DALADALI IN CALCUTTA IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

In this paper I wish to illustrate the hypothesis that a necessary correlate of stable social order is a system of controlled conflict. In other words, a social system depends for its cohesion on the existence of conflicts in smaller sub-systems, provided that the conflicts are conducted within an accepted convention. Hence faction-feuds in a social system are not necessarily evidence of fission in that system and may also be evidence of fusion. I wish to illustrate this theme, what Gluckman\(^1\) called 'The peace in the feud', from evidence from Calcutta in the nineteenth century.

*Daladali* is an important institution of Bengali social life, at least since the end of the eighteenth century. It is mentioned in various biographies and memoirs\(^2\) and the newspapers in the nineteenth century regularly published the activities of various *dals* in Calcutta. Many administrators and foreign observers like George Johnson, J. C. Jack and R. Carstairs noticed 'that great Bengali institution doladoli, or the faction feud which had possession of almost every family, especially every great family in the land.'\(^3\)

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* The research for this paper was undertaken as the Director of a project, 'Class, Caste and Politics in Calcutta, 1815–1876'. This research project was sponsored by the Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta, and was financed by the Indian Council of Social Science Research in 1970–71. I am most grateful to the Institute and the Council and, more particularly, to J.P. Naik, for their generous assistance. I am also grateful to my project assistants, particularly to Prathama Sen. Mary Murnane, of the Department of History, Sydney University, has made some valuable suggestions, which were particularly helpful in revising the first draft of the paper.


Most modern scholars, however, have neglected this interesting phenomenon. The term daladali is used in Bengali in a derogatory sense, to describe that tendency of fission which is supposed to be the root cause of all evil in Bengal today: industrial unrests, campus riots and political instability. One feels that this has somehow inhibited the possibility of a fruitful research on the subject.

Ralph Nicholas\(^1\) was one of the first scholars who drew our attention to faction-feuds in modern rural Bengal. He has shown how factions are formed, how they function and how they are used as ‘vote banks’ by the political parties during election campaigns. Elsewhere, I have discussed the role that the dals played in Calcutta in the nineteenth century in mobilizing the Bengali bhadralok into modern politics.\(^8\) Leonard Gordon has spoken of another type of dals ‘small units of political action’, consisting of young men, mainly students led by dadas (a kinship term for elder brother, here used for the leaders of the dals), which were the basic units of the revolutionary movement in Bengal in the twentieth century.\(^8\)

Historians of the older generation have for long taken a linear view of Indian history. They have looked at the history of India, more particularly the history of Bengal, since the nineteenth century, as a development from ‘Indian status to British contract’, if we are to borrow a phrase from Sir Henry Maine (as an American historian has done).\(^4\) The history of modern Bengal is presented to us as a continuous struggle between the forces of reform and the forces of reaction. The heroes of this type of history are either the enlightened British administrators like Bentinck, who were bent upon reforms, who stamped out superstitious customs like sati, introduced English education and thus brought about a new social order, or the Indian reformers like


\(^2\) See pp. 52 ff.


Rammohun Roy who had to wage battles against the orthodoxy for enlightened social reforms. This view of history is too simple to explain the many-sided complex developments of the nineteenth century. This explanation of history neglects the role of the so-called 'conservatives' in the social reform movement and fails to understand the true significance of the conflicts within the bhadralok society and between the bhadralok and the Europeans. Historians have tended to look at these conflicts through ideologically tinted glasses and they have thus given us a distorted picture.

Calcutta in the nineteenth century was a peaceful city. It was then not plagued by the periodic riots, mob-violence, and political murders, as it has been during the twentieth century. This does not mean that there was no violence in the city during the nineteenth century: in fact newspapers are full of reports of violent crimes, murders and armed robberies. But these acts were committed by individuals or groups of gangsters, which did not threaten the stability of the social order. The bhadralok enjoyed a rather comfortable and peaceful life in the nineteenth century. Their hegemony was not yet challenged by the Muslim middle-classes and the tranquility of the city was not yet disturbed by a politically organized working-class or by socially alienated youths. This stability was maintained because no one who mattered in public life wanted to disturb the social order. There was cohesion within the bhadralok society. Although the society was segmented into castes and dals, and the bhadralok competed with one another for power and status, they were often united in societies, school committees, and political associations for united action to protect their property, and to get a better deal for the Indians or to stand against a particular Act of the government. There were many dals within the bhadralok group which would sometimes split into smaller dals yet at other times fuse with other dals for united action. This system could be

compared with the Nuer political system, as Evans-Pritchard describes it ‘an equilibrium between opposed tendencies towards fission and fusion’.\(^1\) This division of society into groups with conflicting loyalties helped to maintain this equilibrium and created an atmosphere where literature and art could flourish.\(^8\)

\section*{II}

Throughout this essay I shall use \textit{bhadralok} as a generic term to describe the families who moved into Calcutta during the latter half of the eighteenth and the early part of the nineteenth centuries. I find that \textit{bhadralok} is a useful analytical category. The new urban class used it to describe themselves as a distinct group separated, on the one hand, from the feudal aristocracy and the peasants of the rural areas, and on the other, from the English administrators and the urban poor of Calcutta. The men who gathered on 16 February 1823 in the Hindu College, Calcutta, to form a society to cultivate Bengali literature and culture, described their society as \textit{gaurdesiya bhadraloker sabha} (a society of Bengali \textit{bhadralok}).\(^3\) The self image and the world view of the Bengali middle classes were largely shaped by their idea that the society in Bengal was broadly divided between \textit{bhadralok} and \textit{abhadralok} (\textit{itarlok} or \textit{chotalok}), between the cultured, rich and middling classes and the uncultured poor.\(^4\) The \textit{bhadralok} included the rich \textit{babus} (\textit{Abhijats}) and the \textit{maddhyabitto} (middling class). There was also another category of \textit{bhadralok}, \textit{grihasthas}; Bhavanicharan Banerjee described them as \textit{daridra, athacha bhadralok} (poor, but \textit{bhadralok}).\(^5\) It was, however,

