

Congress Politics in Bengal 1919–1939

Srilata Chatterjee

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List of Abbreviations

AICC	All India Congress Committee
ABSA	All Bengal Students Association
ABYA	All Bengal Youngman's Association
BCDC	Bengal Civil Disobedience Committee
BPCC	Bengal Provincial Congress Committee
BPSA	Bengal Provincial Students Association
BLCP	Bengal Legislative Council Proceedings
CDM	Civil Disobedience Movement
CONF	Confidential
CPI	Communist Party Of India
CWC	Congress Working Committee
DCC	District Congress Committees
DPI	Director Of Public Instruction
GOB	Government Of Bengal
IB	Intelligence Branch
KPP	Krishak Praja Party
ML	Muslim League
MLC	Member Of the Legislative Council
NCM	Non-Cooperation Movement
PCC	Provincial Congress Committee
POLL	Political
RNP	Report On Native Newspapers
TCDC	Tamluk Civil Disobedience Committee
TSF	Tilak Swaraj Fund

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Introduction

It is generally believed that 'associations brought nineteenth century India across the threshold of modern politics'.¹ The foundation of the Indian National Congress in 1885 was a landmark in the history of associations. Since then the complexities of modern politics have shaped its creed, character and composition both at central and local level.

Until the First World War the nationalist Congress confronted imperialism using techniques ranging from the policy of petitioning favoured by the Moderates to the passive resistance of the Extremists. By the end of the war however, nationalist politics began to reach sections of the populace who had earlier remained outside it. Their potential as active participants in modern politics could not be ignored. A point had been reached where institutional politics could not remain oblivious of the politics of the people. This set the trend for nationalist politics in future years as the two streams interacted, each moulding the other.

This work attempts to identify the links between institutional politics and the politics of the people, exploring its impact on both groups and also on the course of the nationalist movement, especially during the period of Gandhian nationalism. Rather than concentrate on the history of a locality at a specific time when the nationalist struggle was at its height, this study has tried to establish a link between micro and macro studies over a period of 20 years in order to broaden the perspective of nationalist politics. Departing from the conventional historiography, which tends to emphasize either elite leadership or subaltern autonomy, this work seeks primarily to present a viable alternative model of interaction between elite politics and popular politics in Bengal against the backdrop of major developments in nationalist politics between 1919 and 1939.²

The years between the two World Wars saw nationalist agitation

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expand its social base and develop a pattern characteristically different from the earlier period. When Gandhi entered the political arena and began his experiment with mass *satyagraha* from 1919, the mood of political activism changed. The wave of Gandhian Nationalism also reached Bengal and left its mark on the nationalist movement in this part of the subcontinent. Between 1919 and 1939 the involvement of the masses changed the dynamics of the Congress-led nationalist agitation in Bengal. The major shifts in the nationalist struggle during this period foreshadowed the developments in the following decades, which culminated in India's independence in 1947.

II

Cradled between the Bay of Bengal in the South and the Himalayas in the North, Bengal lay in the Eastern periphery of the subcontinent. To its colonial masters it was known as the Bengal Presidency – the commercial, political and financial epicentre of the Empire. The vastness of the Bengal Presidency had always been a cause of concern for British administrators. For administrative convenience, it was arranged into five Divisions comprising the districts which lay within the Divisional boundaries. The Presidency Division was comprised of the districts of 24 Parganas, Nadia, Murshidabad, Jessore and Khulna; the Burdwan Division was made up of Burdwan, Birbhum, Bankura, Midnapur, Hooghly and Howrah; the Dacca Division consisted of Dacca, Mymensingh, Faridpur and Bakarganj; the Chittagong Division was carved out of the districts of Chittagong, Tippera and Noakhali and finally the Rajshahi Division was formed from the districts of Rajshahi, Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, Rangpur, Bogra, Pabna and Malda. This 'administratively unwieldy province' was the homeland of the Bengalis whose attachment to the province went beyond the comprehension of any administrator's statistical analysis. This was their own land; the most beautiful, the most familiar, the most peaceful and soothing in all the world. It was this *Swadesh* that they were fighting for, and which their leader dreamed of freeing from all crises:

The evening breeze blows through the peepul in the emerald woods
of Bengal.

