed by detectives, she would have to lead an over-demanding life. It was not just the problem of being the wife of a foreigner. In spite of clearly knowing that she would be falling into the jaws of death by marrying Bose, it was not so easy to refuse the request as it came from none other than Toyama. After grappling with the issue for some time, she told Toshiko about the proposal.

Think about it well. Although the situation is tense, you should not rush into it, because it is absolutely different from a normal marriage.

Even after hearing this, Toshiko remained quite calm and composed and simply nodded. Soon two weeks passed and Toyama reminded them about his request. Koko asked her daughter what she had in mind, and Toshiko replied, 'Mom. Let me go. I have made up my mind.'

As his circle of acquaintances expanded gradually with time, even without a conscious effort to that effect he assumed a role in the history of Japanese internal political development, which the author portrays as a landmark. Japanese political ideologies were along three main streams in those days: The essence of Genyosha's activities laid in 'protecting the rights of the people who revere the imperial family and have the spirit of patriotism'. Gradually they expanded their vision to the whole of Asia and developed sympathy towards Asians who were oppressed by the Western powers. Another stream was consciously indifferent to 'ideology'. It was human capability, spirituality and the power of action that were more important. And lately an ideology based group started forming who uniformly valued the right to national independence and sovereignty for all Asian countries, irrespective of Japan's interest in it. Bose became, to a considerable extent, a link between these groups as they gathered around him in discussing Indian freedom struggle. The author writes,

It can thus be said that Bose's underground activities during this time, besides being successful to some extent in directing the attention of many Japanese towards the Indian independence movement, also contributed towards building a human network for the movement for the reconstruction of Japan, which was its byproduct.

Today's Japan is in comparison more open and responsive to influences from outside. And still, those who have direct experience of life in Japanese society, even in urban areas, would wonder with no end how it was possible! It is difficult to even imagine how a helpless asylum seeker from an occupied country could achieve that level of acceptance and could command such respect in a foreign land, Japan at that. There is no parallel instance after all.

Even the history of Asianism in Japan, a country by far more advanced, more powerful, till recently, than any other country of this continent owes a great deal to Bose's contribution in this

regard. I, for one, cannot hold in my imagination a situation wherein a Pan-Asiatic Congress is being held in Osaka in the year 1926 with the participation of eminent political leaders and parliamentarians from Japan, China, Korea, Vietnam etc. and the charge of conducting it rests upon a stray Indian with no formal position whatsoever! The congress was held in an extremely acrimonious environment for various reasons, but the Osaka Mainichi newspaper carried the following comments:

The most noteworthy thing in the two day meeting was the manner in which Mr. Bose, India's representative, conducted it. He spoke fluent Japanese and whenever there was a clash of opinion, he intervened skillfully without hurting the sentiments of either side and managed the meeting extremely well.

The author informs us : Thanks to Bose's active handling of contentious issues, the two day discussion ended without much trouble or confrontation.

Bose's political mission including Asianism was firmly rooted in his religious philosophy and in the history of the Orient. He was deeply influenced by Sri Aurobindo's religious philosophy and he positioned a whole-hearted devotion to the anti-British independence struggle as the manifestation of the spirit of self-sacrifice of Hinduism. He wrote:

If the dreadful war is to be eliminated from this world, the feelings of distrust and animosity that exists widely between nations and races must be discarded. Instead, the spirit of universal brotherhood must be built. How can that be achieved? It is not possible without the help of religion.

And also,

In the past, Asia occupied a position of glory in world history. This was because it was the source of culture and civilization, which was transmitted to the whole world, and there was happiness and public peace. It is clear that in the future we will need to create a new culture to rescue mankind from its present difficulties, misfortunes, distress and sufferings. A complete liberation of Asia is a prerequisite for that.

Towards the end of 1920s, Rash Bihari Bose's activities peaked all the more. In particular, he wrote enthusiastically in various magazines in which nationalists were involved and he devoted himself in attaining further heights in the independence movement from Japan. To intensify and sustain Japanese interest in the India of that time, from 1930, he started writing articles in *Gekkan Nippon* under a column titled 'Pan Asia Communication' along with Shumei Okawa. He co-authored his maiden book, *Prospects of Revolution in Asia* with Takeyo Nakatani. Published a total of about twenty books that he wrote, translated or co-authored. Side by side, he contributed articles in several magazines writing about England's tyranny in India and the evolution of the anti-British independence movement. He published books almost every year and his contributions to magazines at times exceeded five per month. However, since the majority of them were in Japanese and could not have any impact in his land of birth, ultimately he launched his own magazine *Shin Ajia* or *New Asia* in 1933. The magazine was published in both Japanese and English and was sent secretly to the leaders of the independence movement, active in India and in the West. Bose, incidentally, left his autobiography written in Japanese.

His wife died quite young, he led a life in a far away land with no certainty of ever seeing his country freed from the clutch of foreign rule, but life was for fulfilling the mission only, after

all. Only once, in the company of a Korean activist, a fellow freedom fighter in his view, Bose gave in to his emotions.

Amongst all the places he had visited to lecture in Japan, Bose was specially impressed by the natural features of Sakada...Bose must have become extremely emotional on seeing the magnificent view, which at the same time reminded him of his homeland. Seeing the setting sun he shouted, 'Lonesome' and is said to have wailed sitting on the floor of the boat... This incident in Sakada was perhaps the only one, when Bose, who resolutely appealed for India's independence without whining, got emotional. It was fifteen long years since he left India.

In addition to Rash Bihari Bose's mythical, near epical legends the book tells us about many other little known or unknown personalities who roamed corners of the world in service of the freedom struggle and some of them sacrificed their lives in the altar of that mission. Bose was disappointed by Gandhi's leadership in the independence movement and during the Sino-Japanese war in 1938 when he invited Rabindranath to Japan for mediation in the reconciliation attempt, overtly influenced by the European view of the crisis Rabindranath flatly refused to respond to Bose's invitation. But his greatest hope was on Subhash Chandra Bose and I keep the story of the formation of the INA, the most spectacular, glorious chapter in the annals of Bose's achievements who by then grew quite an influential voice in Japanese Foreign Policy formulation, untold for the reader to collect a copy and fill himself with pride and dreams while going through it.