\begin{enumerate}
\item For a conservative view on the importance of diversity and conflicts for progress and creativeness in a society see T. S. Eliot, \textit{Notes towards the definition of culture} (paperback ed.) London, 1961.
\item \textit{Gaurdesiya samaj sthanpanartha: pratham sabhar vivaran}, Calcutta, 1229 (Bengali era), p. 27.
\item For a further discussion on the self-image of the \textit{bhadralok} class see my article ‘\textit{Bhadralok} in Bengali language and literature--an essay on the language of class and status’, \textit{Bengal past and present}, Dec. 1976.
\item Bhavani Charan Banerjee, \textit{Kalikata Kamalalaya} (reprint), Calcutta, 1343 (Bengali era), pp. 8–9.
\end{enumerate}
more usual to consider grihastha as synonym of maddhyabitto. They were all dubbed together with the abhijat by the English officers as ‘the educated natives’,¹ to distinguish them as a group from the old nobility and the masses. In their English newspapers, the bhadralok described themselves as the middling class.²

The bhadralok status was not ascriptive, it had to be acquired, and the English-educated opulent men of Calcutta could easily move into this new aristocracy. Although the majority of the bhadralok came from the three high castes, Brahmins, Baidyas, and Kayasthas, membership was open to all caste groups. Even among the founder members of the bhadralok’s first society in 1823, the Gauriya Samaj, there were two Subarnaniks, Biresher Mallick and Kashinath Mallick.³ Radhakanta Deb’s first list of the ‘Principal Hindoo Inhabitants of Calcutta’, prepared in 1822, included at least seven families who came from Subarnanik, Tili and weaver castes.⁴ In fact, men who held a common position among some line of the economy, acquired high status through English education or administrative service or some other secular channel, and shared a common life style, became members of the bhadralok class. In their life style the bhadralok imitated the English officials and the Mughal nobility, without sacrificing high caste social values. Many caste groups like the weavers who acquired high bhadralok status, imitated both high class and high caste life style. The Setts of Calcutta lived ostentatiously in large houses, opened ‘reading rooms’ for ‘the educated youth of the metropolis’, established English schools and acted as justices of the peace. But they also supplied the holy water for the idols of Somnath and Dwarakanath, and established their family deity ‘Radhakanta jew’⁵ in Calcutta. According to J. N. Bhattacharya, the rich calcutta weavers gave

2 Bengal Herald, 13 June 1829.
3 Gaurdesiya samaj sthapanartha etc., p. 3.
4 Foreign Miscellaneous Series, National Archives of India (F. M. S.), no. 130, ff. 113—8.
up the life style of their poor caste brothers in the rural areas. Like other high castes, the Setts and Basaks of Calcutta did not allow widow-remarriage and divorce, which was commonly practised by the Tantis of the interior. Sometimes the rich low caste groups had to gain high caste status before they could be admitted into the bhadralok community. Risley mentions that a Ghulam Kayastha (slave Kayastha) of East Bengal, 'could, and can even at the present day, if rich and provident, raise himself by intermarriage as high as the Madhalaya grade, and obtain admission among the Bhadra-lok or gentry of his countrymen'. So high caste status and high caste life style were important to the bhadralok. It must however be remembered that the majority of the high caste Brahmins and Kayasthas did not belong to the bhadralok class, as they were poor, uneducated and did not share the 'middle class' life style.

It is now generally accepted that Bengal in the pre-colonial days was largely divided into semi-autonomous chiefdoms, presided over by rajas who served kinship, religious, administrative and economic functions. The caste system largely depended on the rajas. It seems that the caste rules in Bengal were enforced by the authority of the rajas and their samajs. Samajs were a hierarchy of social groups. According to Ram Ram Bose, Maharaja Bikramaditya invited Brahmins, Baidyas and Kayasthas from all over Bengal to settle in his chiefdom to form a samaj: Brahman Kayastha, Baidya nana uttam varner basati hailo, Maharaja Bikramaditya samajpati Jasahore mahasamaj hailo, emata samaj aar Banglay, kakhano chilo na. ('Brahmin, Kayastha, Baidya, various high castes established themselves, Maharaja Bikramaditya became the samajpati of Jessore, the great samaj came in-

3 For the profession of the Brahmins in Calcutta in the early nineteenth century see W. Ward, A view of the history, literature and mythology of the Hindoos, London, 1817–20, Vol. 3, p. 88 n. It is interesting to note that according to 1921 census the majority of the Brahmins and Kayasthas of Calcutta were not educated in English, hence were not a part of the elite group. Census of Calcutta, 1921, report, Pt. 1, pp. 87–9.
to being. There was no such samaj anywhere else in Bengal').¹ Bharat Chandra Roy described Krishnachandra, the Maharaja of Nawadwip, as a great samajpati, and the poet compared his patron’s samaj with that of Indra, the King of the gods.² No doubt there were in Bengal many intraregional and inter-regional caste panchayats, especially among the lower and the merchant castes, which settled caste disputes.³ But it appears that the majority of the caste cases were settled by the rajas and their samajs. Like the nads of pre-colonial Kerala,⁴ most social ties were vertical to the rajas and samajs. We must not, however, exaggerate the lack of spatial mobility and regional isolation in pre-colonial Bengal. The literary evidence shows that most poets and authors travelled widely,⁵ and all Bengali samajs accepted the rule of smriti and Raghunandanan. Moreover, some samajs had higher authorities than others, for instance the Nawadwip Samaj which largely consisted of the Bharadwaj gotra of Paschetya Baidiki Brahmans, was well respected throughout Bengal for their knowledge of the shastras and the navyanyay logic.⁶ It is widely believed that the Baidya raja Rajballava tried, in the eighteenth century, to introduce widow remarriage and sought unsuccessfully the support of the Nawadwip Samaj and the Maharaja of Krishnagar.⁷ Again, when the Tagores wanted to be recognised as Kulins they looked to the Maharaja