Alone do I loiter among fields; the crisis in Bengal is
As if over; behold the countless Banyan trees – century old –

With verdurous leaves and scarlet fruits on the breasts,
Jingling their branches in wistful songs. Are the peepuls in passion
too?

The cold corpse of Sati on the lap, for days; he has
Found the simple tale of Uma's love. His matted hair like Shiva's
Is brightened on the seventh lunar day.
On the grassy bank of the sweet Dhaleswari, in Gaurh
No Ballal Sen will ever return; nor will
Raygunakar arrive; Deshbandhu has arrived in the torrential Padma.
Among the fatigued riverine yellow beaked black birds,
Along the eddy, Chandidas has come and Ramprasad too, with his
Shyama,
Sankhyamalas and Chandramalas; jingling bangles of adolescent girls,
dead.³

III

During its early years, the Indian National Congress functioned mainly as an annual gathering of the politically conscious elite, and it professed to be 'the most visible outcome of that revolution in the political life of the Indians, which was slowly transforming their thoughts and intellects for the last 28 years and which had evoked the nationalist spirit'.⁴ Although its supporters might, in moments of euphoria, have seen it as India's national party, the early Congress functioned as a party without a permanent organizational structure.⁵

The early Congress in Bengal had no separate organized identity. Leaders of the local associations attended the sessions as Congress delegates. In 1887, Bengali delegates to the Madras session of the Congress expressed a strong opinion that a provincial conference should be held every year for the discussion of provincial questions which could not be covered by the National Congress. This desire bore fruit when provincial delegates convened at the hall of the British Indian Association during the *Dasserah* vacations in 1888. It was the first of the annual meetings of the Bengali Congress workers, the Bengal Provincial Conference. The first President of the Bengal Provincial Conference was Mahendra Lal Sarkar. Within a few years it was felt that periodic conferences in different districts would be more conducive to the dissemination of the political ideas current in Bengal. Accordingly, Rai Baikuntha Nath Sen Bahadur arranged the first peripatetic conference,

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which met in Beharampore in 1895. The Conference continued to be an autonomous institution until the Congress was reorganized after the inauguration of the non-cooperation movement. Its management was then handed over to the provincial Congress committee.⁶

In Bengal the Indian Association had established links with the countryside in the pre-Congress era. After its merger with the Congress in the Calcutta Session of 1886, the Indian Association functioned as a representative of the Congress in Bengal. In 1887 the Indian Association had branches all over Bengal, nearly half of which were village unions, especially in the districts of Pabna and Midnapur. In rural Bengal the Association had sought to create a base among the educated gentry and the occupancy *rayats*. But once the Congress came into being, it stopped the association from frittering away its energies on local issues.

On the other hand, the Congress developed its own base for local political activity, using a number of local political bodies to maintain its provincial links. The district bar associations were highly politicized bodies that often played crucial part in selecting the issues and techniques of agitation. Educational institutions, *Mofussil* newspapers, printing presses, libraries, literary societies and athletic clubs were all semi-political groups. The district associations, people's associations in the subdivisions and municipal rate-payers' association had political objectives, as did municipalities and local and district boards which were the constituent parts of the Bengal Legislative Council.⁷ The Congress, represented by the Indian Association, maintained links with all these local bodies, ensuring its monopolistic hold over 'the Congress identity in the province'.⁸ Thus in Bengal the politics of nationalism never really lost touch with the hinterland. From the outset these local bases of independent political activity were important levers in the organization of institutional politics. Even in the period dealt with in this book, these centres of politics played a major role in forging links between the Congress and its support base among the masses.

