The Hindu-Muslim riots in January 1964—those which, some may remem-
ber, were touched off by the theft of the Prophet’s hair—are the only
ones I have ever seen but they made an indelible impression. The scenario
of the riots in Calcutta, if described, should sound familiar, for it would
be reminiscent of more recent scenes in Bangladesh.

After the Gurkhas had quieted the city, I went to Dacca. On a panel in
Washington not long ago, I heard the remark that communal riots have
been frequent in India, but rare in East Bengal and nonexistent in West
Pakistan. I do not know about West Pakistan, but Dacca in 1964 suggests
that such remarks stem from a common type of selective vision. The
government of India in 1964 sent a judicial commission to interview Hindu
refugees and find out what had happened. Here are two completely
random and typical excerpts from the report of that commission:

On the night of January 3, 1964, a large mob attacked and set fire to Hindu
houses in the village. People started running and they were chased. Quite a
lot of persons got killed, others burnt to death. The mob was shouting
with glee and also shouting the slogan “Jehad.” Many women were
abducted, ravished, and killed. [Case K 746, p. 61]

During the looting many Hindus took refuge in the bazaar, which was
attacked by a large gang of Muslims who started killing people including
women and children indiscriminately. They snatched away suckling child-
dren from the arms of their mothers, killed them in one stroke as one breaks
an egg, and threw them into the river. They also threw the dead and mutil-
ated bodies of older persons into the river. The water of the river turned
red, the surface strewn with innumerable bodies. [Case DN 117, p. 141]
The report is a long one, and these interviews are in every way typical. In many cases the Muslims specified as committing the atrocities were Biharis (a general term for non-Bengalis); but this is not always specified. And if the stories from Bangladesh are true—that the murders of the day before Dacca fell, the killing of people from the university and elsewhere, were committed by right-wing Bengali Muslim extremists from the Al-Badr and Al-Shams groups—one is forced to wonder.

Political history was not my concern before 1964, nor has it been since. But the violence was of such a degree that it seemed to me that it could only have stemmed from hatred of many centuries duration. Yet in my reading of texts from the so-called medieval period (fifteenth to eighteenth centuries) I had found little indication of such deep-rooted antagonism. The sixteenth-century Kavikañkan Candi, of the keen-eyed and witty Mukundarām, accepts the fact of Hindus living side by side with Muslims with perfect equanimity. The writer seems to look upon the Muslims as simply another caste, somewhat varied in occupation. His description of the settlement of the new town of Gujarāta runs in part, in Ron Inden’s translation, like this:

[He] brought subjects of many castes [jāti] to the town. . . . Many Muslims settled there, receiving the hero’s pan. He gave them the western quarter. . . . They rise at dawn, spread out their red-colored mats, and prostrate themselves five times. With Cholemāni garlands, they mutter prayers to the Pir Pegambar and light evening lamps in the pir’s hall. Kinsmen, sitting in groups of ten to twenty, constantly deliberate on the Quran. . . . They do not abandon their ways; they wear tightly tied pājāmā and on their heads ten-striped caps. . . . Some marry according to Hindu usage. . . . Hindus who have become Muslims are called Garsāl. Those who become blind only at night, beg during the night.²

The last two lines are particularly interesting, as is the tone of respect that runs throughout. The last line is funny; the next to last means that Hindu converts are looked down upon, garsāl being a term of disrespect. This despite the fact that conversion is traditionally in Islam quite a legitimate way of gaining adherents to the faith. Recently, in a paper given at Chicago, T. N. Madan of Delhi University told the story of how, in Kashmir, that other>seam” of two cultures, he knew a Brahman who had converted to Islam out of loneliness and a desire to marry. Not only would no Muslim girl marry him, but he was ostracized by both cultures. To the meaning of life and accommodation in such cultural seams I shall return.

Nor was I able to find much evidence of a consistent religious antagonism between Hindus and Muslims in the great body of medieval Bengali literature, that of the Vaiṣṇavas. In these texts is found suggestion of an
occasional campaign designed to destroy Hindu temples; Sanātana Gosvāmin, who had been a high minister in the court of Husain Shah (1494–1525), left the service of the king because the king was about to embark upon a campaign in Orissa, in which temples would be destroyed. There are stories of how (though this takes place in northern India) an image of Kṛṣṇa had to be moved from place to place for fear that the Muslims would capture and defile it. There are stories of how Muslims would come to the houses of recalcitrant Hindu officials and sacrifice cattle in the Caṇḍi-manḍapa, thereby defiling it and its owner. And there are occasional qāzi who treat individual Vaiṣṇavas harshly: one such has the great disciple Haridāsa brutally whipped through twenty-two market-places because, although born in a Muslim family, Haridāsa refused to recite the Koran and iterate his faith in Islam. Here, though, it seems to be Haridāsa’s apostacy rather than his Vaiṣṇavism that brought about this cruel treatment. There are other qāzi who speak the name of Kṛṣṇa and are thus saved; for, says Haridāsa, even if a Muslim uses the term harām (“defiled, unclean”), he is saved, that word having the name of Rāma embedded in it. And still other qāzi allow, extraordinarily, the nagara-kirtan, the Vaiṣṇava street procession; this, from the attention given it in the texts, was an unusual concession. Cases of oppression and even antagonism seem to be random, and for every instance of hostility there is one in the other direction. Husain Shah may have destroyed temples in Orissa; but the Caitanya-Caritāmṛta text (II:25:184ff.) has this to say about his personal relations with Hindus:

Subuddhi Raya had been a ruler in Gaurā, formerly, and Husain Shāh Sāyed was his servant. He gave him a commission, to excavate a tank; he made a mistake, and Rāya hit him with a whip. Afterwards, when Husain Shāh himself had become king of Gaurā, he paid much respect to Subuddhi Rāya. His wife, seeing the marks of the whipping on his body, told the king to whip Subuddhi Rāya. But the king said: Rāya was my protector and was like a father. It is not proper that I should strike him. And his wife said: If you will not take his life, take his caste. And the king replied: If I take his caste, he will not live.³

There may have been cruel qāzi; but there were others in this high administrative post who respected their very real social ties with Hindus, based on village relationships. Caitanya-Caritāmṛta 1:17:140ff. tells us that one qāzi, speaking to Caitanya, said:

You have come in anger; I remained hidden to pacify you. Now you have been pacified, and I have come to meet you. It is my good fortune that I have received such a guest as you. By village relationship Cakravarti [i.e., Caitanya’s maternal grandfather] is my father’s brother; village relationship is stronger than blood-ties. Nilambara Cakravarti is your mother’s
father, and so you are my nephew. A maternal uncle always endures the anger of his nephew, and a nephew does not take offense at his maternal uncle.

Even further, as I have tried to suggest elsewhere, there were Muslim poets who wrote on Hindu themes: the beauty of the Ganges (Daraf Kahn, in Sanskrit) or the love between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. The following poem, though not the best that could be found, is not atypical:

You do not know how to play the flute.
You play it at the wrong times. You care nothing for me.
When I am sitting with my elders,
you call me with your flute. I could die of shame.
You play it on the farther bank. I hear it here.
I am an unlucky girl; I do not know how to swim.

If you find the bamboo clump from which this flute was made,
tear it up by the roots and throw it in the river!

Cānd Qāzi says: I hear the flute, my life ebbs from me—
I shall not live, unless I see my Hari.

Except for the signature line, it is a Vaiṣṇava song. Whether the poet was a Vaiṣṇava or whether he was simply substituting the names of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa for the Sufi concepts of the soul and God is not known. Whatever the case, it is clear that there was no scorn, on the part of the Muslims who wrote these songs, at least, of the Vaiṣṇava form of Hinduism.

Nor is there scorn of Islam on the part of the Vaiṣṇavas. When, in the biographies, Caitanya is arguing with one Muslim or another, he treats his antagonist just as he treats the Vedāntins and other Hindus: he does not tell them that they are wrong, merely that they have misread and misinterpreted their own scriptures. In the Caitanya-Caritāmṛta, Caitanya argues in the following way (illustrating, perhaps less than in some other places, its author Kṛṣṇadāsa’s interesting ideas of the Koran and Islamic theology).

Caitanya with four companions is on his way home from a pilgrimage to Vṛndāvana; they are in a forest, and he has fallen unconscious in a fit. The party is approached by some Muslim soldiers, Pathans, who accuse Caitanya’s four companions of having poisoned him to rob him. Two of Caitanya’s companions are from western India, and two are from Bengal. Indicative of the attitude of the Pathans toward Bengalis is the Muslim leader’s remark: “You two are from the west and are good men; but these two Gaṛiyas [i.e., Bengalis] are rogues; and so they tremble” (II:18:162). II:18:177–188 reads:

And among those mlecchas [i.e., Muslims] there was a most brave man; he wore black cloth, and people called him “pir.” His heart softened when he
saw Prabhu [i.e., Caitanya]. “Our own śāstras [i.e., the Koran] establish the qualityless Brahmā and preach nondualism.” Prabhu refuted his arguments using those very śāstras. . . Prabhu said: “In your śāstras the qualityless [God] is established; in your śāstras it says at the end that īśvara [God] is one, that his body is dark in color, and that he is full of all divine qualities. . . . From him are creation, establishment, and destruction, the equal refuge for worlds both gross and subtle; he is the best of all things, to be worshipped by all, and is the cause of causes. . . . Except for service of him, the worldly pain of the living creature does not pass away; love at his feet is the essence of the meaning of mankind. . . None of your pandits understand your śāstras, and that among injunctions what is earlier and what is later, that which is later is stronger. Examine your own śāstras, and ascertain what has been written there at the end.

But as Joseph O’Connell points out in his doctoral dissertation “Social Implications of the Gaudiyā Vaiśnava Movement” 5—and it should be noted that much of this essay owes a debt to that excellent study—by and large the Vaiśnāvas do not seem to single out the Muslims by religion. They treat them, as we have seen Mukundarām do, as a caste among many other castes, having odd customs of dress, but having a place, just as do Brahmans and Kayasthas, in a complex society. The terms Muslim or Mussulman are not used by Vaiśnāvas to single out this beard-bearing, cap-wearing group until texts of the late eighteenth and even nineteenth centuries (Prema-vilāsa and Bhakta-māla). 6 Before these relatively late dates the terms used were secular: Muslims were called mleccha, which was not originally very complimentary, meaning something like “barbarian,” and yavana, which is simply “foreigner” and is applied to Greeks as well as to Muslims. From the other point of view, the term Hindu is used sometimes by Muslims, and sometimes also by Hindus, but only when they are addressing Muslims. It must be remembered, however, that in the middle period it is quite possible that the term was not used to designate a religious community, as it is today, but a people inhabiting a geographically definable piece of territory. The term comes from the name of the Indus River and was used by the Greeks and later by other invaders from the west to designate the people of a strange new land. So it is far from certain that Muslims were using this term in a religious sense; the usage possibly denotes no more about religion than the terms Bengali or Maharashtrian: geography, language, and culture of which religion is but a part.