¹ Ram Ram Bose, Pratapaditya charit, Serampore, 1801, pp. 45–6
² Bharat Chandra Roy, Ananda Mangal in Bharatchandra granthavali, Calcutta, 1369 (Bengali era), p. 11.
⁵ For the life of Bharat Chandra Roy see Madanmohon Goswami, Bharat Chandra, Delhi, 1961. and for the autobiographies of two other authors of pre-colonial Bengal see G. Whyte Kilpatrick, ‘Two autobiographical accounts from Middle Bengali Literature’, in Dimock op. cit. pp. 47–66.
⁷ This story about Rajballava’s attempts to introduce social reform in Bengal had been told in most biographies and memoirs of the nineteenth century, but the earliest account of it appeared in print in Karik Chandra Roy’s Kshitish Vamsavali. See C. C. Banerjee, Vidyasagar, Allahabad, 1909, p. 227.
of Krishnagar for support. According to Shivanath Shastri, most printed almanacks and religious texts in the nineteenth century claimed that they were written under the patronage of the Maharajas of Krishnagar. Most samajs were not as influential as Nawadwip was, but within their own territories the rajas were the supreme arbiters in caste cases. The rajas, if we are to believe the literature, vied with one another to bring reputable Brahmins and other high castes into their chiefdoms.

The establishment of a new thriving urban centre in Calcutta under the British protection created new problems, and it undermined the authority of the old samajs. There was no single arbiter of caste laws in Calcutta. This was not however a problem peculiar to Calcutta. Dobbin has recently described the disruption in the traditional methods of regulating caste affairs through caste panchayats in Bombay city in the nineteenth century. Kumar has also spoken of the changing role of caste assemblies in urban Maharashtra in the nineteenth century. In Calcutta, jatimala cutcherries were established in the early days of the Company; we do not however know the exact date of their foundation. The cutcherries received some official sanction, and according to Warren Hastings the ‘chief mutsudys or banyas of the governors of Calcutta’ were appointed to preside over them. Thus during the second half of the eighteenth century Nubkissen, Ganga Gobind Singh and Cantoo Babu acted as ‘presidents’ of the cutcherries. According to Verelst the jurisdictions of the cutcherries were universal (it is interesting to note that the cutcherries were always mentioned in the plural). Edmund Burke also believed it to be so, and he charged Warren Hastings for

6 Harry Verelst, A view of the rise, progress and present state of the English in Bengal, London 1772, pp. 27–8 n.
putting 'the caste and character of all the people of Bengal' in the hands of his servants. But it is most unlikely that the jati-mala cutcherries had any jurisdiction outside Calcutta and among the higher castes in Bengal. In fact, according to Warren Hastings they had 'cognizance only of disputes among the lower kinds of the people'. It seems that the high castes settled their disputes through dals and the caste cutcherries lost their importance in the nineteenth century.

It is not quite clear when the dals started. It is, however, clear that they were already present when Nubkissen moved into Calcutta in the middle of the eighteenth century. It is believed that there were two dals in Calcutta, one led by Madan Mohun Datta and the other by Kristo Churan Mitra. According to the Samochar Darpan 'nearly all the people of the town were subjects' to these two dalapatis. Nubkissen belonged to Mitra's dal. Although a Maulik Kayastha by birth, he soon became the leader of Mitra's dal and under his leadership it grew in number and influence. Soon Nubkissen was recognized as the goshthipati of the Dakshin Radi Kayasthas of Bengal.

His own nineteenth-century official biographer considered this as his greatest achievement: 'Navakrishna's social importance was perhaps greater even than his political. All his other glories were outshone by the glory which attached to the chief of the Hindoo community of Calcutta...in the social kingdom of his city he was the very monarch. As he owed his fortune to his own enterprise, sagacity and genius, so his social pre-eminence was purely of his own acquiring.'

He had that uncommon ability for leadership, ability to command respect from men under him. His immense wealth, a large number of economic dependents and kinsmen (nephews, cousins and other relations), and his official position must have weighed heavily in his favour, in the fight for leadership of his.

2 Select Secret Proceedings, March 1775, as quoted in Census of India 1911, p. 395.
3 N.N. Ghose, op. cit. p. 204.
4 Samachar Darpan, 24 September 1831.
5 N.N. Ghose, op. cit. p. 171.
Dalali in Calcutta

dal. He modelled himself after the traditional rajas. He invited high class Kulins to settle in Calcutta and helped them with funds. He also patronized Brahmin pandits as a raja should do. Such important pandits as Jagannath Tarkapanchanan, Vanesvar Vidyalankar, and Radhakanta Tarkabagish were all indebted to him. He gave them land and house properties in and outside Calcutta.

He patronized the ghatak (match-makers) and with their aid he raised his own social status by marrying his grandson Radhakanta Deb into a high caste Kulin Kayastha family and maintained disciplines within his own dal. The ghatak had an unusual hold over the high caste Bengali society for centuries. Their chief function was to select appropriate matches. For this they kept registers of pedigrees, of marriages, of important social events and decided the social status of the Kulas (families). George Johnson described them as ‘men of a fawning and flattering disposition’, who in the ‘assemblies of the Hindoos’ would often panegyrize some individual as for his giving them a few rupees, as they would satirize him for not listening to their adulation. They sometimes involve parties in difficulties by getting up matches of a disreputable character. Risley, however, was impressed by their remarkable memory, some of the ghatak could offhand ‘repeat the names of all members of the main as well as collateral branches of any family in his particular part of the country; of the families with which they have married, and of the issue of such marriages’. He also mentioned that bribes were often offered to the ghatak by rich families to establish a claim to high social status, but were rarely accepted:

1 Ibid p. 190.
2 N. N. Ghose in his memoirs gives an eulogistic description of Nubkissen’s Sabha: ‘Maharaja Nubkissen was the Maccenas of Bengal. There never was in this province a more munificent or more enthusiastic patron of letters and the fine arts. His home was the favourite resort of men of learning. His sabha (Association) of pundits was pre-eminently the first in the land. It has been popularly compared to the famous council of Vikramaditya.’ p 184.
3 A rapid sketch of the life of Raja Radhakanta Deb Bahadur, Calcutta, 1859, p. 17.
4 George Johnson, op. cit. p. 279.
'Disputes, however, are common, and the ghataks who favour a claim that is fallacious, and who attend at an unauthorized marriage, fall in the estimation of those who have questioned its soundness and declined to be present. The scruples of a single pradhan ghatak often mar the otherwise perfect satisfaction of a parent on the marriage of his son to a family of higher rank than his own; and should all the leaders unite in forbidding the marriage, it is impossible to win any permanent promotion beyond that laid down in their registers.'  