White racial and economic domination had provoked a sharp reaction to British rule among the educated Bengalis, which in turn was reflected in their political activities. From the beginning of the twentieth century, the Bengal Congress leadership resorted to more radical methods of agitation. To the Bengal Extremists, the concept of passive resistance seemed the most comprehensive and forceful. They intended a dual attack on imperialism through their multifaceted mechanism of passive resistance. As well as crippling the British economy through boycott, the Extremists also wanted to eradicate the illusion and eu-

phoria which surrounded the power and mightiness of the British rule. This boycott did not just involve non-consumption of British goods but 'embraced in its purview the whole field of government. It would make administration under the present condition impossible by an organized refusal to do anything which shall help either British commerce in the exploitation of the country or British officialdom in the administration of it'.⁹ In their programme of agitation the Extremists had not really excluded the wide mass of the people; 'in this boycott and by this boycott we propose to create in the people consciousness of the *parraj* on one hand and the desire for *Swaraj* on the other'.¹⁰ In *New Lamps For Old*, Aurobindo also regretted the absence of close cooperation between the rich and the poor and talked of revolution from below. But the academic objectivity of the Extremist leaders did not coincide with an appeal for widespread mass uprisings. The *Swadeshi* movement remained confined to Bengal and did not evoke any response from the Congress.

The Bengal Congress was constantly affected by ideological debates among its leaders. They not only aligned themselves either with the Moderates or the Extremists, the two major groups in the Congress, but were organized into further complex groupings centering around personalities. Major players among the Moderates included Surendra Nath Banerjee, N N Ghosh of the *Indian Mirror*, Asutosh Chaudhuri of the Bengal Landholders' Association and Rash Behari Ghosh of the National Council of Education. In the Extremist camp Bipin Chandra Pal and Aurobindo each had his own followers. In Barisal the *Swadeshi* leader Aswini Kumar Dutta had his own group. The bone of contention among all these leaders was the control of the provincial Congress. In spite of their differences they had a sentimental attachment to Bengal, the land of their birth. This shared sense of identity produced a strong alliance between the Bengali leaders against the other dominant regions represented in the Congress. In the Calcutta session of the Congress in 1906 'there came into existence an implicit understanding between the Moderates and the Extremists of Calcutta to push the political demands of Bengal against the conservative Congress high command'. Satyananda Bose had informed Gokhale that '...Bengal is very keen about *Swadeshi*, boycott, partition and national education. The feeling is not confined to the Extremists but is shared by the Moderates also.'¹¹ In spite of the opposition of Mehta's Bombay clique, four important resolutions were passed by the Calcutta Congress in favour of *Swadeshi*, boycott, national education and *Swaraj*.

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Evidently, Bengali politics was not free of friction, but its leaders never allowed this to interfere with questions of national interest. Even after the 1907 incident at Surat, Bengali leaders from both camps met under the presidency of no less a person than Rabindra Nath Tagore in the Bengal Provincial Conference at Pabna and passed a resolution demanding the resumption of the Congress based on the Calcutta resolutions.

Efforts to reunite the Congress were initiated by the Bengal leaders once again after the outbreak of the First World War. At the momentous Lucknow session of the Congress in 1916 the Extremists returned to their old anchorage in politics. The Banerjee group coalesced with the Extremists and threatened a 'raging and tearing scheme of agitation in connection with our demand for self-government'.¹² These years also saw the initiation into politics of younger men whose new ideas and vigour were to turn the tide of nationalist politics. In the Bengal Provincial Conference of 1917 Banerjee himself proposed that Chitta Ranjan Das should chair the session of the Conference. In the process he paved the way for C R Das to re-enter politics and redefine extremism. Das raised crucial questions in his presidential speech and opened a new vista in the nationalist movement. 'We boast of being educated; but how many are we? What room do we occupy in the country? What is our relation to the vast masses of our countrymen? Do they think our thoughts or speak our speech?'¹³ Through his speech he reminded the educated, the wealthy and the high caste that the 'flesh, blood and backbone of the land', the vast mass of the countrymen must not be left out of their endeavours.¹⁴ C R Das also talked of the socio-economic problems of the peasants and the need to restructure the villages so as to provide them with the basic amenities of life. For the first time, an attempt was made to critically evaluate the politics of the elite, who tended to assume that their mode of politics was acceptable to all. Thus by 1917 the elite politicians began to feel the strain of isolation from the general populace and sought to radically restructure the Congress organization.