Bose's rejection of the then prevalent spirit of European modernism did not make him a darling of the interpreters of history who have to abide by the rules of the establishment that promotes and sponsors writing of History. And the trend continued, even in this book certain

interpretative paragraphs are easily identifiable that have raised predictable points to question Bose's stand and actions at different points of time. But even the prose and presentation of these portions are so discontinuous and conspicuous by disunity that the basis of their presence can be guessed without difficulty. Today, all the stories of pain, set-backs, disappointments, successes, failures have lost much of their significances, what remains is an assurance, unfailingly, THAT LIFE CAN BE LIKE A FLAME OF MISSION, HE SHOWED IT. Rash Bihari Bose died in the year 1944. His memory is getting faint in Japan, but the indian curry he introduced in Nakamura is still a favourite dish in that famous shop.

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Bose of Nakamura by Takeshi Nakajima (trans. Prem Motwani), Promilla & Co., Publishers in association with Bibliophile South Asia, New Delhi, 2009, Pages-323, Rs. 700/-

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Motherhood/Maidenhood in Revolutionary Nationalism: A review of Sarala

Debi Chowdhurani's *Jiboner Jhorapata*

Mousumi Biswas Dasgupta

Assuming that women are always and universally to be considered as a disinherited lot and have no other relationship with the national awakening apart from that between a victim and an exploiter/negator may be called a Mother Teresa kind of social theory. Perpetual, perennial supply of lepers and wretched of the earth are necessary for such social welfare (driven by the maxim: poverty is good). So, for a certain version of liberal feminism, the eternal margins will forever fuel seminars and finance monographs. Of course, no one's denying liberalism its fair share of glory. But this margin fascination has a presumption that women can have no other specific identity apart from being the wretched of the earth (women of the world, unite!), which is a Communist International version of feminism. Culture and identity and community are male domains (which is true to a large extent, as any society under patriarchy will follow the pattern of male dominion), so women are forever denied any status as stakeholders in the nation. The term 'women' signifies a perpetual absence in the process of national identity formation.

This is a stereotype. And like all other stereotypes, even this stereotype will be seen to carry more than a grain of solid truth if we look at our history. And like all other stereotypes, it will be seen to be an exercise in linearity. Sarala Debi Chowdhurani's autobiography in Bangla, *Jiboner Jhorapata* (*The Fallen Leaves of Life*) recently republished by Dey's Publishing Kolkata in association with School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University is an interesting study in the role of women in the formation of revolutionary nationalism in Bengal. Women's empowerment was a very important motif running throughout the history of nineteenth century Bengal Renaissance (a limited renaissance, no doubt, limited in all aspects), and I am tempted to quote this conversation

between Madanmohan Tarkalankar and John Bethune from Sunil Ganguly's *Those Days*:

'You are a Brahmin and you propose to send your daughters out of the house to attend school! Won't your fellow Brahmins ostracize you?'

'Why should they? Education for Brahmin maidens is nothing new. Our women have been educated through the ages. If a few idiots choose to spit on me, I shall simply ignore them.'

'Your women have been educated through the ages!'" Bethune echoed in surprise. "I didn't know that.'

'Women in ancient India received equal education with men. I'll give you a few examples. Maharishi Valmiki's daughter, Atreyi, was enrolled in Agastya Rishi's ashram. Gargi and Maitreyi took lessons in Brahma Vidya from Rishi Yagna Valkya. The Mahabharat records that Rukmini, daughter of Kin Vidarbha, wrote a letter to Lord Krishna. Leelavati, daughter of Udayanacharya, was learned enough to preside over the debates between Shankaracharya and Mandan Misra. The wife of our great poet, Kalidas, was a learned woman, as was Vishwadevi, authoress of *Gangavakyavali*. A woman named Kshana was such a fine astrologer that her predictions are honoured to this day. How many more examples shall I give? And why only in ancient India? Even now, a woman by the name of Hoti Vidyalankar runs a *tol* in Varanasi very successfully. Every one has heard of her.'

'You should make the public aware of these facts. Why don't you?'

'I will – most certainly. And I will prepare the text books for the school myself--' (225-226)

Women's education (more properly, girls' education, as they used to be married off early) in Bengal during nineteenth century was a phenomenon limited to the upper castes, as this conversation bears out. And there is no denying the fact that women's education is the primary requirement for their empowerment (though the colonial connotations of the term education uncritically assumes it to be

equal to a western institutionalized degree). Given this scenario, it reinforces the liberal standard of feminine disempowerment. But as we said earlier there may be some faultlines in this perception. Rani Rashmoni was a powerful woman of nineteenth century, and she did not belong to the upper castes. She founded Dakshineswar temple, that would later become one of the epicenters of the Bengali/Hindu revival, and if we come to consider Vivekananda's influence on the revolutionaries, then Rani Rashmoni must be considered as the fountainhead of the nascent Bengali nationalism. But the paradox of history is that the Kolkata Brahmins raised vociferous protests when after building it, the Rani was about to open this temple to the public. The Brahmins said that a Shudra woman did not have the legitimate right to dedicate a temple to Gods. Finally, she found a way out by making a Brahmin the guardian of the temple. The caste hierarchy in Bengal has been a monstrous exercise in anomaly and collaborationist elitism, given that the caste from which the Rani hailed, the Mahishyas, have a powerful place in the history of Bengal and Orissa.

Fakir Mohan Senapati, considered the father of Oriya nationalism, once commented that Oriya language survived the onslaught of Turk-Afghan-Persian-Arabic influences because of the domestic sphere that was dominated by “Gruhalakshmis” who resisted the foreign influence that had the men under its sway (since they worked in close contact with the Islamic colonizers and used a language and adopted a culture that celebrated this collaboration) as Esha Dey, noted Bengali writer recently reminisced in a personal conversation with the editor of JBS. Women's role in sustaining the indigenous culture and language within domestic spheres has every claim to be a topic of critical study. Women were less prone to foreign influences and they played crucial roles in celebrating cultural expressions of identity, as the historical role of women of Thakurbari will bear testimony.