Whatever might have been the moral character of the ghataks as a class, there was no doubt that they had considerable power over the society. Nubkissen, as their patron, got the Kayastha Kulagrantha (it may be considered a digest of all family registers), recorded systematically, and exerted considerable influence over the Kayastha caste. The crowning social event of his life was ekjai, where the ranks of the Kulins were determined and Nubkissen was declared the goshthipati of his caste in West Bengal.

The chief function of the dalapati was to preserve caste, lives, and religion of his dal. It was suggested that heads of different dals should 'like kings use their utmost endeavours to keep carefully the members of their dals [within the holy path]. For example, if any man through vicious inclination eat what is not to be eaten, or drink what is not to be drunk, and this becomes known, then the leader of a dal immediately gives notice to the members of his party, that such a person is fallen, and they are to have no intercourse with him or, if a man become fallen through a false accusation, he may beg of the leader of a dal to restore him into his dal, and he on careful investigation of the charges, finding him innocent may take him into his dal, and so on'. Nubkissen must have had considerable experience as an arbiter of caste cases in the caste cutcherries and many men looked to him for guidance in social intercourse.

According to Bhavani Charan Banerjee members of the dals had to consult the dalapatis on such occasions as birth of a

3 Samachar Darpan, 24 Sept. 1831.
child, marriage, and sradh. Dalapatis used to draw up lists of invitees, so many Brahmins, so many adhyapaks, and so on, according to the financial ability of the member, and keeping out those who were blacklisted and must be ostracized. Members were not allowed to have any social intercourse with those who had been officially ostracized by their dalapati. In the large houses of the dalapatis members used to visit upon their leaders to finalize arrangements for marriages, sradhs and other family ceremonies.

The dal was important to Nubkissen, it gave him a high status within his caste and amongst the bhadralok in Calcutta and leadership over men whom he could control and mobilize. The dalapatis had also taken over another function of the rajas, they were patrons of the arts. The official biographer praised Nubkissen for introducing into Calcutta society nautch, kabi and akhrai.¹ His nautch parties attracted many Europeans. Hickey described one in *The Bengal Gazette*:

‘On Monday night Rajah Nubkissen gave a nautch and magnificent entertainment to several persons of distinction in commemoration of Miss Wrangham’s birthday. As the ladies arrived, they were conducted by the Rajah through a grand suite of apartments into the zenana, where they were amused until the singing began, which was so mellifluous as to give every face a smile of approbation. The surprising agility of one of the male dancers occasioned loud acclamations of applause….After supper there was a ball, which was opened by Mr Livius and Miss Wrangham, who were dressed in the character of Apollo and Daphne. When the minuets were ended, country dance struck up and continued till past three in the morning, when the company departed highly pleased with the elegant festival. As the Rajah was attending Miss Wrangham to carriage, he thanked her in very polite terms for having illuminated his house with her brightness.’²

III

By the turn of the century many high caste new families moved

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¹ N. N. Ghose. *op. cit.* p. 186.
² Hickey’s *Bengal Gazette*, 25 August 1781, as quoted in N.N. Ghose, *op. cit.* p. 184.
into Calcutta and it was not possible for the two original multi-caste dals to control all the new members of the bhadrakol class. There appeared a large number of new dals. The wealthy abhijats provided the leadership. There were already some single caste dals especially amongst the Subarnavaniks. The Mullick family of Pathuriaghata and Chorebagan had their own dal. According to L. N. Ghose ‘This family was of great antiquity, sprung from the Subarna Banik caste or the Banker caste of Bengal, whose profession by national custom is confined to banking and mercantile business. The Mullicks have been re-renowned for their wealth, enterprise, and munificence from immemorial times. So great has been the weight of their social position, that they have been recognized as the Dolopaties or the head of a large number of families of their castes.’ The membership of their dal was restricted to dependents and kinsmen, who benefited both economically and socially: ‘The descendants of many near relatives and dependents up to this day enjoy the benefits formerly rendered and remember them with gratitude. As Dolopati they introduced several reforms amongst their kinsmen, and saved many from ex-communication of caste or other social degradation.’ There was at least another dal of the Subarnavaniks, one of their leaders, Nimai Charan Mullick of Burra Bazar, was selected as the Chairman of Dharma Sabha in 1830.

According to Bhavani Charan Banerjee all other castes of Calcutta, Brahmin, Baidya, Kayastha, Kamar, Kumor, Tili, Mali, Sankhari, Kansavanik, Tantubay etc. belonged to various multi-caste dals which came into existence from the beginning of the nineteenth century. Many castes, like the Tilis, had their own single caste dals, where purely internal caste matters were discussed. Most, however, belonged to both single caste dals and the large multi-caste dals. Most dalapatis of the large multi-caste dals were Kayasthas, Dakshin Radis like Radhakanta Deb, Ashutosh Deb (Dey) and Shivnarayan Ghosh or Uttar Radis,

2 Ibid. p. 59.
3 Ibid. p. 68.
like the family of Ganga Govind Singh, or Bangajas, like Kalinath Munshi. There were, however, many Brahmin dalapatis like Biswanath Motilal and the Tagores.¹