Bengal had a long tradition of popular protest which pre-dated the politics of associations. Although the Bengali peasants had not taken a directly anti-British stance or posed a threat to British rule between 1858 and 1914, they were still regarded with fear by the colonial government. In nineteenth century Bengal, the chief targets of peasant anger were the European planters and the indigenous landlords.¹⁵ The Congress had always adopted a very cautious attitude as far as the peasant question was concerned. Although individual congressmen had

shown concern (for example, Aswini Kumar Dutta in Barisal had spoken for the peasants, as had Surendra Nath Banerjee and Krishna Kumar Mitra for tea-garden labourers), the Congress as an institution had underplayed the question of peasant–landlord relations. In the 1893 and 1894 sessions of the Congress, there were strong attacks on the Bengal government’s attempts to ameliorate peasants’ rights. Until the First World War there was no attempt to discuss rural issues. Problems such as land redistribution, the causes of rural poverty and debt were attributed to high land-tax demand and the drain of wealth from India. But a radical change was noticed in the 1920s when both the peasant and the working class became important constituent parts of nationalist politics.

Educated professionals had always been a ‘great driving force behind the nationalist activities in Bengal’.¹⁶ The *Swadeshi* movement, it has been argued, ‘depicted a united Hindu upper caste *bhadralok* agitation; doctors, lawyers, students, journalists, teachers who often had a link with the *rentier* interests in land in the form of *zamindari* or intermediate tenure-holding’.¹⁷ During this period the ideal of mass struggle against foreign rule gained renewed momentum through new organizations such as the *samitis* and national volunteers, although it failed to close the gap between the *bhadralok* and the masses. The *Swadeshi* movement also failed to deal adequately with the Hindu–Muslim question. Notwithstanding these weaknesses, the *Swadeshi* movement had created a base for launching the Gandhian movement in Bengal. The new techniques of mass contact and the novel forms of organization of the *Swadeshi* era were reconstructed in the movement of the 1920s. The press and the platform, which had emerged as effective mediums for spreading a new creed of radical nationalism, continued to be important in the years to come. Other techniques more indigenous in form and character were also adopted to establish contact with the masses. For the upper caste Hindu professionals, the *Swadeshi* movement had already created an experience in mass agitation, with techniques that were to be the main weapons of Gandhian non-cooperation.

IV

Concentrating on the progress of the nationalist struggle in Bengal, this work seeks to examine the nature of the interaction that existed

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between Congress, representing mainstream political nationalism, and popular social groups and their unorganized politics, emphasizing the impact that this interplay had on the organization of the Congress. An attempt has been made to address the question of how far the provincial Congress was able to orient itself to the aspirations of the people as it transformed itself from a loose organization to a fully-fledged political party.

At the outset the book makes an overall survey of the political, social and economic conditions in Bengal at the dawn of the non-cooperation movement. The leadership in the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee was split into the Home Rule agitators comprising C R Das, Motilal Ghosh, Bipin Pal, Fazlul Huq, Byomkesh Chakrabarti and the hard-core Moderate Surendra Nath Banerjee. Despite their ideological and methodological differences, both sides were perturbed by two major issues – the 1919 Reforms and the control over the Congress in Bengal. As for the domination over the Congress, Das, Byomkesh Chakravarti and Fazlul Huq were trying persistently to control the Indian Association and through it the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee.

In an atmosphere of general political stagnation, Gandhi began his experiments with mass agitation on issues that affected the entire nation. The *satyagraha* against the Rowlatt Act inspired the new generation with something more than just the politics of petitions. At this stage, with the exception of the revolutionaries, most of the politically-minded intelligentsia of Bengal looked upon Gandhi with a degree of tolerance. They acknowledged his leadership in the *satyagraha* and the fact that he possessed a very wide influence over the masses. But he was still ‘a nonpolitical leader...who had attained his position of influence through his skillful and persistent championship of the South African Indians’.¹⁸

Even in Calcutta the general populace remained quite apprehensive about the observance of the 1919 *satyagraha*. They had been asked to observe the Black Sunday (6 April) by fasting. Newspapers, placards handbills and notices had made them aware of the issues behind the *satyagraha*, and its conditions of peace and non-violence. In the districts the response was minimal, with the exception of Dacca where meetings were attended by large audiences that even included the Muslims. But the news of Gandhi’s arrest sparked off open violence in the Northern part of Calcutta. It also led to a temporary fraternization of the *Marwaris* and the Muslims of the city.