Hindus, when they are talking among themselves, speak of Vaiśnāvas and Śāktas, Brahmans and purohit. When they use the term Hindu, it is to reply to Muslims in categories the Muslims themselves use. The Caitanya- Caritāmṛta, interestingly, uses the term Hindu-dharma, which would sug-
gest that Muslims saw a specifically Hindu way of looking at things, on a couple of occasions. In the passage where Caitanya is confronting the qāзи who has tried to stop the nagara-kīrtan, he says:

You are the qāзи, and have power over hindu-dharma; but you do not use it. I do not understand this respect. [I:17:174]

In the city the hindu-dharma grows greatly; nothing is heard except for the sound of the name of Hari. [I:17:193]

As O'Connell points out, in the first of these statements there is recognition of the potential power of repression that lies in the hands of the Muslims. But there is also recognition of the fact that it is not being used. To the Vaiṣṇavas, not only were the Muslims acceptable as one religious and social group among many, but their political dominance was also accepted, if with some trepidation. Vṛndāvana-dāsa in his Caitanya-bhāgavata uses the term kāla-yavana ("the yavana as death") and mahatibra-yavana ("most cruel yavana"). But so long as this potential was not realized, the Vaiṣṇavas were content. Their real enemies were the Hindu pāsaṇḍi, Brahmans antagonistic to Vaiṣṇavism who tried to bring about persecution by informing Husain Shah of the prophecy, Christian-like, that a revolt in Navadvip, Caitanya's city, would rid the land of yavana rule. The Vaiṣṇavas did not go so far as the Šunya-purāṇa, a text of the cult of the god Dharma which rejoices in the Muslim conquest, seeing it as chastisement of proud Brahmans; but neither, so long as there was no systematic persecution, did they attempt anything except coexistence.

If such mutual understanding and even sympathy were present in the seventeenth century, the contrast is at least impressive, with pictures of burning bustees and people being shot from rooftops as they fled the flames seemingly typical of the twentieth. O'Connell (p. 63) paraphrases Muin ud din Ahmad Khan's History of the Fara'idi Movement in Bengal, 1818–1906 as follows:

Even though the total Muslim population of Bengal probably was larger than elsewhere the population became polarized into antagonistic competing Hindu and Muslim communities only in the 20th century and then only after intensive efforts to pry Bengali Muslims loose from their Bengali cultural moorings.

If this is true, it will take a historian of British India to explain why. And if it is true, it will suggest further that Bengal in this as in other respects cannot be fully included in the generalizations made about India. Bernard Cohn, in conversation, tells of genuine Hindu-Muslim riots in Benares as early as 1809, with all the trappings thereof: temples desecrated by the slaughter of cattle, destruction of temples to build mosques, and so forth. And in the middle of the nineteenth century in Kerala there were riots, at
first for economic reasons but later polarized along communal lines, the
reports of which sound much like those taken in Calcutta in 1964. At this
point it might be helpful to go back to the beginning.

Every region of the Indian subcontinent differs from every other region
in a variety of ways, and each region varies in different ways from the two
main classical traditions that otherwise unite them—the Sanskritic tra-
dition and the Perso-Arabic tradition of Islam. It can be argued that
Bengal differs more than most. In the first place, long before the coming of
Islam, Bengal was recognized as far from the heartland of the Indo-Aryan
people, in the upper Gangetic plain. Bengal was quite literally beyond the
pale, and in early Sanskrit texts references to the place are invariably full
of scorn. A Jaina text points out that Bengal is a perilous place in which to
travel, being filled with barbarians who think nothing of murdering even
monks. Other texts say that Bengal is so impure that those who are ill-
advised enough to go there must submit to ritual purification upon their
return to God’s country. And there is the legend of the king Adisura,
who wanted to perform an elaborate Vedic sacrifice but could not find any
priests in Bengal with enough knowledge to do it; so he sent to the west
for these priests, and they came and performed the sacrifice and were re-
warded with lands on which they established hierarchical societies with
themselves at the top. And in Mogul times, generals were sent to Bengal
as punishment, for the place, as one of them succinctly put it, was a
malarial swamp. Besides, the Bengalis were always revolting about one
thing or another, and more often than not succeeding, because they knew
the watery terrain and how to use it.

If the British had had any control over history, it is certain that they
would not have established their capital at Calcutta. But history, with her
incomparable sense of humor, had seen fit to have Job Charnock establish
his trading post in those three little villages on the Hugli. The British did
not much like Bengal, or the Bengalis either. If one scans the texts written
by servants of the Company, or even Kipling, one cannot but be struck by
phrases like “toadying, sly and deceitful, cowardly, pompous, slight of
build and dark of skin” applied to the Bengalis. By contrast, the people of
northwestern India were “tall, strong, and brave, eaters of beef, direct and
truthful, courageous enemies and staunch friends.” And so the native re-
giments of the British armies were made up of these people—Panjabis,
Pathans, Baluchis, warlike peoples with qualities much like those the
British considered their own. In Black Watch (1929), brave Muslim troops
from the northwest frontier, fighting side by side with their red-coated
comrades, save India for England during World War I, taking their place
in the British military Hall of Fame beside the Fuzzy Wuzzy, as those
first-class fightin’ men hurl themselves forever against the British square.
Some have characterized the Bengalis as paranoid. But it is not paranoia if somebody really is after you. So many factors have had their effect: the geographical location of Bengal on the far eastern end of Indo-Aryan expansion so far as Hindus are concerned, cut off from the birthplace of Islam (and geography is significant in Islam, as the fact of the hajj attests) to the Muslims; the contempt of the British for lacking warlike qualities and of the Brahmans from other parts of India for eating fish and mis-pronouncing Sanskrit. These factors alone, contrasting with and stimulating a pride in intellect, in language and literature, have understandably made Bengalis feel apart. And, too, there is the Bengali pride in the motherland, shared by Hindus and Muslims alike. It is not insignificant that the anthem of Bangladesh, written by the non-Muslim Tagore, Amār sonār bāṅglā, explicitly speaks of Bengal as mother. Nor is the poem written by the Muslim Nazrul Islam insignificant:

We are two flowers on one stem [or, in a Bengali pun, at one nipple]—
Hindu and Muslim—
the Muslim the jewel of the eye, the Hindu the breath—
that sky is one, where moon and sun swing, in the lap of the mother,
one blood in the deeps of the heart, one the pull of that pounding pulse.

Full-fledged Muslim invasions of Bengal began in the thirteenth century. There had been a trickle of Sufis, some gentle and some warlike, at earlier times; and the Muslims ruled the place, either from local courts in Bengal or from imperial courts in Delhi, until the defeat of Siraj-ud-ullah by the British at Plassey in 1757. When Islam came to India in the tenth century, it arrived with a religious book, a complete set of interpretations of that book, a set of laws, and a social structure relatively fixed. Because of this cultural cohesion, Peter Hardy argues, Islam was able to retain a kind of “cultural apartheid” vis-à-vis the Hindus. It is true, he admits, that the Muslim rulers of Delhi and elsewhere used Hindus in the administration of their vast empires and that Hindus sometimes reached positions of great power in these administrative networks. It is also true that Akbar was a student of Hindu among other scriptures, that Dara Shikoh, eldest son of Shah Jahan, was a profound and serious student of Hindu philosophy, and that syncretistic cults such as that of Kabir sought to blend the religious systems by seeking the best in both of them. But, Hardy would say, Akbar, Dara Shikoh, Abul Fazl, and the rest were exceptions, and Kabir came from, and spoke to, the lower cultural orders.

In regard to Bengal, his argument would be harder to make. It is true that one stratum of Bengali Muslim society is the ashrāf—Muslims of the aristocracy who seek to preserve the cultural apartheid, looking to the west for their heritage and claiming descent from the lineally pure invaders,
who in their turn were descended from those close to the Prophet. Some question the historicity of this claim; in an excellent thesis for the Australian National University, Ashim Roy characterizes the ashrāf as follows: “The upper strata of the Muslim society in Bengal had thus been organized into a distinct social entity on the basis of an amalgam of history and fiction welded onto the body of material power.”

Such people are more tied to their western lineage and to Islam than to the Bengali motherland. But there are other strata of Bengali Muslim society. There are village people who, together with their Hindu neighbors, visit, or used to visit, the same shrines, tombs of saints; there are cults shared by Hindu and Muslim, that called Satya-pir by Muslims and Satyanārāyaṇa by Hindus, for example; there are Hindu festivals celebrated by Muslims, and vice versa; we shall see an example in a moment. And there is the stratum which is Bengali by birth and heritage, and proud of the fact, and which, unlike the village people, see distinctions between Hinduism and Islam and are Islamic in all their habits and beliefs. There may be some among these who, like the ashrāf, have contempt for those who make no distinctions and contempt for Hindus. But there are others who see Hindus as fellow Bengalis and fellow human beings, with a right to their own beliefs. They are like the Kashmiri Muslim merchant whose advertising calendar shows the gods of the Hindu pantheon.

The second and third of these three strata have another thing in common—the Bengali language—and it is here that the cultural apartheid between the ashrāf and other Muslims in Bengal is most obvious. Let me quote Ashim Roy again:

Thus in their thought, ideas, and even their language the ashrāf remained, or at least posed to remain, alien to their coreligionists in Bengal, and looked down upon the Muslim masses because they thought themselves nearer to Islam, as they were closer to the Arabic and Persian languages, literature, and culture, which according to them were permeated with Islamic values, while the Bengali language and literature, subjected to the influence of the Hindus, was steeped in idolatry.