However, the male fantasy of women's purity contributes heavily to this image. It was

certainly no glory of the Indians that women had to be confined within the boundaries of her home (as some nationalists uncritically assumed), and yet we see that women's confinement became a matter of glory for patriarchy, and the nationalists of the old school. Women as prized possession of patriarchy and women as unspoilt, pure, innocent space (free from all polluting and corrupting foreign influences) meant for the furtherance of the *ancien regime* are the two fancies which come together in this celebration of women as the sustainers lost treasures.

Sarala was instrumental behind the cult status of Vande Mataram as we know. Being the maiden she was, she could be no mother figure for her countrymen. Moreover, she was not Tagore's idea of feminine virtue, embodied for the poet by the figure of Indira Debi Chowdhurani. Sarala was too brave, opinionated, outspoken for Tagore's taste, as we can understand while reading her autobiography. Vivekananda wanted Sarala as an associate in his project of the revival of Hinduism, but she couldn't join him, not only because of resistance from her parents, but because she too had some inhibitions. Nivedita was the second choice for this task, as Sarala notes in her autobiography. The rest was history.

The term nation is cognate with terms like 'nativity', 'nascence', 'natal' etc. It has a strong hint of celebration of a commonness of birth that generates a search for and discovery of the motherland. Mother Bengal, whom later nationalism would convert into Mother India, was the signifier of the birth of this imagined community of the modern Bengali people at the crucial crossroads of history. There is no denying that it was predominantly a male project. Male conception of motherhood unites all warring males and dissolves conflicts. The same should be true about the womenfolks, though. But men were stakeholders of power in a way that couldn't be remotely matched by women.

Thakurbari (the House of the Tagores), the atmosphere of national awakening in Bengal, and Sarala Debi (She was the grandchild of Debendranath Tagore and niece of Rabindranath Tagore) are interrelated concepts and figures we cannot examine in isolation. Historically speaking, the Tagores came primarily from a class of native collaborators of the British. And yet, they came to the forefront of the resistance against foreign dominions at the time of national awakening, a process that shares some common space with Bengal Renaissance. The rich dialectics of this process cannot be reduced to an economic conception or a class conception of history. Cultural analysis is required and we need to look at the gendered consciousness of women in nationalism.

We need to explore the question of identity and expose the fallacious Marxist paradigm of the universality of class, without being oblivious of the (however limited) historical role played by the leftists and liberals in the emancipation enlightenment and empowerment of the people from the margins all around the world. Identity is still not redundant, and has always been an important force in human history. The nuances covered by this term can never be sufficiently understood by the economic provisions of class. For example, an enlightened, educated, knowledgeable and empowered woman from among the Brahmins comes to benefit others (not necessarily just the rich ones) of her extended clan. Similarly, there is no reason why Rani Rashmoni could not be perceived as a signal figure for the empowerment of the women of the oppressed castes of Bengal by her contemporary caste sisters, irrespective of her elevated economical status. She participated in the nascent nationalist awakening by taking the side of Bengali fishermen when they entered into a conflict of interests with East India Company (over fishing versus shipping on the Ganges). When the foreign rulers wanted to stop the procession for the immersion of *Durga* idols on *Dashami*, Rashmoni intervened and retaliated against the British by closing her privately built road (an arterial road of the then Kolkata) to the British. Let us lament for the fact that she couldn't write an autobiography like Sarala Debi could. Let us mourn for these absences and dark spots in our history

and let us try to imagine what could have been this autobiography that we never had.

Coming back to Sarala Debi, I find that she was both a Maud Gonne and a Joan of Arc for the Bengali people at a time when women's cultural and political roles in the public spheres were nothing to write home about. She fought culturally and politically for the independence of her people and she must be given credit for this historical role she played. If we castigate her for failing to see beyond her immediate social boundaries and for being limited to the upper castes in her activities and programs, we need to make it clear in the same breath that in her anti-colonial struggle and in her celebration of Bengali and Hindu identities as cultural sites of anti-colonial resistance, she deserves a page or two in the book of the history of the Bengali people.

Her participation in a prayer (*arati*) held at the Vishwanath temple in Varanasi antagonized Tagore as he perceived it to be a surrender to idolatry. Sarala is symbolic of the trajectory along which the history of the Brahmos moved during this period. Rediscovery and celebration of the Hindu past constituted a strongly emotive gesture that characterized the nationalist movement of this period. Shockingly as it may be for us, Sarala even supports polygamy for men in her autobiography with a similar logic that Bankim first put forward in an article criticizing Vidyasagar's campaign to ban polygamy. Sarala (like Bankim) agrees with the basic arguments against polygamy, but still wants some exceptions to be made, particularly in case of a wife's 'sterility' leading to non-availability of (male) heir. Sarala here becomes a case study in the dilemma of a revolutionary nationalism that was Janus faced. It had two different faces, one that looked forward, and another that looked back. To what extent cultural nationalism in India has been an uncritical celebration of *ancien regime* and has failed to answer the demands of progress (however much we reject a linear definition of progress) and has conformed to the classic definitions of *reactionary* and *rightist* in a retrograde surrender to old traditions, is an indispensable question we

have to ask again and again, as it will lead us to a diagnosis of its failures.