The *Khilafat* agitation had an important impact on Bengal as the

majority of the Presidency's population was Muslim peasantry. They became a willing audience for the new leadership that had emerged among the Bengali Muslims. There was considerable feeling among Muslims regarding the fate of the Caliphate. In the urban centres especially, where the Muslims were influenced by up-country Muslims of UP and Bihar, the government was fearing trouble. While the 'political nation' was simmering with expectations and apprehension, the political leadership was suffering from indecision as to the proposal of non-cooperation. Debates and discussions continued until the Nagpur Session of 1920 resolved the issue in favour of the proposal.

The second chapter highlights the new organizational structure of the Bengal Congress that was built up in the context of the non-cooperation *Khilafat* agitation. This agitation coincided with the organizational changes in the Congress. At national level, a new constitution of the Congress proposed the establishment of a working committee of 15 members, which was to function as a permanent Congress executive.¹⁹ From a loose federation of 200 members, the Congress sought to transform itself into an organized institution. The main object of the organizational machinery developed by the new constitution was to mobilize and control a greater number and range of Indians for political activity. The Bengal Provincial Congress Committee represented the Indian National Congress in the province of Bengal and Surma Valley. The district committees were to carry out the work of the Congress in accordance with rules and instructions framed by the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee.²⁰ Financially too the Congress was in a much stronger position than in the pre-war years.

The revitalization of the Congress organization in Bengal during the 1920s was facilitated by several factors. Emergence of a new generation of leadership to provide excellent guidance, both at the provincial and district level, was of extreme importance. Organizational support for the non-cooperation movement came from both within and outside the Congress. Volunteer organizations, national educational institutions, Gandhian *Ashrams* and other independent non-educational institutions provided structural support to the movement, acting as centres from which the Congress workers directed their activities. The third chapter is specifically concerned with the involvement of the reorganized Bengal Congress with the non-cooperation *Khilafat* movement. The intensity of the popular upsurge that swept the country in 1921 has often been explained in the context of the economic hardships of the post-war years. Without denying the importance of the economic factor, this

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monograph also highlights the role played by ideology and consistent vigorous propaganda to draw the discontented masses into open and extended political action against an alien rule. Mass meetings and demonstrations by the leaders proved to be the most effective method of rallying the people – especially the students, labourers and peasants – around the non-cooperation *Khilafat* cause, a movement which saw the participation of various social and occupational groups. This study reveals the constant interaction between radical militarism of the non-institutional movements and organized nationalist opposition to imperialism.

This interplay, which began during the non-cooperation movement, continued on a different scale in the post non-cooperation period as shown in the fourth chapter. After the initial confusion the non-cooperators began to reconstruct a programme on lines that would appeal to the popular imagination. While Gandhi advocated constructive social work, Nehru and Das were in favour of contesting the elections. In the Chittagong Conference of 1922, Chitta Ranjan introduced the concept of obstruction and non-cooperation from within the council. In most of the Bengali districts, organizational reconstruction and constructive social work continued simultaneously as the *Swarajists* dominated Bengali politics.

Disagreement within the Congress was seen as much during Das's lifetime as afterwards. The only difference was that after Chitta Ranjan's death his followers, devoid of leadership, fell prey to clique conflict among themselves. Obviously, this had a negative impact on the Congress organization in Bengal. But whether it stalled the flow of mass mobilization remains to be answered. This book also shows how at various levels, nationalist-minded people took the initiative to organize themselves, both in alliance with the local Congress committee and independently. The network of *Ashrama* and *Sanghas* set up by the revolutionaries to consolidate their scattered organization also sustained the Congress movement. At the same time constructive non-cooperation threw up institutions which were to develop self-reliance through service to the motherland. As events turned out, organizations for constructive programmes and revolutionary organizations merged with the Congress in Bengal. The province was not lacking in political energy. On the other hand, despite factionalism, the Congress had not yet become a redundant element in the nationalist politics of Bengal.

Chapter Five of this book recaptures the Bengal Congress in the context of the civil disobedience movement. The civil disobedience

movement brought to light various trends prevailing within the Congress. Unfortunately the movement in Bengal was unable to draw together the divided elements of the Congress leadership. As a result it lacked cohesion and direction, although popular participation was not lacking.