Roy quotes Yaqinuddin Ahmad, writing in the Moslem Chronicle in 1896: “The Muhammadans of Bengal had leaders who tried their utmost to belong to the northwest. They talked Hindustani, imitated Delhi or Lucknow manners, but in spite of that they were Bengalis.” And Ni'am ud din, in Zudbat ul masa'il in 1873: “The accomplished men of [Bengal] do not take themselves to Bengali books for the poor quality of the language, not worth listening to. . . . They do not like their children to read them; rather, it is forbidden by many.” One cannot take pride in one’s language and literature, if one is a Bengali, and be a Muslim. An instructive letter appeared anonymously in the Moslem Chronicle in 1895:
Several heathen customs have crept into the society and [innovations in Islamic custom] and [belief in local deities] are practiced with impunity every day by thousands of so-called Mussulmans in their feasts and festivals. There are places where widow-marriage is looked upon with hatred. . . . In every district of Bengal there are benighted places where people profess a corrupt form of Islam . . . they even openly worship Hindu gods and goddesses. Nearly all of the people of [Nadiya district] have Hindu names; their manners and customs are those of Hindus; they celebrate the pujas; they have caste distinctions too. We are choked with inward shame and mortification by witnessing a scene, which we did the other day in Taltola. . . . It was the day of Sripancami puja when we saw troops of Muhammadan lads, children of lower-class people and reading in Hindu patsalas, carrying small flags and chanting heathen ditties in praise of Ma Sarasvati.20

If the Bengali ashraf felt this way, how much more so Muslims from the untainted West? For the attitude is that no matter how pure their personal Islamic beliefs and practices, all Bengalis, excepting perhaps the ashraf, have been stained by Hinduism. To become contemporary for a moment, it was reported in the New York Times for 13 May 1971 that a Pakistani army major, asked about the army’s attack on Dacca University, replied: “We have to consider that an entire generation of students has been lost, because of the laxity and permissiveness of parents. You hear of alcohol drinking and raping going on at the university—things unheard of in a Muslim society.” The mention of rape is particularly ironic: but then Bengali Muslim girls are not Muslims.

There are millions of Bengalis, however, who call themselves Muslim; where did they all come from? They are not all ashraf, nor do they all claim to be. O’Connell calculates on the basis of some figures in Abdul Karim’s Social History of the Muslims in Bengal that in 1650 there were in Bengal 8.6 million Hindus and 4.1 million Muslims. At that time, the Muslims had been in Bengal over three hundred years. Although I have not stopped to calculate it, the original invaders, who probably did not number over a few tens of thousands, would have had to multiply at a prodigious rate. The obvious theory is that most Bengali Muslims became Muslims through large-scale conversions. The question of course is this: If conversions there were, how did they come about and who was converted?

There may have been large-scale forcible conversions. And there are examples of how Hindus lost caste—Subuddhi Rāya, who did finally lose his caste at the insistence of Husain Shah’s wife, is an example—by being forced to eat, perhaps, forbidden food and, no longer accepted by the Hindu community, became Muslims. But the case of Subuddhi Rāya is
instructive, though no one knows how typical: while some Brahmans told him that he might as well kill himself, others prescribed the simplest possible prayascittā (ritual purification): the taking of the name of God. And Mirza Nathan in his history tells of a severe reprimand given a Muslim official for forcibly converting a Hindu. There were such conversions, then, but seemingly not on a vast enough scale to answer the question. Another argument is that lower-caste Hindus and noncaste people, and Buddhists who, everybody seems to feel, were running about the place in numbers, found social and religious satisfaction in Islam, which did not discriminate so rigidly. These, the argument goes, converted voluntarily.

All these arguments have some merit; as is often pointed out, not only is it difficult to tell by physical features most Bengali Muslims from most Bengali Hindus, but many Muslims perform the same services as their Hindu neighbors: both are fishermen, both are weavers, both are cultivators, and the like. There were probably high-caste converts too, attracted especially by the warmth of Sufi Islam; Sanātana Gosvāmin, minister to Husain Shah and later a favorite of Caitanya, seems to have been of a Brahman family, but became a dārves, a Sufi.

It is perhaps unfair to conclude with a series of questions I cannot an-
swer. As to what it all means to Bangladesh: rivers of communal blood have flowed in Bengal and may yet flow. And in Bangladesh the term communal takes on a new dimension: there are Hindus who are Hindu and Bengali, Muslims who are Muslim and Bengali, and Muslims who are Muslim but not, psychologically at least, Bengali. The last have hunted the first two, and may be hunted in their turn. Hindus have been hunted by some of the second and most of the third, and may be again. But history has shown too that Bengalis of all communities have lived together, if not always in tranquillity, drawn together, as Nazrul would have it, by the common blood of their common mother. That common blood has soaked the soil of the new nation. One keeps one’s fingers crossed and hopes that, as Abul Fazl, minister to the Great Mogul, said, “the thorn of strife and hatred be caused to bloom into a garden of peace.”

NOTES

4. “Muslim Vaisnava Poets of Bengal,” in *Bengal: Regional Identity*; ed. David
Kopf (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1969).


6. I have been told that the terms are so used in texts from Sylhet and Mymensingh as early as the sixteenth century; I have been unable to verify this.


13. eka brnte.


17. Ibid., p. 43.

18. Ibid., p. 44.

19. Ibid., p. 44.

20. Ibid., p. 38.
Norms of Family Life and Personal Morality among the Bengali Hindu Elite, 1600–1850

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Until at least the latter half of the eighteenth century, our chief sources of information for Bengali social values are the literary and religious texts besides a meager amount of biographical data contained in these very texts. The caste histories and the chronologically uncertain traditions preserved in the district histories written in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries marginally supplement this information. Most of these works are written by the members of the upper castes with traditions of literary education and reflect their values. Even when they write of other orders of society, they present an outsider’s image of a different social group and unconsciously interpolate their own values; often the incongruities are obvious; more often the authenticity of the portrait cannot be checked. In the nineteenth century, especially the latter part, descriptions of social groups without any literary traditions become more abundant, but the paucity of evidence for the earlier period precludes any comparison with former conditions or the discussion of any trends over time. A study of social norms in Bengal for the period under discussion has hence to be concerned with the “upper stratum”—“upper” in terms of social status more than anything else—who have been described somewhat loosely as the “elite” for the purposes of this study. This stratum, of course, was not homogeneous, but the sources do indicate a basic uniformity of norms and a limited range of diversities. The differences between the Hindu and the Muslim elites—determined by differences in social organization and religious ideology—were more basic. Such a comparison has not been attempted here, partly to keep the essay within reasonable limits. Finally, the time period covered here is really less awe-inspiring than it
seems. The continuity of relevant values is considerable, and even if the starting point of this study were pushed back by two more centuries it would not have made a great difference. The time limits refer simply to the broad chronology of the sources used. The significant changes are concentrated in the last half century and, to some extent, in the last one hundred years of the period.

A striking fact about Bengal’s social life before the mid-eighteenth century is the relative absence of the joint family. Although our information on this point is by no means exhaustive, it is too extensive to be explained away as mere coincidence. Several writers of panchali in the seventeenth century—Mukundaram, Ruparam, Kshemananda—have left behind some autobiographical data. The life stories of the Vaishnava hagiographers are known, and we have a number of biographies of Chaitanya and his followers. The typical family in nearly all these cases is nuclear and rather small. The heroes and heroines of the medieval ballads are also portrayed as belonging to small nuclear families. The one major exception is to be found in the legend of the merchant Chand, who had seven grown-up sons living with him.

The norms associated with the nuclear family were necessarily different from those of a joint family. Negatively, there was a lack of concern with duties to a wide range of uncles, grand-uncles, cousins, and the like, and family obligations referred typically to one’s immediate blood relations. The reverence due to the jāti or the kinship group—especially the latter’s right to sit in judgment on one’s conduct—was recognized. But the total involvement with the larger kinship group—in terms of one’s associations, affections, and family duties—appears to be a later development.

There is only one feature of the joint family one can trace back to the seventeenth-century literature. The aged parents apparently continued to live with the grown-up and married son unless they preferred to live in retirement after a while in the holy city of Benares. In such cases, however, the father became an honored guest rather than the head of the family, although in the domestic setup the daughter-in-law was expected to submit respectfully to the mother-in-law’s instructions. The principle that the aged parents were not to interfere with the decisions of their grown-up sons in such households was recognized even in the late eighteenth century, though it was deemphasized not consciously abandoned later on. The household of Umapati Tarkasiddhanta, great-grandfather of Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, as described by the latter, is an instance in point: “Tarkashiddhanta was very old by now; hence, the affairs of the family were under the control of his son, Rasmundar Vidyabhu-
shan. Therefore, the latter was the real master and his wife the real mistress. According to the custom of the land, Tarkasiddhanta and his wife were mere figureheads; their writ did not run in any sphere. This withdrawal of the older generation from positions of real authority in the family probably stemmed from the basically nuclear character of the family, though the custom persisted even after the joint family had become a marked feature of social life.

By the latter part of the eighteenth century, the joint family was very much an established fact of upper-caste Bengali society. The family annals contained in the district histories and the biographies of the nineteenth-century literary lions compiled by B. N. Banerji confirm this fact. If the seventeenth-century poets were scions of nuclear families, their most famous eighteenth-century counterpart, Bharatchandra, broke away from a family dominated by unfriendly brothers. Vidyaasagar’s great-grandfathers—both on his mother’s and on his father’s side—were the heads of large joint families.

Vidyasagar thus described an ideal joint family in the latter years of the eighteenth century, spelling out the contemporary norms:

On Vidyavagish’s death, his eldest son Radhamohan Vidyabhushan became the head of the family, the second, Ramdhany Nyayratnaha, began to teach in his father’s college [Chatuspathi], the third Guruprasad and the fourth Bisweswar Mukherji began to earn their livings in Calcutta. The four brothers lived together in a joint family [“shared a common kitchen”] all their lives; everyone handed over his earnings to the eldest. The eldest was just and equitable in his conduct, as far as was humanly possible. His care and affection for his brothers’ families exceeded, if anything, those for his own family. In fine, under his authority nobody had any reason for anger or displeasure. . . . All the four [brothers] were equally worthy and full of goodwill; hence, no one ever found them in mutual dispute or misunderstanding. Leave aside their own families, they never treated differently even their sisters, sisters’ daughters and sisters’ grandchildren.