Sarala was a noted editor (her periodical *Bharati* deserves a special mention in the history of Bengali journals), an acclaimed musician (she set the rest of Vande Mataram to tunes after Tagore turned the first two stanzas into a song), and a patriot who founded Pratapaditya Utsav and facilitated the making of Vande Mataram into a patriotic slogan. Where she recollects her emotional patriotic response to a song in Bangla – “Mother, why you are dressed as a madwoman” – we realize the intense force of motherhood in the nation-awareness, as it was the idea of motherhood that imparted concreteness to an imagined community, and invented the mechanisms of a fraternal bonding. It was this idea of the mother that Nivedita celebrates in her historical speech “Kali the Mother”, it was the primitive force (and no one should discard it because of its primitiveness, as human existence has always been a collage of the primitive and the futuristic) of motherhood that informed Rani Rashmoni's cultural resistance to the subjugation of her people by foreigners. An idea of motherhood is celebrated in Bankim's Vande Mataram as well, where Bankim evokes the mother figure as a cultural strategy meant for motivating Bengali people into a resistance against colonizers, as Bengalis have been historically worshiping Shakti. The plight of the mother, and the sons being called to rescue the mother from her plight will recur as steady motifs throughout the revolutionary movement. Despite its patriarchal focus, this movement is an acknowledgment that though the name of the father might have worked variously for social and economic legitimacy for a plethora of projects ranging from private property to dynasties, when a cultural bonding was required, when a cultural/political war of resistance had to be launched, the name of the mother had no substitute, and the movement repeatedly evoked and resorted to the name of the mother for imagining a community, fraternally cohesive through the figure of the mother. We shall have to study Sarala Debi Chowdhurani's autobiography to decipher the coded presence of the ferocious motherhood/maidenhood (Kali/Joan of Arc) in the Bengali nationalistic hermeneutics, coming to the

rescue of a subjugated middle class and giving this people an identity, alignment, self-pride and most importantly the 'chaste' protection of the feminine.

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Jiboner Jhorapata by Sarala Debi Chowdhurani. Published by Deys's Publishing Kolkata and School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University. Pages 240, Rs 140.

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Nationalism & Universalism: Tagore's Novels 'Ghare Baire' & 'Char Adhyay'

Pradip K. Ray

I have been re-reading the Tagore novels; finished 'Ghare-baire' a fortnight back. I had not liked the novel in my first reading, which is probably the reason why I did not feel any urge of reading it again in the past thirty and odd years.

There was considerable embarrassment amidst the intelligentsia about the messages sought to be conveyed by Tagore in 'Ghare-baire' (as well as in 'Char Adhyay'). To this embarrassment was added the scathing review by George Lukacs, the noted Hungarian Marxist critic, which crossed the precincts of the novel and raised questions about Tagore's alleged allegiance to the British rulers in general and his rejection of the armed freedom struggle in particular. All this was done, as Lukacs points out, in the name of a doctrine of total acquiescence and universal humanism. Lukacs even gave vent to his suspicion that the Nobel Prize and the Knighthood were rewards from the English bourgeoisie for Tagore's intellectual service to the British Empire!

Questions and judgments are, however, two different things. When Lukacs dismisses Tagore as an insignificant writer, devoid of creative powers, sensibility and imagination, we can understand that he was groping at the proverbial elephant like a blind man, cluelessly unable to fathom the genius of a myriad-minded artist. His bias becomes apparent when he compares Tagore with Gustav Frenssen, a minor German novelist who left Christianity and turned to a form of Germanic neo-paganism. Apparently Lukacs was not familiar with the other writings of Tagore, and as such, lacked the objective neutrality to make a comprehensive evaluation.

I also went through a literary essay by Sankha Ghosh, the noted poet and Tagore scholar, which can be read as a rejoinder to Lukacs' attack. Sankha has pointed out the factual inaccuracies in Lukacs' observations. 'Ghare-baire' started being published in 'Sabujpatra' from May 1915 and continued for eleven months. The Nobel was awarded in 1913 and Knighthood on the 3rd June 1915. It is improbable that Tagore's political intentions became apparent to the British from the very first chapter.

Similarly, Sandip could hardly be perceived as a 'contemptible caricature of Gandhi'. When the novel was being written, Gandhi was a new entrant to the arena of national politics (having returned from South Africa on the 6th January 1915); he had not gained the eminence to inspire a caricature. The boycott call of the Swadeshis and the boycott call given during the days of Non-cooperation in 1920 at the behest of Gandhi were not to be confused. The opportunistic and violent propaganda resorted to by Sandip was diametrically opposite to the spiritual nationalism for which Gandhi stood. Of course, Tagore had little faith in any kind of nationalism, spiritual or radical. The universalist in him was afraid that nationalism would probably discard the whole of Western civilization altogether, including the path-breaking inventions in technology and science.

It is an accepted position that Tagore had rejected the nationalism of the terrorists as the right path for freedom. This sentiment, conceived against a backdrop of an ideology of love, trust and global human fellowship, is what occupies the central theme of Tagore's 'Ghare-baire'. The appropriateness of such rejection can be questioned, but this alone does not render him a collaborator for perpetuation of the British rule. His patriotism and concern for his countrymen got eloquent expressions in his vast range of lyrics, poems, essays, short-stories and other writings as

well as in his social activities. Lukacs, however, had anticipated the counter-argument of the Tagore admirers in 1922 and sought to answer it in the same review. According to him, the significance of any intellectual greatness is evident from the way it responds to the most burning contemporary issues, to the sufferings and aspirations of the people of that age. Interestingly, Sankha, an ardent Tagore admirer, has avoided tackling this issue.

The Tagore worshipers try to defend the ‘Ghare-baire’ paradigm by emphasizing the baser side of the Swadeshi movement. According to them, the terrorists had hijacked the movement in the direction of anarchy and Hindu communalism. As a universalist and a liberal humanist, Tagore disapproved these trends. But this appears to be an improper generalization based on exceptions. By the time Tagore started writing the novel, martyrs like Kanailal Datta, Satyendranath Basu and Khudiram Basu were already hanged by the British in 1908; Bagha Jatin died in an encounter with the British police in 1915. About Bagha Jatin Tegart is believed to have said, "Had Jatin Mukherjee been an Englishman, the English would have erected his statue at Trafalgar Square by the side of Nelson's." There were instances of selfless sacrifice by thousands of other martyrs like Vishnu Ganesh Pingle, Niren Das Gupta, Manoranjan Sen Gupta, Chittapriya Roy Choudhury, etc., who were hanged by or before 1915. Did they, or the majority of them, appear greedy, lustful, selfish and vainglorious in Tagore’s view? Why did he then try to make a compendious assessment of the Swadeshi movement through the most contemptible character ever created by him? Why did he ridicule Bankim’s patriotic mantra putting it repeatedly in the vile lips of Sandip? Why did he write then in 1921 that those who sacrificed their lives in the catastrophic fire were objects of reverence; their failure also glowed in their spiritual luminescence? Perhaps Tagore’s apology was Amulya, the inchoate revolutionary; but the boy got killed by a bullet, which was probably, in Tagore’s view, the destiny of an otherwise honest Swadeshi!

