

The Defining Moments in Bengal: 1920–1947

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The history of Bengal has been the focus of a great deal of recent scholarly attention. It has benefitted from waves of topical and methodological interest, but there has long been a need for a comprehensive book on the late colonial period that encompasses revisionist historical perspectives and their conclusions. Since most of the early Congress leaders came from Bengal, in histories written in the 1960s and 1970s that sought to study the clash between British colonialism and Indian nationalism, Bengal featured prominently. As the field of Indian history began to encompass provincial history in addition to nation-centric narratives, Bengal came to assert itself more eloquently by the end of 1970s. What followed were specific focuses on the theme of partition, the history of the subaltern groups, historical experience of women, peasant and working class struggles, communalism, and Hindu and Muslim nationalism. This multipronged approach enriched the area of study overall. Lacunas that remained were quickly corrected. For instance, in partition studies, Bengal was relegated to a backseat because of an overwhelming interest in Punjab, though Bengal was also partitioned. But subaltern studies in the 1980s rescued Bengal from this neglect by encouraging studies on the Bengali peoples' experience of partition, particularly women and scheduled castes and tribes. No oversight prevailed for long. Now Sabyasachi Bhattacharya's *The Defining Moments in Bengal 1920-1947* offers a welcome broad history within the framework of the 'constitutive elements of the life and mind of Bengal' (p. vii), his argument for starting the book with 1920 being that the decade saw a 'redefinition' of Bengal's identity and the birth of a "new 'Bengali Patriotism'" (p. vii).

The nine chapters in the book are divided into three sections. Chapters one to four deal with deep structures in Bengal's life and culture. Chapters five to seven trace the constitutive elements that shaped Bengal's economy and polity. Last two chapters describe the process of attainment of independence along with partition. Bhattacharya asserts that together these chapters describe the key moments that shaped Bengal 'as we know it today' (p. vii). Barring the last two chapters, which are arranged chronologically, Bhattacharya explores, through interestingly titled chapters, groups such as women, Muslims, scheduled castes and tribes, themes such as community consciousness development, patriotism, nationalism, and spaces such as private spheres, literary societies and other cultural domains. While none of these points of discussion are novel, even for a study of Bengal or the period under discussion, Bhattacharya accords them a specific place and connects them to offer a reader some sense of the fundamental shifts that were taking place in Bengal between 1920 and 1947.

In the first chapter, 'Reinventing Bengal', Bhattacharya studies the new Bengali patriotism of public intellectuals like Pramathanath Chaudhury, Fazlul Huq and Chitta Ranjan Das and how it differed from 19th-century nationalism, which did not allow for the cultivation of any distinct regional identity. Chowdhury and Das, however, found no contradiction in the coexistence of Bengali patriotism and Indian nationalism. In fact, they were of the opinion that the former strengthened the latter. This belief found acceptance in the wider public mind as well; so much so that criticism of the much revered Tagore's idea that 'innate unity of mankind had no room for nationalism' (p. 17) was commonplace. Other significant changes in the 1920s were vernacularization of politics, the growth of *mofussil* towns at a higher rate than cities like Calcutta and Howrah, the rise of the *atraf* class among Muslims and a new wave in literature pivoted around the publication of the literary magazine *Kallol*. Bhattacharya masterfully demonstrates the linkages between these developments. For instance, the use of the Bengali language in political discourse impacted, as it was impacted by rise of mofussil towns, and with that rise of political leadership from these towns. The *atraf* classes came from these suburban and rural areas and unlike the city-based *ashraf* class, which was well-versed in Urdu, they not only clung to Bengali but as they entered political or literary worlds, they consciously used Bangla as a political tool. The literary world in particular gained from contributors like Kazi Nazrul Islam, who infused the literary world in Bengal with new themes, ideas and characters like beggars, goons and burglars, who had had no place in the literature of the preceding classical Tagorean era.

Bengal continued to reinvent itself, Bhattacharya argues in his second chapter, through the figure of the new *bhadramahila* and a redefinition of the gender question. While Bhattacharya admits that men still dominated the public sphere (there were no women's movements in the 1920s and women hardly had any property rights) his research takes us within the private sphere, where women were demanding 'love' in conjugal relationships, and Feroza Begum writing in a women's magazine *Saogat* held the mullahs (Muslim clerics) culpable for female illiteracy. Progress was slow but significant. While Jyotirmoyee Ganguly asked if 'companionship in marriage was possible in a male dominated society', her contemporary Anurupa Devi wrote, 'authors who write of sexual love ... should have been eliminated at the moment of their birth' (p. 63). By presenting voices from often-ignored women's journals *Jayashree* and *Mandira*, Bhattacharya allows readers an insider's view of discourse on feminism and women's rights. So while one hand it might seem that the forces of conservative feminism of the late 19th century had outstayed its welcome in Bengal in the 1920s, the reader understands why from within the same world there were voices like those of Congress activist Bina Bhowmik's, who questioned Gandhi's pleas to Indians to support the British in the Second World War. As Bhattacharya put it, 'By the 1920s it was no longer a question whether education should be offered to women: ... the only question was how much' (p. 53).