The preeminent claims of one’s extended family on one’s affections were taken for granted by the upper-caste Bengali in the early decades of the nineteenth century. One of the first autobiographies written in Bengali—that of Kartikeyachandra Ray, dewan of the Nadia Raj—repeatedly expresses such sentiments. The author thus described the happy life of his early youth: “All the twelve months in the year I spent at home; I could [thus] see my elders, I was surrounded by my relations, the most desired objects of life.” His ancestors who worked for the Nadia Raj had two houses, one near the palace where they lived with their relations “in pleasures and entertainments” and another in a neighboring village for their immediate families. “Therefore, either in their family affairs or
psychologically, they experienced no inconvenience or unhappiness.’” He further explains that formerly aristocratic families preferred to live where their relations could live with them when necessary. The attachment to one’s extended family was reinforced by regular instruction in one’s genealogy in all its aspects. The earlier generations knew the genealogy of one’s neighbors belonging to other castes as well. A deficiency in such knowledge was considered a matter for shame. These good practices, the dewan writing in the latter half of the nineteenth century regretted, had fallen into disuse. The poignancy of the loss is thus expressed:

If I do not know the name of my great-grandfather and my kin also does not know the name of his great-grandfather, then how should one know that they are the same person? Consider, through our ignorance, nothing could be known about our close relationship and the joy that could have been derived [from the knowledge] or the mutual services we could have rendered would not materialize.  

In the same vein, while he accepts as entirely natural the friendship of his cousin (his father’s sister’s son), he humbly wonders how people unrelated to him became his close friends.

The tensions within the joint families reflected a conflict of values traceable largely to the changing economic milieu. An early instance of an individual opting out of a joint family is that of the eighteenth-century poet Bharatchandra. Son of an improverished zamindar, Bharat wanted to follow scholarly pursuits and learned Sanskrit, much to the chagrin of his elder brothers who saw no possibility of restoring the family fortunes through such useless knowledge. Bharat left home to make his career. After some wanderings he eventually became the court poet of Raja Krishnachandra and set up his separate establishment, refusing to return to his family.  

The economic opportunity which the poet found and the circumstances of the ruin of his ancestral fortune—an armed attack on their property by the Burdwan maharani—were not atypical of the earlier centuries. The atypical fact of a zamindar’s son trying to make a career of service and learning Persian for that purpose is, however, not unrelated with the opportunities in commerce and services, which undoubtedly increased in the eighteenth century. Significantly enough, Bharat’s patron was the dewan to the French government at Chandernagore and his host was the dewan to the Dutch at Chinsura. It was only the insight of his patron which prevented Bharat from following in his footsteps. So long as the traditional means of livelihood provided a family income to be shared by all concerned, the only threat to the norms and continuity of the joint family could arise from a clash of personalities, which tend to be muted in nonindividualistic societies. The new economic opportunities
created an accent on individual aspirations and, eventually, an inequality of income which undermined the norms of fraternal harmony. This process, witnessed by Kartikeyachandra Ray and Vidyasagar among many others early in the nineteenth century, has slowly worked toward the dissolution of the system.

It would, however, be incorrect to suggest that there was a total revolution in values affecting family life in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. The old norms showed in fact a remarkable capacity for survival. The ritual purity of the extended family, as the prime determinant of the family’s status, had long been a major preoccupation of the upper-caste Bengali Hindu. When *kulin* polygamy turned ritual purity of one’s *kula* into a lucrative source of income in the course of the eighteenth century, its maintenance and projection were naturally even more emphasized than before. Besides, the reformist assault on orthodox prejudices led to a reinforcement rather than a weakening of older values so far as a large section of the Bengali caste Hindus were concerned. Even individuals influenced by Brahmaism and critical of the *kulin* preoccupation with ritual purity to the exclusion of all else saw some justification in the orthodox practice of inquiring into the prospective bride’s family background as far back as four generations on the ground of the heritability of negative traits. That the inquiry was concerned mainly with ritual purity, especially from the point of view of the matrimonial alliances contracted by the girl’s forebears, was apparently overlooked in this argument.

In any society, marriage is one of the major institutions around which the norms of interpersonal relationship tend to crystallize. The peculiar ambivalence of Bengali society with regard to the question of polygamy reveals a conflict of values—between a preference for ritual excellence and a desire for psychological security and domestic peace. Polygamy appears in medieval Bengali literature as an accepted, but exceptional, fact of life. Few medieval Bengali personalities of whose lives we have any knowledge were either polygamous themselves or came from polygamous homes. The same pattern is reflected in the lives of the fictional characters. Marriage to polygamous husbands was considered a great calamity by the bride as well as by her mother. Polygamous homes were described as the abode of continuous quarrels, enough to drive away benign deities. But all such humane considerations were counterbalanced by the status dividends of giving one’s daughter in marriage to a ritually pure *kulin* and, presumably, the expectation of benefits in the hereafter from such an act of religious merit. For reasons not quite clear, *kulin* polygamy increased enormously during the eighteenth century; yet even during this period and later the majority of *kulin* must have remained monogamous. The family histories of well-known *kulin* personalities
contain few instances of polygamy. Besides, demographic factors surely acted as a check on this aberration: if some kulin rejoiced in hundreds of wives, most of their fellows would have to be satisfied with one each, the supply of high-caste women being subject to some natural limits. The pathetic fate of kulin women, doomed either to dishonorable spinsterhood in their brothers’ households or to a nominal marriage which permitted them to meet their husbands only once a year, was described in Bengali literature from the first novel in the language down to the days of Saratchandra. Yet the inhuman system persisted well into the twentieth century. Even kindhearted and sensitive men, fully aware of the misery it implied, gave their daughters in marriage to polygamous kulin husbands. In the first half of the nineteenth century, among the caste Hindus the only social group that broke away from this practice completely—under the influence of humanistic and puritanical social ideologies of the West—was the Brahmos.

Another institution which persisted from medieval times well into the twentieth century was that of child marriage. Toward the closing years of the sixteenth century, Mukundaram wrote:

Blessed is the girl given in marriage at the age of seven... If at the age of nine a daughter is given according to proper rites to a bridegroom, the water offered by her son ensures a place in heaven [for the grandfather]. . . . At the age of twelve, a girl attains puberty and is no longer afraid of men. . . . If on seeing a handsome man, the [unmarried] daughter feels the stirrings of desire, the father will suffer in hell.

Both before Mukundaram and after, the image of the child bride appears repeatedly in medieval Bengali literature. In fact, the “English-educated” youth of the early nineteenth century sought to discover a romantic dimension in this institution. Kartikeyachandra Ray, married at the age of fifteen, later observed:

No doubt, the system of child marriage has many faults; but it offers a happiness which courtship [Western style] cannot. . . . For, at the time of courtship, even if the lover and the beloved may be deeply enamoured, sometimes through accidents their engagements break up. Hence the happiness of courtship is not comparable to that of the first phase in our marriage.

Even among the Brahmos, the age of marriage was pushed up by only a few years; for girls, it hardly ever exceeded fourteen.

As I have discussed elsewhere, the institution of child marriage was linked to the normative requirements of absolute chastity and devotion to one’s husband expected of all married women. The literary conventions of the period repeatedly emphasize the good wife’s unqualified devotion
to her husband—the Radha-Krishna legend and the opposite convention of wives lamenting their fate on seeing a handsome hero notwithstanding. That the wife’s love for her husband was necessarily more intense than the husband’s attachment to her was a generally accepted image of marital relations. To quote Bharatchandra: “Can the husband’s feelings for his wife compare with a woman’s desire for her husband? A woman longs for her husband’s body, as is evident from her burning herself to death with her dead husband. Consider, when the wife dies, a man forgets her and takes another wife.”21 The belief that a husband’s love is the panacea for all ills to a woman is continually emphasized in the literary and biographical works of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as well.

Within the limits of such innocent faith, the norms permitted a frankly voluptuous attitude to marriage—a frankness which got shrouded in the sentimental verbiage of Indian “Victoriana” by the middle years of the nineteenth century. Mukundaram writing in the late sixteenth century thus describes his enamored hero: “Having heard from people of Khullana, the merchant’s heart was afflicted by the darts of desire [“lust”]. He discussed [the matter] with Jamai Pandit and told him, ‘Save me by arranging the marriage.’”22 Thus Bharatchandra even more explicitly: “A woman’s life is in love-making. Who can survive without it? Fie on the life of she who lives without this essence of life.”23 And thus a nineteenth-century worthy reminiscing on his married bliss: “To our wives, we were their sole treasure. . . . Whatever their unhappiness at home . . . they forgot it all when they saw their husbands. . . . If saddened by any family circumstances, they lost their sorrow on seeing their husbands, just as darkness is dispelled when the sun rises, and like mariners of old they had their eyes fixed on their [only true] star, the husband.”24

Kulin polygamy pushed into the background certain older norms of marital relationship. The literary conventions down to the days of Bharatchandra emphasize the feminine expectation that the husband should be a good provider.25 A married woman living with her parents or a man dependent on his in-laws was the object of contempt and pity.26 The kulin polygamist, however, made a profession of marriage, and no social stigma attached to his living entirely off his year-round visits to in-laws’ houses where his numerous wives lived permanently. Even the kulin not given to such excesses grew up in the expectation of being provided for by their in-laws and often had no other means of livelihood.27 By virtue of the ritual purity of their genealogy alone, such pedigreed stud bulls were much sought after.

The nineteenth-century Bengali reformers’ preoccupation with the condition of women—the debates and agitations over widow burning, widow marriage, women’s education, and the age of marriage—probably
makes sense in the context of a degradation in the position of women. Widow burning, for instance, definitely increased in the nineteenth century. Nowhere in the literature before the mid-eighteenth century are women represented as objects of contempt or pity. A bigamous husband is shown as extremely anxious to soothe the elder wife's feelings not only in Mukundaram but even in Bharatchandra. The fate of the kulin grass widow portrayed in Alāler gharer dalal has no parallel in earlier literature. That this degradation had become part of the accepted norm is clear from the well-known conservative resistance to all attempts at reform, often blatant, at times sheltering behind shamefaced sophistry. Western education, and especially education of women, brought about a slow change in attitude. Yet in the first half of the nineteenth century such change was confined to a small segment of caste Hindu society—mainly the Brahmos and the "reformed" Hindus.

An important outcome of the change in values was an increased freedom of social contact between men and women. Outside the circles of reform, men's contact with women unrelated to them long consisted only in visits to prostitutes or brief encounters with the young women of the neighborhood who came to visit the new bridegroom. Women could enjoy the pleasures of conversing only with the new bridegroom either in their own family or in the family of relatives in the neighborhood. Even such contact was unlikely except with one's own husband or one's husband's sister's husband. "Their joy knew no bounds when they met a good-natured, simple-hearted and sweet-spoken bridegroom. . . . Whatever accomplishments they had, they sought to display before him. In all this," we are assured, "neither the girls nor the young women ever had any impure feelings in their hearts. Later, writes Ray, "when several of us, friends, began to meet one another's wives, we and our wives were deeply gratified."

