Introduction

This volume presents essays delivered by most of the guest speakers in a seminar on Bengal convened in the spring of 1972 at the University of Hawaii. The seminar was organized by several South Asianists at the University of Hawaii out of their concern for the independence struggle in Bangladesh and for United States foreign policy toward the emerging nation and its friends. It was their view that the events leading up to and culminating in the war for independence could not be adequately understood unless a knowledge of social and political development over a period of several centuries in Bengal provided a basis for judgment. Their intention in the seminar was twofold: to provide students with a rigorous interdisciplinary study of Bengal that would result in new insights into its contemporary problems, and to provide a group of Bengal specialists with an opportunity to address themselves to certain aspects of history and society that they understand to be influential on current developments in Bengal.

The essays in this volume deal with three time units in the history of Bengal—the middle period, the nineteenth century, and the twentieth century.

The first essay, by Edward C. Dimock, Jr., describes his efforts to find sources of contemporary Hindu-Muslim antagonism in the medieval literature. Changes in family structure and social and world views in the late middle and early modern periods are the subject of Tapan Raychaudhuri’s study. These two essays take a brief look at an earlier period in Bengali history and society.

The following four essays deal primarily with the nineteenth century, although Blair B. Kling’s study covers the transitional period from the middle to the modern history of Bengal, as well. While Kling’s contribution deals with practical and material aspects of upper-class Bengali life, the next three essays are concerned with intellectual debate and developing ideas in the scintillating decades of the Bengal renaissance. John N. Gray, a graduate student in the seminar, offers a critique of David Kopf’s and my essays and goes on to develop a theory which would extend our work a step further. Readers will notice that these studies deal almost exclusively with the Hindu community in the nineteenth century, an imbalance which may seem to reflect lack of deep involvement on the part of
the Muslim community in the social and intellectual ferment of the century. This dearth of Western scholarship concerned with the Bengali Muslims is a subject to which I shall return.

J. H. Broomfield and John R. McLane both concern themselves with aspects of the independence movement in the twentieth century and the phenomenon of communal politics. Nicolaas Luykx traces the evolution of public policy on rural development in East Bengal, including the role played by American agencies in development projects.

The bibliographic essay by David Kopf is devoted entirely to publications by Bengal specialists in American universities. Sufficient time was not available to cover the vast literature on Bengal produced by scholars of many countries. In addition it seemed appropriate to this volume to discuss the work of American specialists, most of whom had been trained on United States government grants intended to provide the nation with resources of specialized knowledge of the various areas of the world, including Bengal.

Bringing together the work of nine authors in a single volume results in a certain amount of variety, most obviously in style. Scarcely less obvious in this volume are differences of spelling and use of diacritics in foreign words and names. Several years ago the Bengal Studies Group made a serious effort to standardize a system of transliteration for Bengali words; nevertheless, wide variations still exist in the methods of Bengal specialists. The problem with proper names is even greater. Some writers use a transliteration of the name as spelled in Bengali; others use anglicized spellings, many of which were used by the owners of the names themselves when writing in English. Given the extent of variation in these essays, it seemed best to let each author keep his own system rather than inflict the radical changes that would be necessary in some essays in order to employ a uniform method throughout the volume. The result of this decision is that a single name may appear in several versions if it appears in more than one contribution.

Finally, these essays, while dealing exclusively with Bengal, undoubtedly contain much that is of interest to other South Asianists and quite possibly will furnish materials for area specialists of other regions who are interested in comparative studies. Still it must be pointed out that a collection of essays is often less than what its planners would have hoped to present. Although this volume was never intended to be an introductory or comprehensive work on Bengal, it was expected to be more representative of the studies done in the various periods of Bengal's history. Unfortunately, three excellent essays, on society in ancient India, anthropology, and art history, were not submitted for publication. Larger problems have also provided obstacles to the fulfillment of our objectives. The singular lack of
substantial material on the Bengali Muslim community in this volume reflects the limited amount of research done on that group by Bengal specialists in American universities. A few younger scholars have now begun to work in that area, thus undertaking to correct a major neglect of many years. Other areas of study similarly have not been approached by American scholars, or, in fact, by anyone else. The present work simply offers the views of a number of scholars on elements from their own areas of research influential on the contemporary history of Bengal. If, as a secondary result, research is stimulated in areas about which this publication is silent, it will have made our effort doubly worthwhile.

There is particular pleasure in writing this final paragraph of these introductory remarks, the paragraph traditionally reserved for acknowledgment of help received in the preparation of the volume. This work, like most others, could not have come into existence without a great deal of help from people whose names are not listed in the table of contents. Of fundamental help in both the planning and the execution of the seminar were Professors Harry Friedman and Burton Stein. Without the practical and intellectual contributions of these two colleagues at Hawaii, neither the seminar nor the volume would have been possible. The University of Hawaii and its Asian Studies Program joined together in providing all the funding for both the seminar and the publication, a noteworthy undertaking in this time of academic poverty. The support and recommendations of the Asian Studies Publications Committee, and the excellent clerical assistance of Machiko Tsuruya, have been directly responsible for placing this volume in your hands.

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