It is almost impossible to find out the exact number of dals in Calcutta during the first half of the nineteenth century. Many dals like the one of the Debs had a long life, it started in the eighteenth century with Nubkissen and continued to function, if only as a social faction of the Dakshin Radi Kayastha families of Calcutta, well into the twentieth century.² There were, however, many dals which grew around a rich dalapati like Ashutosh Deb (Dey), which did not last much beyond the death of the patron.³ There were yet other dals like the one of the Dattas of Hatkhola, which played a significant role in the eighteenth century but receded into the background in the nineteenth century.⁴ Although it is not possible to get the exact figure for the total number of dals, it was generally agreed that there were about five big dals in Calcutta between 1820 and 1850. These were led by Radhakanta Deb, Ashutosh Deb (Dey), the Tagores, Biswanath Motilal and Kalinath Munshi.⁵ There were many small dals led by Shivnarayan Ghosh, Ganga Govind Singh’s family, Nilkamal Banerjee and many others.⁶ The figures for the memberships of these dals are not available. But we know that Navin-krishna Singha had 117 Tili families and about 50 Brahmin families in his dal. There was, however, a small number of Kayasthas in this dal.⁷

2 N.N. Ghose. op. cit. p. 191.
3 Ashutosh Deb started his dal in 1833 and was very active in the 40s and 50s of the century, but soon after his death his dal was never mentioned again. Samachar Darpan, 5 January 1833, S.S.K. Vol. 2, pp. 271–2. Cf. Dwijendranath Thakurer smritikatha, Puratan prasanga, pp 285–6.
Radhakanta Deb probably had the largest dal in Calcutta. He enlisted the support of the most learned Brahmans and the important Dakshin Radi Kayastha families of Calcutta. In the 1840s when Dharma Sabha became a mere caste tribunal and a front organization of Deb’s dal, Samachar Chandrika used to publish the proceedings of the Sabha regularly. It seems that at every meeting the dalapati used to give vyavasthas on about 200 petitions on caste cases and dans (gifts to Brahmans).¹ If this is any indication of his strength then the membership of his dal must have run into thousands and his influence was not restricted to a particular area in Calcutta.

As the number of dals increased, it was thought useful to bring out a newspaper solely devoted to the transactions of the dals. This was to be called Dalabritanta. The prospectus for this paper appeared in Samachar Darpan and in Samachar Chandrika.²

It was suggested that publication of the transactions of the dals would help to discipline the members of the dals. Such a newspaper would help the dalapatis. When some Srimani’s widowed sister-in-law ran away with a sailor³ or some Madhusudan Mitra’s second son was married off to a girl of wrong caste,⁴ the dalapatis could print such facts and the vyavasthas on such issues in the newspaper and could make it that much harder for Srimani and Madhusudan Mitra to get back to their respective castes, because of the wide publicity. Thus newspapers could be used to control men by the dalapatis. The Dalabritanta did not get beyond its prospectus, but the activities of the dals were regularly published in the newspapers, more particularly in Samachar Chandrika.

There was keen competition amongst the five great dals to gain high status and control over men and matter in Calcutta. Two dals were more important than the others, one led by the

¹ See Samachar Chandrika, especially 8 June 1843, 23 November 1843, 4 February 1844 and 6 October 1845.
² Samachar Darpan, 24 September 1831.
Debs and the other by the Tagores. High caste status was important to these families. The Debs were Kayasthas but Maulik Kayasthas; the Tagores were Brahmans, but had lost their Kulin rank and were considered as stained or degraded Brahmans. The Debs were recognized as goshtipatis of the Dakshin Radi Kayasthas and received high Kulin status, since the ekjai of Nubkissen. The Tagores had to struggle hard. In the eighteenth century, when they first moved into Calcutta, there were not many Brahmin residents, hence the Tagores, despite their low grade position, were recognized as high caste Brahmans by the low caste residents of the city. But when they became wealthy and influential, Durgacharan Mukherjee of Bagbazar formed a party for degrading the Tagores. In this he was helped by the Kayastha magnates of Calcutta. The Tagores were extremely proud of their Brahminhood, they displayed their sacred thread openly and claimed high status from others.\(^1\) Gnanendra Nath Tagore, who embraced Christianity, called himself a 'Brahmin Christian'.\(^2\) They were disliked for this by the Baidyas and Kayasthas of Calcutta.\(^3\)

The Tagores employed ghatak\(^4\) who re-wrote their family-histories in the nineteenth century and helped to obtain high caste Brahmin brides and bridegrooms for their children. Prasannakumar Tagore got his daughter married off to a high caste Nai-
kasya Kulin bridegroom.\(^5\) If Ward is to be believed then the Tagores tried to bribe the Maharaja of Krishnagar and the Nawadwip Samaj with a lac of rupees, so that they could be received as a high Kulin Brahmin.\(^6\) It was also suggested that by the end of the nineteenth century Sir J. M. Tagore was 'on the way towards acquiring an influence on the pandits which may one day enable him to re-establish his family completely in caste'.\(^7\)

\(^4\) *A brief account of the Tagore family*, Calcutta, 1868, p. 5.
\(^5\) *Samachar Darpan*, 25 February 1832.
\(^7\) *Ibid.*
The nucleus of a dal was one of the rich and old established families, and dalapatis were senior members of such families. The most important members of a dal were the kinsmen and friends of the dalapati. However, it would be a mistake to think of the families as united groups. For instance the Debs were broadly divided between the senior and junior branches. The junior branch generally accepted the leadership of the senior branch and worked with them in the Dharma Sabha. But in 1844 they broke away to form their own dal.¹ The Tagores were even less united, there were at least three distinct groups, one led by Gopi Mohun Tagore and his son Prasannakumar Tagore, the second by Dwarkanath Tagore and the third by Umananda Tagore who really belonged to Deb's dal.²