The shift in attitudes toward women had its counterpart in the growing discrimination between male and female children on the part of the parents. The literary record before the rise of kulin polygamy shows that the birth of a daughter was less welcome than that of a son but was by no means considered a calamity. As kulin polygamy turned the daughter's marriage into a serious financial liability, there was a corresponding decline in the value of daughters in parental eyes. Kartikeyachandra Ray records a pathetic incident in which kulin parents virtually allowed their little daughter to die while fussing over their not-so-sick son. The married or widowed kulin girls lived in their brother's or father's house almost as menials, though there were occasional exceptions to this pattern.

A different type of change in parental attitude toward sons was determined by new economic opportunities. In the traditional Bengali society
a son was expected to inherit his father’s estate or follow his father’s profession without any special effort to achieve excellence. The scholar or poet seeking fame was perhaps an exception to this pattern, and an ambitious scholar might even want his son to achieve great academic distinction. The notion that a man might aspire after such wealth and status beyond his birth appears to have been rare. The education given to a child conformed to this status-oriented pattern of expectation. A Brahmin scholar’s son acquired knowledge of Sanskrit; others learned Bengali and Persian, which would be useful in securing clerical jobs. The experience of the companies’ compradors, however, set in motion a new pattern of expectation. Education, especially knowledge of English, came to be regarded as a passport to wealth through jobs with the various agencies of government or at least in the city of Calcutta. Someone like Vidyasagar’s father might still desire a Sanskritic education for his son in tune with the scholarly tradition of his family, but in general the emphasis had definitely shifted to job-oriented education likely to lead to wealth and a new status. The quaint custom of subjecting the prospective bridegroom to a written test of his knowledge of the useful languages was evidence of this new concern. As a determinant of status, wealth had gained an altogether new importance and made possible a divergence in the values of family life as between the rich and the poor. Seeking marriage alliance with rich families never appears to have been by itself an object of ambition with the genteel Bengali Hindu until the latter half of the eighteenth century. The spoiled son of the rich family repeatedly parodied in the nineteenth-century novels was a newcomer in Bengali literature, a product of the new cult of money.

The traditional morality of the Bengali upper castes had two distinct but interrelated dimensions. The dharma of one’s jāti had a hard core of ritualism and, beyond a point, personal ethics was not distinguishable from ritual correctness. But even the caste duties were particular applications of some generally accepted ethical norms—notions of universal morality summed up in the expression śīl (right conduct). For the upper castes, Brahmins in particular, śīl consisted in righteousness, humility, generosity, self-restraint, love of scholarship, knowledge of the scriptures, and devotion to the gods, Brahmins, and the guru. A nineteenth-century writer describes the virtues of earlier generations in similar terms: “Devotion to gods and one’s parents, affection for brothers and sisters, filial attachment, love for one’s neighbors, hospitality, charity, forgiveness—to such great virtues they were deeply attached.” Elsewhere the same writer eulogizes a relation who lived by the traditional norms as a person who never turned away a suitor for charity, never desired any woman but
his wife, was kind to people who had harmed him, totally honest, always in control of his temper, and stoically unmoved by suffering. Vidyasagar’s grandfather, another embodiment of traditional virtues, is described by the savant as a man of independent spirit who never hesitated to speak out his mind and scorned to speak to ill-behaved men, even though they were scholarly, rich, and powerful. His anger had no outward expression. He preferred not to depend on anybody. “He took only one meal a day, was a vegetarian, clean in his conduct and careful in the performance of his daily duties. Hence everyone pointed him out as a living saint.”

The nineteenth-century Bengali humanists were acutely aware of the blind spots in the traditional norms. Lying, bribery, and sensual indulgence were apparently considered only minor vices by the older generations around the turn of the century. It seems likely, however, that there was some ambivalence in these respects and also some fluctuation over time. The distinction between bribes and perquisites was rather blurred to the medieval mind in India as elsewhere, and there was nothing special about Bengali upper-caste attitudes in this regard. Nepotism was considered a blameless and natural behavior, if not actually a virtue, even by the nineteenth-century humanists in Bengal. In the traditional system of values, the notions of public morality were indeed dim. Administrative oppression was calmly accepted as a divine visitation in retribution for people’s sins. But at least some literary references of the eighteenth century imply disapproval of oppressive officials. And, again, one passage in Bharatchandra has a curiously nineteenth-century flavor in its scorn for masculine self-indulgence: “Even if a woman suffers the pangs of desire for 12 years, she should not cohabit with a lecherous man. What sort of a woman is she who kisses a man that has kissed another woman? Even one who touches a person who has a stomach for the leftovers from other people’s plates is herself defiled.” This is not the conventional idiom of the khaṇḍita nāyika, the heroine crossed in love of Vaishnava poetry.

However, to the rising generation of the 1820s a certain laxity of sexual morals, some proneness to lying, and a weakness for easy money were vices commonly associated with the older generation. The ethical message they derived from their Western education implied a rejection of these vices and a desire to imitate “English ways.”

The results were not always fortunate. Drinking, formerly associated with religious rituals and practiced generally in moderation and quietly at night, became respectable as a part of “English ways.” If the wild youth of commercial Calcutta rejoiced in smoking opium, the sophisticated Hindu College students took to drinking in earnest. Rajnarayan Basu
recalls in his memoirs his honest but unsuccessful attempts to follow his father's advice—to drink only in moderation. The excesses of Young Bengal which went much further were a deliberate rejection of all traditional norms.  

Although the oldest profession in the world was surely not brought to Bengal by the British rulers, the economic and administrative changes of the late eighteenth century provided it with a market probably unprecedented in its scale. The growth of the new administrative centers fostered colonies of clerks, lawyers, and the like—grass widowers all, who left their families back in their village homes according to the custom of the times. Many of them found solace in the company of concubines recruited from the fast expanding red light districts. Even the more inhibited regularly visited the “huts,” which became centers for social gathering. “Especially on the festive days, there was hardly space enough for people there. Just as on the Puja nights people go around to look at the images [of the deity], so on the night of Bijaya men went around to have a look at the prostitutes.”

The puritanical creed of Brahmoism sternly rejected such laxities and put forward a new ideal of personal morality. Barada Babu, a character in the first Bengali novel, is one of the best-known embodiments of the new puritan ethic. Barada Babu “was continually engaged in discourses about God from his boyhood days. Hence his sufferings did not worry him.” A poor man, he spent his youth in study and meditation. He had none of the false pride of the English-educated. He was gentle and polite, dutiful to his family and relations, charitable to the poor, performed good deeds in secret, and “would never take to unrighteousness even if it cost him his life.” He performed only such acts as were dear to God and avoided all that was not dear to Him. Discipline, meditation, analysis of self, and continuous study of the works of worthy men enabled him to find out what the Lord desired. He did not spend his time in frivolity. His devotion was evident from the tears that flowed every morning when he prayed. “Through such practices has his soul become pure and calm.”

Besides the morality of the Brahmo patriarch a new humane sensibility gradually emerged, giving a fresh dimension to personal ethics. Kartikeyachandra Ray, who lived a blameless life despite many temptations, recalls in his old age the love a fallen woman had offered him and he could not accept:

I used to think this singer's body is impure, her heart is impure, but her love is not impure. If a flower grows in some foul spot, does the flower become foul as well? If one enjoys the love of a dog, why should one not be happy when a human being loves you? I felt both happy and sad about her love. . . . How tragic is the fate of women. We depise the man guilty
of adultery, but do not feel defiled if we sit or converse with him. But when a woman is adulterous, we feel defiled even if we look at her.\textsuperscript{51}

A passionate skepticism and a melancholy awareness of the human condition eventually provided the basis for a very different personal morality in Bengali elite culture. The sentimental reminiscences of a suburban babu quoted above anticipated the tortured individualistic groping of a later age toward norms which required no external sanction.

NOTES

1. See, for instance, Mukundaram Chakravarti, \textit{Chaṇḍimaṅgala}, ed. Abnascandhra Mukherji (Calcutta, B.S. 1344), p. 224: "If one's kins are wrath, even the celestial bird Garuda would lose his wings." Again: "The king takes one's wealth, the judge takes one's life, the kin takes one's Jati [i.e., ostracizes]." [B S. = Baṅgaḷa sāl, year of the Bengali calendar.]

2. The life of the hunter Dharmaketu and his wife Nidaya after their son's marriage is described in such terms in the \textit{Chaṇḍimaṅgala}, pp 59–60.


6. Ibid., pp. 330, 331.


10. For a detailed discussion, see my \textit{Bengal under Akbar and Jahanir} (Delhi, 1969), pp. 6–8.


13. \textit{Bharatchandra-granthāvali}, p. 149: "The four co-wives continuously quarrelled. . . . [The goddess] Annada was annoyed by these quarrels. . . . The goddess shows kindness where there is love. She does not abide where there is quarrel."


15. See his \textit{Bamuner Meye}.


25. Bharatchandra, op. cit., p. 67: “He who has no food at home should better be dead. How can he aspire after pleasures?”
26. Raychaudhuri, op. cit., Introduction; also Mukundaram, Chaḍimaṅgala.
27. See, for instance, K. Ray, op. cit., p. 31.
29. See for instance, the story of Dhanapatī and Lahana in Kavikankan Chaṇḍi and that of the bigamous Bhavananda in Annadāmaṅgala.
32. Sibnath Sastri, op. cit.
34. Raychaudhuri, op. cit., Introduction.
35. Kartikeyachandra Ray, op. cit., pp. 77, 84
37. Ray, op. cit., p. 22; Vidyasagar, op. cit., pp. 328, 341; Brajendranath Bandypadhyay, Sahitya-sadhak Charitmaḷa, Bhabanicharan Bandypadhyay, p. 8
39. Raychaudhuri, op. cit., Introduction
42. Ray, op. cit., p. 16.
43. Ibid. p., 249.
44. See Mukundaram’s autobiographical sketch, op. cit.; see also Kshemananda, quoted in Sukumar Sen, Bāṅgla Sāṃśṭityer Itthas, vol. I.
45. Bharatchandra, op. cit., p. 242
46. Ibid., p. 233.
48. Ibid., p. 97f.; Rajnarayan Basu, Ātmājibani, Sibnath Sastri, op. cit.
49. Ray, op. cit., p. 128f.
50. Alaler gharer dulal, pp. 27f., 54f.
Economic Foundations of the
Bengal Renaissance

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Most historians of the Italian Renaissance have assumed the existence of a high correlation between commercial vitality and cultural renaissance. Robert S. Lopez, however, has warned against accepting any simplistic cause-and-effect relationship between economics and art, and he observes that "intellectual development must be traced primarily to intellectual roots." On the other hand, he writes, the content, themes, and fashions of art are a function of the morale of the creative artist and cannot help being affected by his total environment, including the economic condition of his society. In the Bengal renaissance there was a perceptible change in literary themes between the early and latter nineteenth century, and without going any further than the unobjectionable generalization offered by Lopez, one may be able to associate these changes with changing economic conditions in Bengal.