Sankha has merely attempted to mitigate the vitriol of Lukacs on more general terms, conceding, however, that Sandip of ‘Ghare-baire’ is a coarse creation that fails all political and artistic standards. The world of ‘Ghare-baire’ is black and white and the characters are stereotypes. This happens when a novel is written to propagate an idea without considering the human relation supposed to exist between one character and another.

Tagore is a demigod for us. He permeates our being, the conscious and the sub-conscious. If there is another great deluge and the Bengalis are allowed to take only one of their cultural possessions on the ark, like most of the Bengalis I would unhesitatingly opt for Rabindra-sangeet. Yet, as an ardent Tagore admirer, I feel uncomfortable with Ghare-baire; I wish he had expressed his opinion about the armed freedom struggle through an exclusive essay, and not through a novel like this.

Although the political sociologists have written heaps of theses to distinguish patriotism from nationalism, these two expressions are seen by common people as more or less synonymous. Patriotism is generally believed to be just a sentiment of pride centering on a form of territoriality that the people living in that territory arrogate to themselves, with or without any historical sense. Nationalism is a complex psychological process which is intricately related to the history & culture of one or multiple ethnic or linguistic groups that have been co-existing together for a considerable span of time and are willing to co-exist in future. Tagore was a patriotic nationalist in his youth. He inaugurated the meeting of the Congress party that took place in Calcutta in 1896 by singing “Vande Mataram” to his own tune. He composed his celebrated piece “Shivaji Utsav” at that time and was inspired by the Shivaji Festival introduced by Maharashtra’s Balgangadhar Tilak. His political

views were palpable when he joined the Swadeshi Movement in 1905 with the Indian National Congress, a Hindu-dominated political organization supported by the Calcutta elite, against Lord Curzon. He strongly raised his voice against the partition of Bengal and fiercely and forcefully opposed the division of Bengal in his essay published in “Bangadarshan”. All India Muslim League supported Lord Curzon for historical reasons and were against the Swadeshi Movement. However, Tagore’s political philosophy was changing from patriotic nationalism to universal humanism. The concept of nationalism was linked to the political thinking of modern Europe in terms of nation-states. Tagore’s anti-nationalism was probably born out of the violence that engulfed the anti-partition movement in Bengal between 1905 and 1908. He started believing that freedom could not solely be attained through the instrumental rationality of politics, of which violence was a necessary ingredient. Soon he emerged as the strongest critic of patriotic nationalism by 1908 when he expressed his position clearly in a letter replying to Lady Abala Bose, “Patriotism cannot be our final spiritual shelter; my refuge is humanity.” The universal humanist in Tagore started denouncing nationalism as being a desire to own a politico-commercial system that seeks to enrich itself by spreading tentacles of greed, selfishness, hatred, power and prosperity, and sacrificing in the process the moral man, the complete man, to make room for a man of limited materialistic concern. His conviction was that people would ultimately have to overcome the seductive charms of nationalism and embrace a new, enlightened, secular universalism transcending all ethnic and territorial loyalties. The fact that nationalism was a social construction, a mechanical organization, modelled with certain utilitarian objectives in mind, made it unacceptable to Tagore, who always valued creation over construction, imagination over reason, expression over want, the natural over the contrived.

Having said all these, let us look at the Indian situation in the beginning of the 20th century.

Before the advent of the British, the geographical India was a group of independent or semi-independent territories, most of which were under the Muslim rule, divided by language, culture & political jealousy. The British wanted to consolidate their hold on India by promoting English as the language of instruction & communication. The English language not only served as a unifying force but also opened up all the windows of the occidental knowledge & wisdom. The Western education exposed the Indians to the ideas of human rights, freedom of speech & right of self-determination on one hand and taught them to hate imperialism & colonialism on the other. They started posing questions to the British how the latter could indulge in sub-human practices against the Indians, when such practices were despicable vis-a-vis the Western values. The resentment gradually snowballed into an all-engulfing revolutionary movement. Thousands of educated youths, mostly Bengali Hindus (because they were the first beneficiaries of Western education), got involved in the armed struggle. They sought inspiration from the religio-cultural traditions of ancient India, its spiritual philosophy, the philosophy of “karmayoga”. Bankim gave the nation his “Vande Mataram” mantra, about which Sri Aurobindo said, “It is not till the motherland reveals herself to the eye of the mind as something more than a stretch of earth or a mass of individuals; it is not till she takes shape as a great divine and Maternal Power in a form of beauty that can dominate the mind and seize the heart that these petty fears and hopes vanish in the all-absorbing passion for mother and her service, and patriotism that works miracles and saves doomed nations is born.” A huge geographical territory which was subjugated & divided in linguistic, cultural & political terms was trying to come under the banner of a single nation. From the late 1920s the country was seething with anti-British agitations of all kinds like workers’ strike, a two-hour occupation of the Congress conference platform in Kolkata (1928) by nearly fifty thousand workers with slogans of *purna swaraj*, armed actions, civil disobedience, establishment of parallel governments in Peshawar, Sholapur and Chittagong and so on. Retaliation by the British government also surpassed all records

of cruelty. Tagore himself came out with strong statements condemning the atrocities, but all these did not deter him from putting his own beliefs into the mouth of Indranath (in ‘Char Adhyay’) to the effect that the English were the greatest among all European nations, carrying the maximum burden of foreign nations. When people felt that the crying need of that hour was a proud feeling of nationalism, it is not surprising that Tagore’s advocacy of universal humanism came in for harsh criticism.