Often dals used to split into smaller dals. Sometimes this would be so because of family feuds. In fact, according to Carstairs daladali was an extension of family feuds: 'There was hardly a family of position without its feud. There is a saying in India that one generation makes a family, the second carries it on, and the third breaks it up.'³ But most Calcutta dals split because a rich member would decide to break with his dalapati, to form his own dal, to carve out an area of power and influence. In 1833, Ashutosh Deb formed his own dal and broke away from the Dattas of Hatkhola.⁴ Biswanath Motilal's dal was also a breakaway group.⁵ According to Bhavani Charan Banerjee, 'when a rich member disagrees he forms his own dal, but when a poor member disagrees he has to look for a new dalapati.'⁶

The primary function of a dal was to settle disputes concerning caste, inheritance, marriage, caste rank and intercaste relationships. Thus dals would decide whether or not the second brother of Navakumar Mukherjee of Jahanabad,⁷ should be deprived of his ancestral property, because he had been living

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1 Samachar Chandrika, 1 August 1844.
3 R. Carstairis, op. cit. p. 98.
5 Letter to the Editor, Samachar Darpan. 5 August 1837.
with a chandal (untouchable) woman. They could give vyavasthas on the caste status of a Tili gentleman called Srimani, whose sister-in-law ran away with a sailor, or of Madhusudan Mitra, who married his son to a girl of wrong caste. It seems that dals spent most of their time in discussions on problems of individuals who strayed away from 'the holy path', ate wrong food or married into wrong castes or had social intercourse with persons who should be ostracized. It was usual to leave the final decisions on such cases to the dalapatis, who gave vyavasthas after consulting the Brahmins. There were, however, cases where special meetings of the pandits were called to give vyavasthas on such difficult problems as inter-caste relationships. In 1832, Bhavani Charan Banerjee called a meeting of pandits to decide whether a Vaisnava Shudra could command reverence from Brahmins.

Therewere many other disputes on property and on inheritance which were settled by the dalapatis. According to Dwijendranath Tagore his grandfather and father 'ruled the society' (samaj sasan) as dalapatis and settled many disputes between the members of the dal, which would usually be decided in the twentieth century in a court of law. In 1845 a dispute arose between Motilal Seal and Ananda Narayan Ghosh, over the jurisdiction of their respective bazars. They failed to settle their case, so, on 2 March 1845, many abhijats gathered in Prasannakumar Tagore's house to mediate in this dispute, but Ghosh refused to accept them as arbiters. In the end Seal's lathials (armed retainers) clashed with those of Ghosh and evicted the latter's Ananda Bazar. Such use of force was condoned by Seal's nineteenth-century biographer K. C. Mittra. Mittra blamed the corrupt police force: 'It was accustomed to collude with crime rather than to punish it. It was the terror not of evil doers but of peaceful and honest

2 The Bengal Spectator, 1 September 1842, S B.S. Vol. 3, pp. 96-100.
3 Samachar Chandrika of 1830-1 and 1844-5.
5 Dwijendranath Thakurer smritikatha, p. 285.
6 Samachar Chandrika, 3 March 1845.
men. The law being too weak to protect the right of individuals, was broken by both parties.\textsuperscript{1} Most bhadralok had armed retainers and private prisons, as the zamindars had in the villages. They were often used to subdue men like the editor of Bhaskar\textsuperscript{2} who would not co-operate, or to settle disputes with other abhijats. Private armed retainers were also used to put down the lower order, when they got out of hand and rioted. This often happened during the puja celebrations or the sradh ceremonies, when large numbers (sometimes as many as 50,000) of poor people were fed by the rich abhijats.\textsuperscript{3} There was not much respect for the police; Dwijendranath recalled how, on one occasion, he and his friends assaulted a police constable, and was never troubled by the authorities for this.\textsuperscript{1}

The disputes between the bhadralok and the lower order were not always settled by the use of force. Most artisan caste groups like kumor (potter), mayra (confectioner) and Muslim darjis (tailors) had long established patron-client relationship with the dalapatis. This relationship was determined by caste and custom. Then there was the large army of domestics, who were even more closely tied to the abhijat families. The relationship between the bhadralok and the class of producers, the dockers, the builders, and other wage-earners in the new service industries was contractual and economic. But although the Oriya palarkin bearers could strike or the upcountry washermen could press for higher wages,\textsuperscript{5} the lower order was fragmented and consisted of migrant labourers from various parts of the sub-continent. They could not organize themselves to wage a class struggle against the bhadralok. Hence it is not surprising to see that, except for the occasional riots, Calcutta was a peaceful city.

IV

The dals allowed the abhijat bhadralok to carve out an area of influence for themselves, and gave them organization to compete

\textsuperscript{1} K.C. Mittra, Mutyalal Seal, Calcutta, 1869, p. 17.
\textsuperscript{2} The Bengal Spectator, 1 February, 1843, S. B. S. Vol. 3, pp. 135–6.
\textsuperscript{3} Sterling to Raja Baidyanath, 17 June 1829, F.M.S. Vol. 158, D.O. Letter.
\textsuperscript{4} Dwijendranath Thakurer smritikatha, p. 281.
for power and status. This competition was often very fierce. In another context I have described this competition among the elites to gain high status and to control men and matter in the city through the dals as politics conducted through a traditional idiom.¹ The dals were, however, very active in what one might call politics through modern idiom. Under the British-India system, as it operated in the first half of the nineteenth century, the bhadralok could not aspire for a very high position in public life. They could, however, sit as jurors on the Grand and Petty Juries, or work as Justices of the Peace and have some say in the running of the local government in Calcutta or they could be selected as deputy collectors of revenue or they could be given similar high positions in the Revenue and Judicial Department.

The men who were selected for such positions were considered as the representatives of 'the native public opinion'. They were the men whose names appeared in that exclusive list of 'eminent and loyal natives', which are now preserved among the Foreign Miscellaneous Series of the National Archives of India.² It would seem that the British continued the government through patronage; they acted the way the Grand Mughal would have liked. The Secretary of the Persian Department³ determined the ranks of the natives, doled out titles and khelats to prominent men and decided on the etiquette to be observed in court. The Secretary also decided on such quaint problems as how to address a Maharaja, whether the Maharaja of Burdwan would be allowed to dress his peons with bells and badges, and whether the governor-general should accept presents from visiting native princes.