Chapter Six is concerned with the Bengal Congress in the post civil disobedience period. As the civil disobedience movement began to slow down, it became evident that the Congress would have to reorient its programme to ensure that it did not lose its contact with the masses. Mass agitation was called off by Gandhi on 8 May 1933 but individual civil disobedience was retained. Meanwhile, the 1935 Government Of India Act introduced provincial autonomy, which was to come into full force from 1 April 1937. The provisions of the act on franchise particularly enhanced the importance of the rural rich. Moreover, with the announcement of the Communal Award and the distribution of seats in the Legislative Assembly and the Council, the Muslims as a community had already become a major force to be reckoned with in Bengal politics. This work makes an assessment of the 1936 elections and their aftermath with respect to Bengal politics. In the seven provinces where the Congress had accepted ministerial responsibilities it had scope to prove itself as a party of the people and thereby build its political hegemony. In comparison, Bengal restricted the constitutional activities of the Congress. However, as an opposition in the Legislature the Party's credibility was established.

This was also the period when one notes a realignment of political forces within the Bengal Congress. The Socialists were gaining in importance and their influence was responsible for the organization of mass meetings and rallies of workers and peasants. Throughout these years a distinct trend towards *Krishak Praja* and Congress alliance was noticeable, especially in Tippera. With the communal situation becoming more and more complex and the constitutionalists among the Congress becoming engaged in political games within the legislature in Bengal, it was the left within the Congress who were primarily engaged in maintaining links with the people, although differing radically with the political programme of the Congress. Elite politics thus continually interacted with the politics of the people, enriching the forces of nationalism.

The conclusion sums up the main findings; that the nationalist movement actually saw the intermingling of institutional politics, as represented by the Congress, and the politics of the masses. This interplay took place both at the times when there were struggles with clearly

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defined anti-imperialist aims and when the movement deviated into the constitutional course.

The research has been based on manuscript sources, printed sources, secondary literature and oral interviews collected in India. The manuscript sources include All India Congress Committee papers, Bengal Provincial Congress Committee papers, private papers, home political confidential papers of the government of Bengal and intelligence branch reports. The printed sources include official reports like district gazetteers, settlement reports, official reports from native newspapers and non-official reports such as newspapers and legislative council proceedings. The secondary sources consist of printed books, proscribed books, memoirs and autobiographies. Finally, interviews with some of the political activists of the period have been used to supplement the information gathered from other sources. The source materials, except the oral evidence, were collected from the West Bengal State Archives, National Archives Delhi, the Intelligence Branch Record Room, the West Bengal Secretariat Library, the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Library, the National Library and the West Bengal Legislative Council Library.

Chapter I

Bengal on the Eve of the Non-Cooperation and *Khilafat* Movement (1919–20)

I

In many ways the First World War was a harbinger of change in Indian politics. Economic dislocation, inflated prices and government control on trade increased the hardships of the people, making them increasingly conscious of the oppressive nature of the rule of their imperial government. In Bengal the intellectual element pondered over the cause-and-effect relationship between the political situation and the economic condition.

The Bengali popular press was particularly vocal against colonial indifference to the economic plight of the people. The *Viswamitra* thought that 'subjugation was the real cause of famine because the commercial policy of the government enabled the foreigners to exploit the land'.¹ The *Hitabadi* too was of the opinion that the establishment of mills and factories had not benefited India and the artisan class was growing poorer. *Dainik Bharatmitra* argued that prospect of British capitalists opening more factories would mean further systematic exploitation. *Samyavadi* felt that to eliminate India's poverty it was necessary to ensure not only that the raw materials for manufacture came from India, but also that the manufacturers should themselves be Indians. British policy was held responsible for encouraging foreign exploiters and the *Marwaris*. The *Bengali* pointed out that the monopoly enjoyed by the Railways and the Steamer Company was the cause of high prices. The most insistent cry was against the export of rice. When the restrictions against interprovincial movements of rice crops were removed, it created a great stir. Demand for prohibition of exportation from Bengal was constantly reiterated.² The middlemen were deplored for their avaricious attitudes, especially regarding the high prices of coal for which their activities were believed to be responsible.