Since we have discussed “*Ghare Baire*” in much detail, it would be unnecessarily repetitive to allude to the 1915 novel once again. The most bitter and scathing attack on national revolutionaries was launched by Tagore in *Char Adhyay* (1934). The utterly disgraceful portrayal of revolutionism – cruel, conspiratorial and absolutely dehumanizing – came as the rudest shock to the people of Bengal and the poet’s admirers throughout India. Indranath, the dictatorial boss of an underground revolutionary group, was shown to have embarked on this path purely for ego-satisfaction. He recruited Ela, the beautiful heroine, to attract and catch young men. Atin, a highly gifted youth from an aristocratic background, fell in love with Ela and joined the group. Soon Atin & Ela got totally disillusioned but could not escape the bond of commitment. Out of anxiety that Ela might get arrested and divulge the secrets, Indranath ordered Atin to kill her. The actual killing was not shown, but there was a hazy hint. The story of ‘*Char Adhyay*’, unlike ‘*Ghare-baire*’, is unfolded in highly stylized dialogues, but the message is clear. To lend credence to Atin’s character, Tagore added a preface where he narrated his last meeting with Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, a Vedantic scholar having joined the Swadeshi movement, who had come to convey to Tagore his deep sense of guilt for the same. Upadhyay had died long ago, and so his version was not available. In the face of public disbelief Tagore withdrew the preface from subsequent editions of the book (now available in the *rachanabali*). No doubt the revolutionary patriotic movement suffered from

some negative traits, but these were blown out of proportion and the positive aspects were unduly suppressed. Just as Bagha Jatin died in the year '*Ghare-baire*' was written, Surya Sen's group demonstrated exemplary courage, determination, discipline and clarity of purpose a couple of years before Tagore wrote '*Char Adhyay*'. And women revolutionaries like Pritilata Waddedar, Kalpana Dutta and others played highly responsible roles, and none of them was a prototype for Ela, the attractive heroine of '*Char Adhyay*', who was picked up by Indranath for entrapping brilliant young men like Atin.

'*Char Adhyay*' was greeted with the widest and sharpest criticism ever to be directed against any work by Tagore including '*Ghare-baire*'. However, the government immediately seized upon the novel as a weapon of reactionary propaganda. In the words of Major C.J. Brennan: "Dr. Rabindranath Tagore has also recently been persuaded through the Assistant Director of Public Instruction/Bengal to dramatize one of his books '*Char Adhyay*' which delivers a powerful attack on the cult of terrorism.... it is also proposed to make it staged in the first-class theatre in Calcutta like Rangmahal or Natya Niketan." The government was also suspected to have bought hundreds of copies of the book and distributed it widely, including among political prisoners. I heard this from a revolutionary, a devout admirer of Tagore, who would have been 100 years old today had he been alive. Of course, he also heard this during those fiery days and did not get a copy of the book himself while in jail. So this may be an exaggerated account.

Tagore might have written '*Ghare-baire*' & '*Char Adhyay*' out of his firm convictions as a universal humanist. I am not willing to use the word 'compradorship' in this context, but these two novels apparently became ready tools in the hands of the British for demoralizing the

revolutionaries. The revolutionaries were dumbfounded, and yet their admiration for Tagore did little diminish. Decade after decade, freedom fighters from Congress as well as from revolutionary backgrounds found spiritual inspiration in Tagore's poems, songs and other writings, although on many occasions they found his political positions unacceptable. However he might have hated patriotic nationalism for its violence and however he might have advocated universal humanism, the fact remains that, as a poet and composer of songs, Tagore was a principal architect of the intense patriotic consciousness that drove thousands of young Bengali men and women to the politics of armed struggle.

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“Ghare Baire” and “Char Adhyay” from *Rabindra Rachanaboli*, Vol. viii, West Bengal Govt., July 1986, Pages 568, price not mentioned.

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He is one of the founder-members of the literary journal 'Jalarka' & has been associated with the editing of the magazine since its inception. He has authored a number of books in Bengali under the pen-name 'Pradip Raygupta', e.g., Skhalita Mukh (a book of poems), Ghare Ferar Samay, Sravananakshatrer Ratri & Chhayabaganer Juin (collections of short stories), Bibhinna Akash & Nimitta (novels) & Taskar, Bidushak o Kabi (a collection of adolescent stories).

Re-viewing *Desher Katha* as told by Deuskar

Sujoy Chatterjee

It was the 22nd day of September, 1910. On that day, the British Govt. decided to ban a book, written by a revolutionary from Bengal, for spreading anti-British ideas and inspiring the revolutionary organisations to fight against the British Empire. This book, as Kalicharan Ghosh described in his *Jagaran O Bishphoron*, showed in details the evils of a foreign rule and how an empire enslaved the people of our country in different ways. The name of the book was *Desher Kotha* and its writer, the renowned journalist, thinker, patriot, and nationalist SAKHARAM GANESH DEUSKAR (1869-1912). The banning increased the importance of the book, and handwritten copies were circulated among the members of the revolutionary outfits, Anushilan Samiti, Jugantar, Atmonnati Samiti, Swadesh Bandhab etc. Like Bankim's books, it soon achieved the status of a "ideological book" and " book written with a special purpose."