To represent 'the native public opinion' the dalapatis had to be involved in the area of public activities which were not directly controlled by the government. This was the field of 'public welfare' and social reform. There was keen competition to control the School Book Society, the School Society, the Committee of Managers of the Hindu College and later of other schools. Here the bhadralok could exercise considerable power, influen-

¹ See p. 2.
² F.M.S. Vols. 130 and 131.
cing the policies of such institutions, appointing and sacking teachers, nominating students for scholarships, and controlling the finance. The leading members of these committees and societies, and owners and editors of newspapers would be invited to tea parties at the Bishop of Calcutta’s house or at the receptions at the Government House. So long as politics remained informal and one of patronage, the dals worked in harmony with the British-India administrative system.¹

_Daladali_ was very strong in the twenties and also during the early thirties. Many men were alarmed by the activities of the dals. Some gloomy prophet suggested that daladali ‘will soon destroy the very fabric of the Bengali Hindu society’.² _The Bengal Spectator_ ³ condemned the system for creating dissension within the community and for breaking up families. With reference to the case of Madhusudan Mitra, the Editor wrote: ‘There is no language strong enough to condemn a man who creates dissension between father and son, between husband and wife, so that he could strengthen the position of his dal.’ Iswar Chandra Gupta of _Sangbad Prabhabar_ ⁴ echoed similar views.

There was a time when it looked as though the _bhadralok_ society was going to be polarized between the so-called ‘Reformers’ and the so-called ‘Conservatives’. In 1828 Rammohun Roy established his _Brahmo Samaj_, in 1829 Bentinck prohibited _sati_, in 1830 _Dharma Sabha_ was formed and in 1831 ‘the Young Bengal’ opened their attacks not only on the idolatrous Hindus but also on the ‘half-hearted liberals’ like Prasannakumar Tagore, who, despite his professed faith in monotheism performed the annual _Durga Puja_ with all the pomp and ceremony that was required of him as a leading _bhadralok_ of Calcutta.⁵

One observer, writing in 1845, described the Bengali society in Calcutta as a community divided into four dals, the Missionary dal, Nastik dal (agnostic members of the Young Bengal), Brahmo dal, and the _Dharma Sabha dal_. They were not dals in the sense

¹ See pp. 44–6.
² Letter to the Editor, _Samachar Chandrika_, 22 July 1845.
⁵ _Sumachar Darpan_, 22 October 1831.
we have described them earlier. They were not social factions formed primarily to function as a caste tribunal. If we leave out the Young Bengal and the Missionaries, they functioned as a modern pressure group would; we can describe the other two dals as an amalgam of various dals, performing both traditional and modern duties. A correspondent to the Samachar Darpan wrote, 'There are many holy, honourable and wealthy persons in Bengal, but from their attachment to different dals there was no likelihood of bringing them together. Of late the Editor of the Chandrika by his great efforts has produced a union of all on the subject of suttees and established a holy society, by which we expect the opponents of our religion will easily be subdued'.

The union was formed against another group of dals led by the Tagores, who supported Bentinck and Rammohun Roy. Dharma Sabha declared war on Rammohun Roy and the sati-dvesis (those who opposed sati). The Bengali Brahmans and adhyapaks were urged to boycott the dalapatis who supported Rammohun Roy. It was stated in Samachar Darpan that Roy's friends were 'expelled from all Hindoo society in Calcutta; that they are not to be united hereafter to any festival, marriage or funeral, that any brahman who may accept of an invitation and, a fee from them will be considered as lying under the same disabilities. Thus they are at once cut off from all farther intercommunity with the aristocracy of Calcutta.'

Most priests of Calcutta ignored the decree of Dharma Sabha, and accepted presents from the sati-dvesis and performed ritual duties in their houses. But then they would go back to Deb's dal and repent for accepting such presents from infidels and ask to be restored back to their old positions. However, it seems from the newspaper accounts the excommunication was nearly complete, and the community was polarized. There were petitions and counterpetitions, attacks and counterattacks. Some of the comments in the newspapers were very nasty and very personal; Rammohun Roy was satirized on various occasions and comments were made about his supposed liaison with a Muslim lady in Calcutta. The 'Reformers' hit back: 'I have seen orthodox

1 Samachar Darpan, 1 October 1831.
2 Samachar Darpan, 2 July 1831.
babus shut their ears when the very name of beef is pronounced in their presence. How then is it that they celebrate the Doorga Pooja with beefsteaks [sic], mutton chops, veal, brandy champagne [sic], sherry and all sorts of liquors and spirits.¹

There was a keen competition to gain influence over men in Calcutta and obtain recognition from the Government as the sole authority on caste. The Debs wanted to use Dharma Sabha as the most important caste tribunal in Bengal. In 1831 there was a bitter debate in the newspapers on the loss of property, for persons who had lost their caste. Samachar Chandrika claimed that Dharma Sabha was the ‘government of caste’ in Bengal; as a proof they cited Samachar Darpan.² In the pages of Darpan the Missionaries put a number of questions to Dharma Sabha, concerning loss of caste and loss of property. Darpan, however, denied that they had acknowledged Dharma Sabha’s authority on caste matters: ‘Had we committed such an error as to acknowledge Dharma Sabha in this case we should have exposed ourselves to the ridicule of our readers. No one can be called the ‘Lord of Caste’, but he who possesses the power of government. Supposing for instance some native gentleman to engage in practices forbidden by the Hindoo Shastras, and to refuse to make the required propitiation, he then becomes an out-cast, and forfeits his ancestral property; but the Dharma Sabha has not the power of enforcing this penalty. All that they can do is to complain of him to the sovereign of the country and it is for the sovereign and sovereign alone, to inflict the punishment.’³ However, the struggle to get Dharma Sabha recognized as the caste tribunal of Bengal continued in the forties and fifties of the century.⁴

There was also keen competition to control schools and other ‘public welfare’ societies. The Debs and their dal controlled most school committees including Hindu College; they managed to keep Rammohun Roy and his close associates out of these

¹ Samachar Darpan, 5 November 1831.
² Samachar Chandrika, 30 July 1831, as quoted in Samachar Darpan.
³ Samachar Darpan, 6 August 1831.
committees. Gopi Mohun Tagore and his son Prasannakumar, however, managed to get a foothold in them.