The dominant literary theme of the first half of the nineteenth century, expressed by such diverse writers as Rammohun Roy, Bhabanicharan Bannerji, and the radical students of Young Bengal, was Indo-British collaboration. They wrote in a period of economic cooperation between the races, a time of embryonic industrialization in Lower Bengal when the area was technologically advanced and when the mercantile community, composed of both races, was attempting to establish independent economic institutions.

After mid-century, Bengali attitudes changed. David Kopf has referred to the growing xenophobia and cultural nationalism of the latter nineteenth century, and Warren Gunderson has noted that "by the 1870s . . . new cultural patterns were emerging which were more assertive and more
aggressively national. . . . In the new age new men appeared on the stage who were much more skeptical about the value of cooperation with the British." The period of nationalism and xenophobia in literature corresponded with a period in which Calcutta had become an economic dependency of Great Britain and locked into the imperial economic system. Furthermore, the Bengali merchant was no longer a partner in the modern sector of the Calcutta business world but subordinate to both British and western-Indian merchant communities.

One result of Calcutta's economic backwardness was a shortage of employment opportunities for the growing number of Western-educated Bengalis. But this problem was not manifest until the 1880s, and the earliest expressions of economic nationalism in Bengal antedate by at least a decade economic stress among the bhadralok. In 1869 Chandranath Bose, and in 1873 Bholanath Chandra, called for protective tariffs to encourage the development of indigenous factory industries. Bholanath, in particular, urged the Indians to establish their own banks, corporations, mills, and factories, and he denounced those of his countrymen who preferred foreign goods to indigenous manufactures. These early expressions of nationalist economic doctrines were inspired not by personal economic hardship but by the poverty of the masses and disappointment with the government for its failure to encourage economic development. The decade of the 1850s was a transitional period that marked both the beginning of purposeful economic imperialism and the end of over 150 years of Bengali-British business collaboration.

The modern Bengali business class, in fact, owes its origin to British commercial activity. When Europeans began trading in Bengal in the sixteenth century, the traditional Bengali merchant castes had been displaced by traders from north India who had captured the lucrative foreign trade in Bengali silk and cotton textiles. It was from these outsiders—Marwaris, Pathans, Kashmiris, and others—and not from Bengalis that the British seized the trade of Bengal in the eighteenth century. Greater resources and the use of the dastak enabled the British to outbid the merchants of north India for the products of Bengal. In addition, wherever possible the British bypassed the middlemen and gathered handloom weavers and silk winders into compounds under their own control. They also diverted the extensive coastal trade between Bengal and Gujarat from the boats of independent Indian merchants to their own ships and changed the direction of the flourishing trade between these provinces to a separate trade of each with the Far East.

As they drove the north Indian traders from Bengal, the British developed in Calcutta a new Bengali merchant class. In the late seventeenth century, when they first came to the site of Calcutta, the British found a few
villages of Setts and Basaks, lower-caste Bengali weavers who had learned while dealing with the Portuguese in the previous century to combine trade with weaving. Under British rule many Setts and Basaks amassed fortunes as brokers and dadni merchants. Other Bengali communities quickly became aware of commercial opportunities under British auspices and migrated to Calcutta. By 1763, along with those of Setts and Basaks, the names of Kayasthas and Baniks appear on lists of investment agents of the East India Company, and after Plassey, Brahmin names were added.

By the end of the eighteenth century Calcutta had moved far ahead of the older trading and administrative cities of Bengal in population and in wealth. Among its citizenry was a new Indian elite composed of banians, dewans, and pundits associated with the British in trade, government, and educational institutions. They were drawn from a variety of Bengali Hindu castes. What they had in common were ambitious ancestors who had come to the city in search of wealth. The new elite invested their money in both modern and traditional activities. To establish status in Bengal society, they built temples and ghats, supported Brahmin priests, threw great feasts, and performed expensive shraddha. But they also built new mansions and furnished them with Western imports. In their productive investments they joined with Europeans in commerce, shipping, and land development. On their own they purchased zamindaris and urban real estate.

In addition to Bengalis Calcutta attracted a large cosmopolitan population from all parts of India and Asia. A new wave of north Indian business communities, primarily Marwaris, settled in Calcutta to work as shroffs (moneychangers) and kothiwal (merchant bankers) in the Burrah bazaar. During the nineteenth century they complemented the international commercial system by advancing money to agency houses that imported British textiles and acted as middlemen for the distribution of British imports to northwestern India. Until the Opium War they also speculated heavily in opium. But unlike the Bengalis they usually remained outside British commercial institutions and maintained their traditional upcountry networks along with their traditional “bania” way of life.

The British carried on their international trade through a group of firms known as agency houses. Formed in the late eighteenth century by enterprising men who left the Company service to try their hand in private trade, these houses represented the sector of the economy oriented toward international markets. They used the money of their constituents, civil and military servants of the Company, to finance the import-export trade, especially the country trade, and to produce indigo and other agricultural
products for export. By the 1820s competition had forced them to expand their activities. They built and operated ships, served as bill brokers, formed banks and insurance companies, and lent their support to ventures in mining, manufacturing, and plantation industries. The number of agency houses steadily increased over the years. In 1790 there were fifteen; in 1828, twenty-seven; in 1835, sixty-one; and by 1846, ninety-three. Of these only half a dozen at any one time were great houses; the majority were limited in their activities and operated with small sums of capital.

Bengali capitalists known as banians were directly associated with the Calcutta agency houses and provided money for the international export trade. In the eighteenth century the banian was valued for his knowledge of internal markets and sources of supply. As the British learned more about India, his value declined; but after the free-trade charter of 1813 and the influx of a new set of adventurers from Britain who came with little capital of their own, the banian again became important, now as a source of finance. His importance continued to grow after the crash of 1830–1833, which frightened off the capital that had been provided by the British nonmercantile community. By the 1840s Europeans were employed “as agents of native capital,” and one writer complained that the new banians had “assumed airs which their more wealthy predecessors had never taken on themselves; they treated their European connections not only with contemptuous disregard, but often with much insolence. The Hindoo star was in the ascendant, and these men made the most of it.” In the mid-1850s capital from Britain began to move increasingly into India and the banian, who now lost much of his financial power, was demoted or discarded altogether.

In their heyday the banians also joined in the development of Calcutta’s commercial infrastructure, including insurance companies, a docking company, banking, warehousing, a chamber of commerce, and commercial newspapers. After 1834, British and Indian merchants invested together in a number of joint-stock companies engaged in steam tugging, coal mining, indigo manufacturing, tea planting, river steamboat services, and railroad building. In these enterprises Indians held, on the average, one-fourth to one-third of the shares.

Finally, Indians also joined in the development of modern power-operated residentiary industries that competed for capital with export industries and counterbalanced the colonial export economy. For the time, it appeared that Calcutta was on the threshold of a small-scale industrial revolution. In 1844 J. H. Stocqueler, a Calcutta journalist, noted that “on approaching Calcutta, the smoking chimneys of steam engines are now seen in every direction, on either side of the river, presenting the gratifying appearance of a seat of numerous extensive manufactories,
vying with many British cities.”16 In the first half of the nineteenth century, when the application of steam power was the measure of a nation’s industrial standing, India led all other colonies and dependencies of Great Britain in the use of steam power.17 Bengal saw its first steam engine in 1818, and by 1845 there were 150 engines generating six thousand horsepower in use in the Presidency. A few of these had been locally produced by British engineer-technicians, but almost all the rest were imported from Britain. Half the engines were used in sugar refineries, docks, collieries, flour and rice mills, and paper factories; the remainder saw service in sea and river steamers, tugs, and pleasure boats.18

In the Calcutta area the largest single industrial complex was located at Fort Gloster, fifteen miles south of Calcutta. The complex included a factory for making cotton twist, a rum distillery, an iron foundry, an oil-seed mill, and a paper mill, all worked by five steam engines.19 The cotton mill, set up in 1817, was the oldest in India.20 In 1833 the mill, worked by two engines of fifty horsepower each, produced a large quantity of cotton twist which, according to a contemporary report, “was daily rising in the estimation of the natives and . . . the labour of men initiated in the art of weaving is now almost double of what was performed at the commencement of the undertaking.”21 After Fergusson and Company, its owner, went bankrupt in 1833, the Fort Gloster complex was purchased by a joint-stock company most of whose shareholders were old India hands resident in England. But at least one Bengali, Dwarkanath Tagore, and possibly others, were major shareholders. By 1840 the mill was producing 700,000 pounds of yarn annually, the lower numbers of which sold in Calcutta better than imported yarn and the larger numbers on a par with imports. The labor force, with the exception of the European superintendent, was recruited from Orissa and Bengal, paid by the task, and worked eleven hours a day.22

Before the middle of the nineteenth century manufacturing activity had spread northward along the right bank of the Hughli River into the suburbs of Hughli, Howrah, Sibpur, and Sulkea, called by one writer “the Southwark of Calcutta.”23 Included were sugar factories, rum distilleries, cotton screws, a biscuit factory, flour mills, a mustard oil mill, and a paper factory. In and near Calcutta itself were a number of steam-operated iron foundries; Jessop and Company, established in the eighteenth century, repaired steamboats, manufactured tools and simple machinery, and in 1825 offered to build a railway from Calcutta to Diamond Harbor.24 The government itself operated the most extensive foundry. From a modern plant opened in 1834 at Cossipore, four miles north of Calcutta, the foundry supplied brass ordnance to the whole of India. The court of directors had sent out twelve boring and turning lathes, some lighter
lathes, and two small steam engines to power the works. Adjacent to the foundry was a casting and smelting house with cupola blast furnaces for smelting iron and large reverberatory furnaces for smelting gun metal.25

A large, docile, and talented labor force was available to operate the factories and mills. The leading employer was the Government Steam Department, which hired Indian and Eurasian labor as mechanics, shipwrights, millwrights, plumbers, and boilermakers. Elsewhere in the city skilled workmen, recruited from Hindu artisan castes and from the Chinese community, worked as carpenters, painters, blacksmiths, locksmiths, and jewelers, some under European master craftsmen. Workmen were hired in gangs under contract with a chief mistry, an Indian master craftsman who received the wages from the entire gang and distributed them as he wished.26 Although there were mixed reports on the quality of Indian labor, those employed in the mint were said to handle the machinery, including the steam engine, with facility.27 Similarly, the workmen at the Fort Gloster cotton mill were considered experts in their machinery duties.28

In terms of the total production of Bengal this industrial activity was probably not of great significance. Its importance, instead, must have been in its effect on the intellectual and moral climate of the city, in awakening a pride of citizenship. Calcutta appeared to be moving inexorably toward industrialization, and a sense of progress pervaded the city. Indian participation in the modern sector of the economy was on an upward trend, and the Bengali elite must have participated in the prevailing pride of citizenship and sense of progress.