Now the question arises-who was this person named Sakham and what was his "special purpose"? The question takes us back to an age often termed as "THE GOLDEN AGE OF THE BENGALIEE PEOPLE". But was Sakham a Bengali? No. He was a Marathi by birth, a Bharatiya by nature and a Bengali by his own free choice. It may sound both amazing and astonishing to today's readers and writers that a Marathi decided to write in Bengali and not only that, he was so much inspired by the socio-cultural atmosphere of the then Bengal that he chose to associate himself with the Bengali identity to a great extent. To understand that age and its people, one should note carefully that Ognijug's Bengal was totally different from today's Bengal and the quality of the Bengali people reached such a height that it not only inspired the non-Bengali speaking population to accept our culture, but it also assimilated those people from other cultures who devoted their whole life for the cause of this country. One such genius was Sakham. *The List of Political*

Suspects During Ognijug, released in 1995, described Sakharam as " a son of Ganesh Deuskar, Maharatta, age 46 years, 70/1 Sukea St, Calcutta-member of a revolutionary party. Name found in the Alipore Bomb Case papers, was professor in the National College, but left and joined the Hitabadi newspaper, is the connecting link between Central Provinces and Bengal." (Source-*List of Political Suspects in Bengal*, corrected upto the end of August, 1912, Pol Branch, Govt of Bengal, edited by A. K. SAMANTA, Director, Intelligence Branch). In fact, Sakharam was a link between the revolutionaries of Bengal and Maharashtra. To strengthen this link, he started Shivaji Utsav and as Barin Ghosh described in his autobiography, the most important goal of Sakharam's life was to write a biography of Shivaji, whom he worshipped as liberator of the country.. Born in 1869, in a Maratha Brahman family, residing in Bihar, Sakharam passed the entrance from Calcutta University. During his school life, he came under the influence of Jogindranath Basu and Rajnarayan Basu. The first was the Headmaster of Deoghar School when Sakharam was a student of that same school. Jogindranath's books on Shivaji, Ahalyabai, Tukaram etc shaped the mind of young Deuskar. At that time Deoghar was a centre of Bengali culture and also a shelter for important revolutionaries (source- *Report on Revolutionary Organizations in Bihar and Orissa, 1906-16*, by W. Sealy). It is interesting to note that Barin Ghosh also passed his entrance from Deoghar English High School in 1897 and many important decisions of the revolutionary groups were taken in Deoghar, Madhupur, Giridi etc. However, in 1890, Sakharam completed his school education but had to discontinue education in University of Calcutta due to poverty. He soon got a job in the same school and started writing in Hitabadi. This was the beginning of his political career. Due to his revolutionary connections, he had to resign from his post and leaving his school job permanently, he devoted his whole time to Hitabadi. Kaliprasanna Kavyavisharad, the editor of Hitabadi appointed him as proof-reader and slowly he became its Chief Editor. At that time, Hitabadi openly supported the extremist line of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, and that was the main reason

why Sakham had to leave his job for the second time. On 18th June, 1904, *Desher katha* was published, which was one of the main achievements of his life.

During this time, the revolutionary groups and their activities increased the confidence of the people so much so that they could fight the mighty British Empire and the socio-political scenario was fast changing. The anti-Congress propaganda convinced the Bengalees that they needed a new platform and a new way-the revolutionary path as we call it, found its inspiration in *Desher katha*. Bhupen Dutta wrote in his *Bharater Dwitiya Swadhinata Sangram* that they were indebted to Deuskar because he understood both the polity and economy, unlike other ideologues who had little knowledge of the latter. The economic exploitation of the British Empire, as shown in *Desher katha*, was instrumental in shaping the minds of revolutionary youths who later continued to praise this book even after joining the communist movement. When it was first published, Deuskar was closely associated with Arobindo Ghosh. Later he became one of the chief advisers of Jugantor Patrika and after a period of political turmoil and uncertainty, joined National College. At the age of 40, he had to resign from that college under political pressure and after two years died on 23rd November, 1912. Deuskar lived and died a revolutionary and unlike many of his contemporaries, he didn't change his ideology. But what was Deuskar's ideology? Here history is silent, but his writings showed some lights. He wrote many books in Marathi and Bengali. Some of them like *Desher katha* concentrated on the problems our country was facing at that time, some written for revolutionaries during Shivaji Utsav (like Shivajir Dikkha), some nationalist biographies (like Peshwa Bajirao, Anandibai, Ranade), and some for future generations (like *Bangiya Hindujati ki Dhangshanmukh* or *Is the Bengali Hindu Dying*). The last mentioned book was his last important work, completed in 1910. He never mentioned that he was a believer in Bankim's ideology, nor he mentioned his loyalty to any particular "-ism". But, as we read his works, we find some important

concepts that could only have originated from Bakim's writings, like indigenous industry, upliftment of the underprivileged section for integrated national awakening, socio-cultural unity, the betterment of farmers and workers, the opposition of the collaborator class in all the social institutions and so on. Unfortunately most of his original concepts were later hijacked by the communists, but in him we find a strange amalgamation of a Communist man and a Nationalist leader. However, his communist traits may be well defined as pragmatism.

Now why do we call this book an important work and what is its value at present? Firstly, every important work should be judged on the basis of its contemporary impact. Seen from this perspective it is important. Secondly, this work belongs to an age or rather represents an age of prosperity what we call "THE GOLDEN AGE OF THE BENGALEE PEOPLE AND CULTURE". Opinions may differ regarding how glowing was the Golden Age, but, since all the peoples and cultures of the world drew their inspiration from their so called Golden Ages, why should not we? And as we have seen to be the case of every such "Golden Age", it must be accompanied by substantial advancement in three areas-first spiritual, second socio-cultural and third political. For example, the spiritual movement of Sri Chaitanya was unmistakably followed by some socio-cultural changes. And, it also gave birth to political leaders like Pratapaditya, Sitaram etc. Again during the 19th Century, the spiritual Sakta movement inspired some social leaders to improve our conditions and as the socio-cultural tree became strong, its fruits were political organisations like Anushilan Samiti, Atmonnati Samiti etc. Thus the book *Deshar Katha* may be deemed as representing a golden age and its culture. Understanding that time is not easy. It spans around 1902-1930. It may vary slightly, but roughly during 1910, the Bengali culture reached its peak, not only in art and literature, but also in politics, sports, paintings, adventure, and so on. The Bengalis were to be found everywhere, carrying with them the immortal messages of Swami Vivekananda, from one

corner of the earth to the other.