During this period of sharp division of opinion and bitter conflicts, there appeared many new associations, newspapers and periodicals. Shivanath Shastri described the period as an era of ‘social revolution’ (samajik viplab).\(^1\) Rajnarayan Bose too considered this period as the turning point in the history of Bengal, the end of sekal (ancien régime) and the beginning of ekal (modern age).\(^2\) Most historians have agreed with Bose and Shastri; Professor Dodwell, the editor of Cambridge History of India and Professor R. C. Majumdar, the editor of the History and Culture of the People of India make very odd bedfellows on this issue. My colleague in Cambridge, Dr Percival Spear, used to offer a special subject for Cambridge History Tripos called ‘The Foundations of Modern India, 1818–1835’. This was also the theme of Professor Ahmed’s book;\(^3\) he considers the period as the beginning of a new era, which came about due to social reforms and social conflicts. All historians of the Bengal Renaissance look back to this period as the beginning of what Kissori Charan Mittra once called the ‘moral revolution’.\(^4\) I think, however, that these conflicts were not so ideologically orientated and the society was never so completely polarized.

In fact I feel that Evans-Pritchard’s model for the Nuer tribesmen helps us to understand the social system of Bengal better than a model of continuous struggle between the two forces of reaction and progress or between two contending classes, between landlords and merchants. The society was never so divided as to disturb the existing social order. If the Nuer tribesmen had to co-operate because of their pastoral economy which depended on what Evans-Pritchard called oecology,\(^5\) then the bhadralok’s class interest held them together. Nobody wanted to

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1 Shivanath Shastri, *op. cit.* pp. 95–114.
create a social revolution. 'Young Bengal' might have been intoxicated by the works of Tom Paine, could talk about 'liberty' and debate on Kant's rationalism, but could not produce a concrete programme for social reform, let alone act upon it.\(^1\) Many members of the 'Young Bengal' group, in later years, became respectable, loyal British subjects; they were recruited as deputy magistrates, and some served as fellows of Calcutta University. The 'Reformers' did not wish to part with tradition completely. Even Rammohun Roy patronized Brahmins through his Anglo-Vedanta school and the Brahmo Samaj. The Conservatives, on the other hand, were in favour of commerce, modern science and English education.

There existed many kinds of relationships and ties within the bhadrulok community. These ties divided men at one point but united them at another. Thus even during the period when the relationship between their respective dals was most strained, the Debs and Tagores were united in protesting against the la-ki-raj land resumption act of 1828, or in welcoming the Jury Act of 1832. They worked together in the School Society, School Book Society, General Committee of Public Instruction and Hindu College. In 1832 Radhaprasad Roy and Dwarkanath Tagore were admitted to the School Book Society. In 1838 they jointly sponsored the Landholders’ Society. Ashutosh Deb (Dey) and Radhamadhav Banerjee, two stalwarts of Dharma Sabha, had close financial ties with Dwarkanath Tagore; they were all Directors of the Union Bank.\(^2\)

The ties were, however, never permanent. Men moved from one dal to another, broke with old friends and made new alliances. Thus Ashutosh Deb (Dey), a close friend of Radhakanta Deb, and his dal, broke with his friends in 1845.\(^3\) In 1851 the Debs and the Tagores joined hands in the British India Association. The Association for long remained under the control of these

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1 For biographical notes of the members of 'The Young Bengal' group see Shivanath Shastri, op. cit. and for an analysis of their ideology see B. Ghosh, op. cit. Vol. 3, pp. 22–33.


3 Samachar Chandrika, 1 August 1854 and 27 January 1845.
two families. If Dwijendranath Tagore is to be believed, then during this period the Tagores regarded the dal led by Ashutosh Deb (Dey) as their chief rival.

The politics through dals continued in harmony with the British-India administrative system. So long as politics were personal and one of patronage, dalapatis could claim leadership of the bhadralok and were recognized by the government as the representative of the 'native public opinion'. But with the introduction of the elective principles, first in the Calcutta Corporation, then in the Bengal Legislative Council, and with the influx of East Bengali students and the migration of many new bhadralok families into the city, who could not be controlled by the old dals, the dalapatis lost control. The caste restrictions were less rigid than they were in the early part of the century, and the dals could no longer impose their vyavasthas on a new rising grihustha bhadralok class. No doubt, new dals (factions) were being formed based on kinship and neighbourhood ties, which played a significant role in politics, but dals were no longer caste tribunals controlled by the abhijats. For them the harmonious society came to an end sometime in the mid 70s of the century. Dwijendranath Tagore looked back to his childhood when the society was based on the joint family system and despite daladali, there was peace and harmony in society.

1 Radhakanta Deb was the first President and Debendranath Tagore was the first Secretary of The British-India Association, See P. N. Singh-Roy, The Chronicle of The British-India Association, Calcutta, 1965.
2 Dwijendranath Thakurer smritikatha, p. 285.
3 According to the Census report of 1911, 'It is in Bengal that the progress has been greatest in sweeping away the vexatious restrictions on eating and drinking imposed by the caste system. Many of the leading Indian gentlemen dine without hesitation with Europeans at the Calcutta Club and in private houses, and are served on such occasions by Muhammedan table servants', Census, 1911, Bengal, p. 388. J. N. Bhattacharya noticed the loosening of caste restrictions in 1892. See Bhattacharya, op. cit. pp. 248–9.
4 Ralph Nicholas, op. cit.
5 Dwijendranath Thakurer smritikatha, p. 286.