An important factor was the encouragement given by the government. Before the mid-nineteenth century the government of India supported economic development, including industrialization, even when it conflicted with home interests. The governors general—Bentinck, Auckland, Ellenborough, and Hardinge—were expected to balance the budget and remit the home charges in the face of rising expenses and the prevailing poverty of the peasantry. The obvious answer was to find new sources of revenue. Lord Bentinck's minute favoring European colonization aroused opposition from the manufacturing interests of Britain, who "saw in colonization the spectre of a second Lancashire on the bank of the Ganges, which could beat the original with cheap Indian labour and raw material."29 But evidently Bentinck anticipated no conflict between British and Indian economic interests. After leaving office he testified that he had supported steam communication with India on grounds that it would facilitate the education of Indian students in England, from which they would return with technological knowledge, the key to progress in India. It would also facilitate the influx of British businessmen, who had done much for
Indian economic development. And along with plantation industries he unabashedly cited with approval the Gloster mills, the iron foundries, and the coal mines, all of which competed with British products.\textsuperscript{30}

Lord Auckland (1836–1842) was even stronger in his conviction that India must industrialize. He favored both the revival of Heath's modern steel mill in Madras and cast-iron manufacturing among the primitive hill tribes of Assam. Auckland directed the Cossipore foundry to supply the government's needs for suspension bridges and iron boats and instructed the Coal Committee to expand its activities to locating the best ores and fluxes available in India as the foundation for a local steel industry. He promoted experiments for the improvement of cotton, the processing of hemp, the manufacture of pottery and porcelain, and the growing of nutmeg, pepper plants, and cochineal insects. Moreover he looked forward to the development of Assam, "a country of vast promise," by the application of both European and Indian capital.\textsuperscript{31}

His successors, Ellenborough (1842–1844) and Hardinge (1844–1848), were too involved in military affairs to devote time to internal development, but their sentiments were not essentially different from those of Bentinck and Auckland. In 1828, as president of the Board of Control, Ellenborough had encouraged, in the face of strong opposition from the private trade interests in the Court of Directors, a policy of import substitution to save the Indian government money.\textsuperscript{32} As governor general he strove to develop public works and establish experimental cotton farms but was thwarted because of a shortage of funds.\textsuperscript{33} Hardinge encouraged the early planning of railway building. "Our rule," he wrote Hobhouse on the subject of railways, "has been distinguished by building large Prisons; and the contrast with the Mogul Emperors, in the respect of public works, is not to our advantage."\textsuperscript{34} At a ceremony awarding prizes to college students in Calcutta for their recitation of Shakespeare, he concluded his address "by giving his hearers a practical account of the magic powers of steam and electricity."\textsuperscript{35}

Among the British publicists of the period, some were willing to admit that India possessed an industrial potential and others were not. George W. Johnson, an attorney who spent three years in Calcutta in the early 1840s, minced no words on the subject:

Doubtless, it is of high importance for the increase of India's wealth to improve her cotton growth, and to establish extensively on her soil the cultivation of the tea-plant, but these are only some of the first steps towards the desired object. . . . It is now shown that the mineral wealth of India fits her for a higher destiny; and that she, like America, may be at first agricultural, but gradually may become, also, a manufacturing country.\textsuperscript{36}
A Madras civil servant named Everett, after a visit to Fort Gloster, predicted that abundant raw cotton and cheap labor would enable the local textile mill to supply "a great part, if not the whole, of the Eastern world, to the exclusion of the European manufacture." He deplored British opposition to the export of cotton mill machinery and asked whether "the manufactures of Bengal have not as good a claim to the protection of the sovereign as those of Lancashire. . . . But India," he concluded, "has never yet been regarded as part of the empire. It goes by the unhappy name of colony, a place . . . made expressly to be plundered by the Mother-country."³⁷

On the other hand, far more influential publicists such as Robert M. Martin and John Crawfurd, who were trying to promote British investment in India, stressed the enormous potential of India as an importer of British capital. To allay the fears of British industrialists and exporters, they emphasized the potential of India as a producer of raw cotton and plantation products. Crawfurd considered that any "attempt to introduce the complex manufactures of Europe into India [would be] a signal commercial blunder."³⁸ In the same vein R. M. Martin wrote of the ideal relationship of mother country and colony: "the one [Britain] teeming with a hardy, industrious and ingenious population, two-thirds of whom are engaged in manipulating and vending the produce of more genial climes . . . the other [India] rich to overflowing with bounty with which nature has enriched the earth, and peculiarly so in those agricultural products necessary to the manufactures, comforts and luxuries of the more civilized nation."³⁹ His racial arrogance turned to doubt by 1860, when he became aware of the industrial potential of the Indian textile industry that had developed in Bombay. "Even the present generation," he warned, "may witness the Lancashire manufacturer beaten by his Hindu competitor."⁴⁰

Indians, noting the effects of both machine-made imports and Fort Gloster yarn on the rural weavers and spinners, were at first less certain of the efficacy of industrialization.⁴¹ A Hindu traveler who visited Fort Gloster mill in 1830 reported that the local people considered industrialization a mixed blessing. As consumers they benefited from cheaper cloth; but some, who had learned from English friends about the results of the industrial revolution in cities like Glasgow and Manchester, were fearful of the long-term effects of industrialization on human life.⁴² Other westernized intelligentsia lumped commerce and industry together and called on the youth of the country to turn from the study of English literature to such practical subjects as science and commerce.⁴³ Gradually, however, Indian writers recognized the importance of industrial development. An editorial written in 1847, probably by Iswar Chandra Gupta, lamented the
closing down of the Calcutta Mechanics Institute because of a lack of public interest and noted that industry and technical skills were essential for a nation's progress.44

The issue may never have occurred to the leading entrepreneur of the day, Dwarkanath Tagore. He saw immediate profit in the production of staples and plantation products, and though he may have believed that India would eventually produce its own steam engines and iron and steel, he was content for the time to import superior British engines at reasonable prices. Dwarkanath cast his lot with the free traders and joined in their attack upon the restrictive policies of the East India Company. He believed the end of the Company's business operations would stimulate the import of British capital and skill, hasten the economic development of India, and lead to the rise of a strong, independent, and reform-minded Indian middle class. It was natural for an enlightened and politically astute Indian like Tagore to associate himself with the party of progress in Britain. But he closed his eyes to the full implications of a movement grounded in the concept of an industrialized England supported by agricultural colonies. It was, in fact, free-trade imperialism that would frustrate the industrial development that he and his British partners were to promote with such vigor in the 1830s and 1840s.45

Indian attitudes carried over from business into politics, and by the fourth decade of the nineteenth century the Indian elite of Calcutta considered themselves potential partners with the British not only in commerce and industry but also in citizenship. Rammohun and Dwarkanath traveled to England to visit the capital city of an empire they considered their own,46 and one reason they wanted the end of Company rule was that they preferred to be subjects of the crown rather than of a mere trading company. Admittedly, British rule in India was looked upon as far from perfect, and the intelligentsia were outspoken in their criticism. But they felt that improvement would come in time, and they could point to many signs of progress achieved thus far under British rule—battles won for a free press and jury trial, colleges founded, law and order established, economic opportunities opened. Most important, the British were the bearers of a new culture of science and technology in which alone lay any hope for transforming India.47

While Indians were developing a loyalty to the empire, among the Calcutta British a group was emerging that could be called an “Indian interest.” It was composed of the partners of the major agency houses with heavy investments in mofussil industries such as indigo. One of the first expressions of a “Calcutta” as opposed to a “metropolitan” interest was the attempt of the Calcutta community to promote steam communication with Britain. The struggle lasted from 1823 to 1840 and was finally
lost when the British-based Peninsular and Oriental Line obtained a government charter. The Calcuttans also opposed any competition from British-domiciled banking with their own Union Bank and succeeded until 1853 in keeping an imperial bank out of India. Again, the Calcutta board of directors of the Assam Tea Company battled against the London board for control over local operations, though the latter represented over ninety percent of the capital. Eventually they too lost to London.

Finally, the local interest groups united in 1846 in a life and death struggle against Manchester-supported houses to prevent the abolition of the "hypothecation system." Under this system, which existed until 1850, the government of India advanced money to Calcutta export houses hypothecated to the shipment of indigo and other staples, advances made by the government in order to remit funds to England to pay its home charges.

Thus, until the mid-nineteenth century the leading indigenous merchants were gaining in strength and anticipating a larger share in the operation of the economy if not the administration itself. At the same time a sector of the Calcutta British mercantile community was increasingly identifying its interests with India and holding the line against metropolitan control over the economy of the country. Together they were building a local, independent economic structure that formed the basis for a vigorous interracial social and cultural life.