After the defeat of the Marathas, Sikhs, small Southern and North Eastern powers, there were none to oppose the British Empire. It was then that the Bengalis took up arms and fought. Political changes usually are outcomes of a complex process -constitutional and revolutionary. The first was the way of the Congress and the second was followed by groups like Anushilan Samiti. In which part of Bharat the first spark of revolution was first seen? Nobody knows. In fact, in the whole revolutionary movement, the three major lobbies, that of Maratha, Bengali and Punjabi, each claims that they sacrificed the most. The most powerful was the Maratha lobby. To it belonged the revolutionary leaders like Arobindo and Barin Ghosh, Sakharam himself, Pan-Bharatiya leaders like V. D. Savarkar and Tilak, and almost 70 percent leaders of the Anushilan Samiti and 99 percent leaders of Jugantor. The Bengali lobby, led by P. Mitra, Pulin Behari Das, and other leaders of Dhaka Anushilan Samiti, was overshadowed after 1910. Ideologues like Sarala Devi Choudhurani, Swami Niralamba, Jogendranath Bidhyabhushan, Bhupen Dutta, and Samadhyayi belonged to none. Hence they were marginalized.

We find that Sakharam's Shivaji Utsav met immediate opposition from the Bengali lobby. The Pratapaditya Utsav, Birastami Utsav of Sarala Devi, Sitaram Utsav of Tarak Nath Das, and other such Utsavs started with the only object to glorify the indigenous Bengali heroes, and biographies of such heroes were written. (I have found atleast 8 biographies of Pratapaditya and 6 biographies of Sitaram alone in the libraries of North kolkata, written between 1905-30, all by different biographers). But while Shivaji Utsav continued and spread, Pratapaditya Utsav discontinued and finally stopped. Later Swami Niralamba and Sarala Devi started their Pan-Bharatiya activities and their early Pan-Bengali activities were forgotten. Due to several factors the

Bengali lobby got weakened and with it the revolutionary movement itself. The coming of Communism also led to its ideological death. The communists were clever enough to use the "divide and rule" tactics against the revolutionaries. The unity of the Bengali-Maratha-Punjabi lobby was broken. The Jugantor group merged in Congress and the *Anushilanites* joined the CPI, RSP, Forward Block etc. The Golden Age was over and time was over with the people of Bengal.

Desher Katha belongs to an age that we call Swadesi Period, when the Bengalis rejected foreign goods and ideas and started to use indigenous products. It was also written during the early stages of Revolutionary Movement, that is, before the death of P. Mitra, and final the arrest of Aurobindo and Pulin Das in two conspiracy cases. In this stage, the ideology of the movement was strong and Bankim's *Anushilan Tattva* was a must-read for every revolutionary of Anushilan Samiti. After the first publication of *Desher katha* in 1904, all the 1000 copies were sold instantly. The second edition increased it upto 2000, the 3rd 5000, and the 4th 2000 (in 1907). In its fifth edition, the issue of *Banga-bhanga* (Partition of Bengal) was included, and it was declared banned under the Indian Press Act in 1910. But the appeal of this book didn't die with its banning, and it achieved the status of "classics", beyond the limits of time and age, as say the books like *Sakharam Ganesh Deuskar* (1990) by Brajendranath Banerjee, *Desher katha* (1970), edited by Mahadeb Prashad Saha, *Desher katha* (1987), edited by Barid Baran Ghosh, and the recent edition of 2011, published by Sutradhar and Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre. The book starts with the immortal lines of Poet Hemchandra and the geographical description of our country-the chapter named *Amader Desh* (Our Country). The 2nd chapter is *Engraj Shashaner Dosh Gun* (The Negative and Positive Sides of The British Rule) and it starts with the lines of Machiavelli, the Italian statesman-"It is better to follow the real truth of things than an imaginary view of them." It deals with the various govt. policies and their criticisms. The 3rd Chapter is *Desher Abastha* (The Condition of The Country) and the 4th *Manasik Abanati* (Mental Decline)-two most important chapters where Deuskar talked

about our slave mentality and he hoped-"Ekdin Bangali manus hoibe." The 5th is *Krishaker Durgati* and deals with the problems of farmers. The 6th chapter *Rail O Khal* is criticism of govt. policies related to transport and canal system. It also shows how our own ship building industry was better than the European one. The next chapter is *Bangiya Shilpikuler Sarbanash*, dealing with a vivid description of how the foreign powers destroyed our indigenous industries. The next chapter *Deshiya Shilper Dhangsa* is its continuation. It also discusses the Swadeshi Movement. The next is *Deshar Ay-Byaya*, dealing with govt. income and expenditures. The next two-*Pratikarer Upay* (Swarajya) and *Sanmohan* deal with the Swarajya movement and how a section of people was hypnotised by the Brits and hence, blindly followed the govt. policies. The last chapter is full of charts and economic details. The whole book gives us an insight into the govt policies of that time and its immediate impact. It also reflects the time and condition of the people just before the partition in 1905. His *Sanmohan-Chittavijay* chapter begins with the lines from *Prosperous British India* --"History records in its annals no greater marvel of one race overmastering another in all matters alike of mind and body." It was an age when the concept of British supremacy was established in the minds of most of the educated Upper Middle Class. People came to believe that they had no other option except following the British Policies. Deuskar challenged that concept. He considered the slavery of mind is more dangerous than the physical slavery, and considered this mindset responsible behind the phenomenon of the Britishers to become the masters of our destiny.

Almost hundred and two years passed after the banning of the book *Deshar katha*. Today a lane connecting Hazra and Bhawanipore in South kolkata reminds us of this now forgotten but once well known Marathi who chose Bengal as his second home. The Revolutionary Movement ended in failure, the Swadeshi inspires little to today's Bengali youth, and though British rule is over, can we really claim to be completely free, spiritually? Have we become self sufficient? Still we look very

much to the West for better ideas and lifestyle, and often ape it. Seen from this perspective, we are not free yet. Hence the words of Deuskar apply for the present too.

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