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The demographic curve in Bengal was shifting. The Census Report of 1921 showed that the population in Bengal had risen by 28.6 per cent since 1881. The annual rate of increase was 0.7 per cent. The rural population itself had increased by 27.6 per cent and by 1921 it stood at 44.38 million.³ But interestingly this trend of population growth was not noticeable in West Bengal, where the growth had been constrained due to malaria epidemics. In a span of 50 years until 1921, the population of rural Central and West Bengal had remained stagnant or even declined by 10 per cent as it had in Nadia and Jessore districts. Frequent attacks of malaria and other tropical diseases had sapped the vigour of the agricultural population. Agricultural production had also been adversely affected by 'the exhaustion of land of the moribund delta and by the mortality and morbidity of labour as a consequence of malarial infection'.⁴ In East Bengal the trend was towards a natural increase in population levels. By 1921 Dacca, Tippera, Noakhali and Faridpur had become very densely populated areas, with Bakarganj, Pabna, Bogra and Mymensingh closely following.⁵ The Muslim and the *Namasudra* peasants of the region had enterprisingly resorted to extensive cultivation. Labour intensive cash-crop production, especially of jute, had proved a lucrative source of income since 1870. However, this meant that by the 1920s nearly all cultivable land had been exhausted.

Between 1919 and 1921 annual agricultural surveys showed that the general condition of the people was not satisfactory. In 1920 excessive rain caused water-logging damage to low-land paddy in Northern and Eastern Bengal while a spell of dryness clamped over Western Bengal. The continuing high prices of basic necessities materially affected all classes of the population. The situation remained unchanged throughout 1921, as essential goods such as cloth and salt became more and more expensive. The depression in the jute trade meant little financial benefit for its cultivators.⁶ Moreover, there was considerable falling off in the area and outrun of the jute crop yielding less income to the farmers. The peasantry, ridden with misfortune, thus became very open to promises of change and better living standards in the days of *Swaraj* which, the leaders pledged, would come within a year.

While rural Bengal was facing the normal problems of natural hazards, demographic ups and downs, rising prices and above all an exceptional temporary crisis created by the war, their industrial compatriots were faring no better. The Bengal delta received the mass of its labouring population from the upper Gangetic plains. These men

did not sever their connections with their native homeland. The Indian Factory Labour Commission of 1908 reported that 'the habits of the Indian Factory operatives are determined by the fact that he is primarily an agriculturist or labour on land... His home is in the village from which he comes and not in the city in which he labours.'⁷

It is therefore natural that the labourers would be affected by the political and social upheavals in their villages. The recruits to the mills came from varied regions such as the Telegu speaking districts of Madras, Bihar, Central Provinces, the Uttar Pradesh and Orissa. There was only a small number of Bengali mill workers. Down the river from Calcutta, in the neighbourhood of Budge Budge and Uluberia, local men from the surrounding villages often came to work in the mills.⁸ In the mountainous tea estates the work force was mainly of Nepali extraction. In the Dooars tea gardens the labour force was made up of local aboriginals and coolies recruited from the Santhal Pargana. The labour force in the colliery region, especially in the Raniganj area, were aboriginal tribes mainly *Santhals*, or *Kols* or Hindus of inferior castes like the *Baurias*, *Bhuias* and *Dushads*. They cultivated their own lands and came to the coal fields in search of work only when their own fields did not require their attention and proved less remunerative.

From the middle of 1920 this labouring population of Bengal, simmering with discontent, which had hitherto been expressed in occasional outbursts, began systematic and planned opposition to the authorities. According to the Director of Industries, with a few exceptions, 'the strikes arose from demands for higher wages but the general origin of the demand was the rise in the cost of living which resulted from the Great War. The popular hope that the Armistice would be followed by a substantial fall in prices was grievously disappointed.'⁹ The causes of the strikes had been identified as economic. In the context of the pressure of high prices, the increase in wages in the preceding year had been neither sufficient nor uniform. Added to this was the general resentment against profiteering, practised freely by retailers and middlemen and the hatred for capitalist mill-owners who made large profits. The contrast between the affluence and comfort of the masters and the comparative poverty of the mass of workers naturally created ill will. This rancour was further stimulated when the masters justified their unruly behaviour by claiming racial superiority.