But their promising achievements were destined to fail. Even in the heyday of local enterprise powerful currents were undermining the foundations of Calcutta's economy. One basic problem was the huge remittance pressures that distorted the foreign trade of Bengal. From 1817 to 1840 the annual volume of Calcutta's commodity exports averaged twice its imports—rupees 2.5 crores of imports against rupees 5 crores of exports. In the 1840s both imports and exports increased to almost double their previous value. Calcutta's large merchandise export surplus formed part of a total export of capital from India that exceeded imports by £5 to £6 million annually. Of this amount, £3.5 million was remitted on behalf of the East India Company, primarily to meet its home charges, and the balance represented remittances by private British subjects. The unilateral transfer of funds had severe repercussions on the economy of Bengal. When commodity exports failed to meet remittance demands, bullion was exported and, in the absence of a paper currency, this resulted in a contraction of the money supply and lower prices. Because the land revenue demand was constant, many zamindars could not meet their taxes. The most acute instance of this problem occurred during the commercial crisis of 1830–1833 when landed estates, sold in default of taxes, glutted the market. Another effect of the transfer problem was to encour-
age the diversion of capital from other sectors of the economy into export industries; this situation resulted in an imbalanced economic structure.\textsuperscript{52}

In Bengal the export industry that received the bulk of investment was indigo. Demand for the blue dye was rising in Britain, and Bengal had the natural endowments to produce the finest indigo in the world. In the 1820s, to pay for the increasing importation of British yarn and textiles, indigo production expanded greatly. From Dacca to Delhi over one million acres were put under indigo, producing annually a crop valued at £2 to £3 million. But indigo production and export created more problems for the houses than it solved. The market for indigo fluctuated with European trade cycles and the supply varied with the Indian monsoon. Indigo production rose not in response to any real demand in Britain but in response to the need for an item for remittance. Even if the trade had been “spontaneous” rather than “induced,” indigo would have presented problems. Seed had to be distributed and advances given to cultivators two years before the indigo was to be marketed in Britain. Its suitability for remittance purposes forced up its price in Calcutta independently of its price in London, resulting in overproduction and a glut on the London market. As often as not indigo planters, capitalized by the agency houses of Calcutta, went bankrupt. In these cases the entire investment was lost because the fields in which indigo was cultivated belonged to Indian zamindars while the expensive processing equipment was useless unless worked.\textsuperscript{53}

By the mid-1820s, with so much of their capital tied up in indigo production, the agency houses began to experience a number of difficulties. In 1825 a commercial slump in England depressed the demand for indigo; to compensate for lower prices, still more indigo was produced and exported, leading to a further glut on the market. A number of agency house partners sold off their enormous Indian assets and retired home. Between 1830 and 1833 the entire edifice crumbled and the old houses, some of which had been in existence from the beginning of the century, failed.\textsuperscript{54}

In 1834 a new commercial structure replaced the old. It lasted until the commercial crisis of 1847. One group of the new houses, which can be called “export houses,” specialized in indigo production; a second group, which can be called “import houses,” specialized in importing cotton textiles on consignment from British manufacturers.\textsuperscript{55} Many of the import houses formed by British manufacturers specifically to serve as agents for the sale and distribution of yarn and textiles, had no independent resources. They remitted their funds to their British suppliers by advancing money on or purchasing indigo, further encouraging speculation in that overburdened commodity.\textsuperscript{56}
This situation left the export houses to provide the bulk of local investment capital. Some of them invested not only in indigo, silk, and sugar production but also in mines, steamboats, and other local industries. Partners of export houses were heavily represented on the boards of directors of the Union Bank and of the joint-stock companies; they belonged to the group of British and Indians concerned with preserving local control; they tried to raise capital for these undertakings locally and were the entrepreneurs among the merchants of Calcutta. In their statements and activities can be glimpsed the first dim urges toward economic self-determination in India.

Each set of houses developed its own sources of supply and its own marketing system. Import houses developed internal markets; but, because of their dependence on their British correspondents, they were not in a position to invest in local manufactures to supply these markets. Export houses invested their capital in the production of goods for markets abroad, and the economic structure of Bengal was bifurcated into two separate channels.

Conversely, in Bombay the same house was likely to combine an import with an export trade. Typical of Bombay merchants was the Parsi Cowasji Davar, the father of Bombay’s modern textile industry. He was “involved in the export and financing of raw cotton and the import of cotton textiles. . . . It was inevitable that the notion of importing machinery and starting a textile mill would strike Davar or one of his contemporaries.”

Because of an international commercial crisis in 1847 the entire group of export houses and the Union Bank which they controlled crashed. The crisis had been touched off in Britain by the railroad mania and a precipitous fall in the price of rail stocks. It disrupted the commercial life of Britain and led to the bankruptcy of houses shipping colonial products from all parts of the world. In Calcutta the houses that had tried to build an independent capital position on the quicksand of indigo were hurt the most. The Union Bank had behaved as if indigo factories were sound capital assets that could be redeemed if loans against them were defaulted. Its directors closed their eyes to the truth that the expensive indigo establishments were worthless unless the price of indigo on the European market held the line.

The crash of 1847 led to a readjustment in business thinking to correspond with the reality of Calcutta’s economic situation. The businessmen of Calcutta could not build an independent economy on the basis of a colonial product that was inelastic both in its production and in its demand. In the absence of a manufacturing industry catering at least in part to an indigenous market, Bengal was doomed to a dependent colonial position. After the crash the merchants accepted their fate and Calcutta
become a typical parasitic city in a colonial setting, a nerve center for colonial exploitation rather than a generator of economic growth. Until the end of the nineteenth century its only important new industry was jute processing, an enclave industry with almost no internal market or backward linkages that would have stimulated the development of ancillary industries in Bengal.

Until the middle of the nineteenth century Calcutta had been a center of industrial progress and advanced technology. This milieu, however small a part of the total economy, contributed to the exhilaration of social and cultural life in the city. But it was Bengal’s unhappy fate to be the major provider of export staples, the strong demand for which was artificially stimulated by the remittance needs of the government and the British business community. Those of the business elite who identified themselves with local interests tried valiantly to overcome this skewed development, but the demand factors were too strong and their own capital resources too weak. Their attempt ended in the crash of 1847 and they succumbed to the subjugation of their economy of imperial requirements.

Once interrupted the momentum of industrial development in Bengal was not resumed until the twentieth century. Government policy after mid-century contributed to the decline in the rate of development of new industries. The government was obligated to develop India into a producer of raw materials and semifinished products that would feed into British industry. It facilitated this policy through fiscal means, particularly by refusing to establish protective tariffs. In addition, as the largest single consumer of manufactured goods, the government discriminated against indigenous manufacturers in its stores-purchasing policy.

Related to the decline in the rate of technological progress was a deterioration in the position of the Bengali businessman in the advanced sector of the economy. Underlying this was an increased racial bias and social discrimination against Bengalis by both private and official Britishers. Technological advance and industrialization leveled off until the end of the nineteenth century, and the inferior status of Calcutta’s economy influenced the cultural and social life in the latter nineteenth century. In 1839 the Bombay Gazette had noted with envy:

We are one good century behind Calcutta in matters of improvement, speculation, and so forth. We have here no public scheming and projecting, no active open system of public spiritedness, no companies forming, no societies emerging. All with us is as yet unwelded and unamalgamated. We hold counsel in a system of wrapt up secrecy and shrewdness in all our dealings with one another. Our monied people have a taste for solitude
and abstraction, and can seldom be made to meet, or subscribe, except on
the departure of some Governor. . . . In Calcutta we observe a totally
different spirit. There we do recognize something like community of feeling
and a combined idiosyncrasy; societies, meetings, projections follow in
quick succession, and a current of healthy sympathy and sentiment seems
to pervade the monied mass. Instead of maintaining the lonely icicled state
of magnificence in which we exist, the thaw of social harmony has pro-
duced a permeative process of coalescence, which is spreading in every
direction, and resolving into one community both Europeans and Na-
tives.\textsuperscript{64}

In the next half century the positions of the two cities were reversed
and, as the races drifted apart, the "renaissance" was infected with the
virus of cultural chauvinism.

NOTES

1. Robert S. Lopez, "Hard Times and Investment in Culture," in The Rena-
sissance, eds. Wallace K. Ferguson et al (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Win-
ton, 1962), p. 43
2. Ibid., p. 44
4. Warren Gunderson, "The Self-Image and World-View of the Bengali Inte-
ligentsia as Found in the Writings of the Mid-Nineteenth Century, 1830–
1870," in Bengal Literature and History, ed Edward C. Dimock (East Lans-
6. Bimanbehari Majumdar, History of Political Thought from Rammohun to
7. N. K. Sinha, Economic History of Bengal from Plassey to the Permanent Set-
East India Company and the Economy of Bengal from 1704 to 1740 (London,
1954), p. 187; and Holden Furber, John Company at Work (Cambridge,
9. N. K. Sinha, op. cit., p. 93; and S. Bhattacharya, op. cit., p. 188.
10. Kissin Mohun Mullick, Brief History of Bengal Commerce from the Year
1814 to 1870 (Calcutta, 1871), pp. 16–21.
11. S. B. Singh, European Agency Houses in Bengal (1783–1833) (Calcutta, 1966),
pp. 1–35.
12. See Bengal and Agra Annual Registers for years cited.
15. Radhe Shyam Rungra, The Rise of Business Corporations in India, 1851–
22. *Parliamentary Papers* (see note 19 above). For holdings of Dwarkanath Tagore see *Bengal Hurkaru*, 22 May 1848; for value of a share, see *Bengal Hurkaru*, 27 March 1852.
43. Reformer, 18 March 1833.
49. Bengal Hurkaru, 11 November 1836, 25 February 1837, 17 April 1837; and Charles Northcote Cooke, Rise, Progress and Present Condition of Banking in India (Calcutta, 1863), pp. 345–347. Also, B. M. add. ms. 37705, Auckland Private Letterbook XVII, Auckland to Hobhouse, 22 April 1841.
51. Financial Letter from India and Bengal with enclosures, 1846, vol. 93, app. 1 and 2; and Parliamentary Papers, vol. 8, 1847–1848, pp. 107ff.
55. The division between “import” and “export” houses was not absolute, but indicated the primary direction of their business. Contemporary observers such as John Crawford and John Marshman (author of “Commercial Morality and Commercial Prospects in Bengal,” Calcutta Review vol. 9, 1848, pp. 163–189) do not make the distinction. But an analysis of the petitions for and against the continuation of the hypothecation system (see note 51 above) indicates that those firms who opposed the system were usually connected with Manchester exporters while those who favored the system were connected with London indigo, sugar, and silk import houses.
57. See, for example, Bengal and Agra Directory and Annual Register for 1847. Names of directors of various joint-stock companies correlate with names of partners of export houses, that is, houses favoring continuance of the hypothecation system. Statements expressing local interests are found in a speech by William Prinsep, a partner of Dwarkanath Tagore, in Calcutta Monthly Journal, May 1839, p. 250, and in the resolution of the Calcutta merchants to establish a steamship company between Calcutta and Europe with headquarters in Calcutta. See H. L. Hoskins, British Routes to India (Philadelphia, 1928; reprint ed., New York: Octagon, 1966, p. 249n.
61. Morris D. Morris suggests that Bengali capital turned to rural marketing,
small-scale rural industry, and agriculture after mid-century because it was more profitable than investment in modern factories, and that these forms of activity are not less “modern.” Granting this possibility, rural entrepreneurship would have contributed little to the élan of the Calcutta intelligentsia. See his “Values as an Obstacle to Economic Growth in South Asia: An Historical Survey,” Journal of Economic History, vol. 27, no. 4 (December 1967), pp. 600ff.


64. Quoted in Bengal Hurkaru, 22 October 1839.