The labour strikes of 1920 can also be explained as a manifestation of an epidemic strike fever, which was 'partly engendered by worldwide political unrest, partly fostered by the frequent reports of labour trouble

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in England and Europe and to some extent also encouraged by political agitators in India'.¹⁰ As to the interaction between these striking labourers and the elite politicians, government reports stated that the non-cooperators recognized the efficacy of strike as a means of creating difficulties for the government. Individual members of the Congress did take an interest and an active part in promoting labour unrest. But even in these cases the politicians came to help the strikers only after an action had begun.¹¹ As an institution, Congress did not adopt any resolution to support the labourers.

The social situation of Bengal in the early twentieth century, which so influenced the response to nationalist politics, also stemmed from the experiments with the social fabric introduced by the British under the Permanent Settlement. These created a multi-tiered social structure. In the rural areas of Bengal the *zamindars*, by virtue of their rights, headed the rural society. Between them and the lowest tenants stood a number of intermediaries who enjoyed social status and position according to their economic strength and their caste. The villages, although bound by traditional values, were not exactly living in an encapsulated condition. Urban capital and enterprise had been attracted towards land and a considerable section of the upper and middle classes had been making a living from land rents. Kinsmen of the landed gentry invariably migrated to the urban areas for better opportunities and earned their living in the professions. A process of interchange was thus maintained by the professional middle classes in the urban centres having kinship ties with the landed gentry.

The British apparatus of administration, moreover, by linking the entire region in a network, had closely knit the rural with the urban, leaving little scope for isolation. Judicial institutions created a class of lawyers whose close relation with the landed gentry in the country and the trading groups in the city, as well as their professional roles in the political trials, proved to be a useful leverage.¹² Another imperial apparatus was the educational establishments set up at various levels to ensure the spread of education among the masses. The enormous numbers of teachers and students educated in these institutions at various levels, from village schools to the University at Calcutta, along with journalists and other professionals, created a new class of modern intelligentsia. This educated middle class helped to build up links between the city, the district towns and the villages. These links, forged over the course of a century, proved extremely vital in the dissemination of the spirit and message of nationalism in the Gandhian phase. Lastly,

the growth of the transport system helped to remove territorial barriers and promote a rapid exchange of sociopolitical ideas.

In the tradition-bound social milieu of India, caste was a vital phenomenon, the influence of which extended into politics. In Bengal in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a considerable number of families of low ritual position increased their power and wealth and a main source of this strength was trade and agriculture. This process of upward economic mobility opened up new opportunities for the lower castes in the shape of Western education and new professions. By the second decade of the twentieth century, their numbers in government service and other professions had greatly increased. These affluent individuals often took part in the Local Board elections and local politics. By the early part of the twentieth century caste associations became a common feature of institutional politics. In general, the 'depressed classes' and their associations remained aloof from the drive for independence. They felt it to be a movement of the high caste Hindu *bhadraloks* with whom they felt no attachment. However, even within such caste groups reactions to the nationalist overtures sometimes varied. While the *Namasudras* of East Bengal openly refused to join and vehemently and actively opposed the movement throughout the colonial period, the *Rajbansis* of North Bengal occasionally got involved in the non-cooperation movement. The *Tilis* who in 1919 were avowed opponents of the anti Rowlatt-Bill agitation changed their attitude by the end of the 1920s.¹³ For most of the caste organizations, the anti-imperialist movements presented a dilemma as they now had to reconsider their loyalist stance.¹⁴

The only caste that merged with mainstream nationalism in Bengal were the *Mahisyas* who constituted the most affluent segment of the agrarian population of Eastern Midnapur. But even among them the difference in the attitude of their caste associations and the general mass of the Mahisya population is noteworthy. While the former professed profound loyalty to British rule, the latter spontaneously participated in the movement for *Swaraj* and created history in Midnapur.

The organized lower-caste movement viewed the Congress as an organization of upper castes and therefore a potential danger in case of transference of power. The Bengal Provincial Congress Committee (BPCC) for their part took little or no initiative to change the character and composition of their organization by drawing the lower castes into their fold. Even in 1924–25, 69.4 per cent of the members belonged to the same social category.¹⁵ Perhaps the sole exception was a social