No comprehensive work on Bengal is complete without a discussion on caste and community identities, including the majority Muslim community. In the third and fourth chapters, aptly called 'Affinity and its denial' and 'The logic of fission', Bhattacharya explores Bengal's deep structures by arguing the presence of both progressive tendencies that brought Bengalis together and the sadly logical regressive tendencies that pulled them apart along caste and religious lines. Following an excellent discussion on the 1931 Census and its befuddling conclusions for the British, Bhattacharya shows how orthodoxy finally won the game. So

while the Bhagwanias sect had recruits from both Hindus and Muslims, Chitrakars were Muslims who did not practice circumcision or bury their dead and painted Hindu gods and goddesses for a living; these were minorities and the Hindu bhadralok denied this affinity. As Bhattacharya puts it succinctly, 'There were rhetorical gestures towards unity in the public sphere but in the private sphere there were unacceptable social practices based on notions of inviolable boundaries ...' (p. 103). Lamenting how the battle for unity was first lost in the 'private social sphere' (p. 103), Bhattacharya then explains how these contradictory forces played out in the field of politics, which by 1930s had come to represent a much larger sphere, a consequence of broadened electorate. However, he starts by looking at daily social transactions through a study of journals such as *Muslim Darpan* and *Islam Pracharak* to avoid the erroneous focus on activities of political parties to trace the roots of communalism. Like the gender question, the issue of Muslim identity was rife with emotion and contradictions. An editorial in *Islam Darshan* reminded Muslims that Islam came first but in *Soltan* it was India's freedom. So while the battle for unity was not lost in the 1920s, in the absence of constructive measures to harness the strong connections that existed within communities, communalism was allowed to develop into the monstrosity that it became in the 1930s and 1940s.

In the next three chapters, Bhattacharya elucidates the significant forces and events that impacted the political tide in Bengal. In a strongly worded and well-evidenced chapter five, Bhattacharya discusses the many alternatives to Gandhism that Bengalis could choose from, ranging from revolutionary nationalism to communism and other Leftist movements. Bengal's first brush with politicization did not come with Gandhi's politics and hence the existence of many forces is understandable. Moving from Tagore's discontents with Gandhian politics to C. R. Das's swarajist anti-imperialist stand that started on a radical note but ended moderately, from inconsistent waves of revolutionary activity to, finally, the ideologically heavy but infrastructurally weak Left movements, Bhattacharya superbly portrays the plurality of Bengal's politics. In the chapter that follows, he discusses another, stronger alternative that emerged in Muslim majority Bengal, the Muslim League. Staying true to his earlier assertion that the battle for communal unity was first 'lost in the private sphere' before it was in the public. Bhattacharya discusses the different spheres in which communal politics developed, with an excellent section of the media and their reportage of Bengal's rising communal environment and responsibility for it. In the least focused of all his chapters, 'Warning signals', Bhattacharya touches on corruption in public life, the impact of war on society and the historic Bengal famine. Together these chapters show that Gandhism, Muslim community consciousness, Muslim separatism and war all left an enduring mark on Bengal's waning colonial economy and polity.

In the last two chapters Bhattacharya narrates the minutiae of the processes that finally led to 15th August, the bittersweet day of Indian independence and partition. In doing so he carefully avoids a nationalist perspective or a subaltern approach. He looks at provincial high politics in Bengal and how the months preceding the partition were a period of tremendous and innumerable possibilities, which need not necessarily have led to the partition of Bengal. He starts with Abul Mansur Ahmed's unique quote where he called the partition 'magical' (p. 310), unique because many adjectives have been prefixed to India's partition but hardly ever magical. In the chapter Bhattacharya takes his readers through the then secret correspondence between Indian leaders like Huseyn Suhrawardy and Sarat Bose and British decision makers Viceroy Mountbatten and Bengal Governor Burrows in order to reflect on the uncertainty of the times and also to offer justification for the quotation he starts with. Apart from one article and a few works that only touch on the subject, Suhrawardy and Sarat Bose's United Bengal Plan remains misunderstood and insignificant in Bengal. Bhattacharya's eloquent discussion of this Plan and the reasons for its ultimate failure locate it as an important event in the historical study of Bengal's regional consciousness but also an event of national importance. When partition became decisive by mid-May 1947, the 'division of hearts' that Gandhi had been forced to admit to trampled over marginal voices that stood against partition and the administrative acumen of the British kicked in to deliver to the Indians, the partition they had come to demand.

Defining Moments is a good, comprehensive book on Bengal. It draws on excellent sources, many of them hitherto untapped, and is full of interesting trivia (like the fact that seven per cent of the Bengali classic *Hutum Peychar Naksha* is made up of Persian words). However, it must be said that while the curious first

time reader of Bengal's history will find this book to be fascinating and educative, more experienced readers might be left with some questions. In terms of structure, overarching focus and the main arguments, Bhattacharya's rationale is not always convincing. He lays out his main organizing principle and argument in the preface and then in the first chapter again, which very briefly serves as an inadequate introduction. While the reinvention of Bengal is the focus of the entire book, the first chapter is called 'Reinventing Bengal' whereas in fact its principle focus is the new Bengali patriotism. In the absence of a clear introduction and conclusion, which would have allowed Bhattacharya to tease out more clearly the significance of his work, while the focus of each chapter is clear, their relation with each other, and with the overall argument that the 1920s witnessed a beginning towards a new redefined Bengali identity, remains a loose end throughout the book. How the various parts, such as 'deep structures' and 'constitutive elements', add up to 'defining moments' could be better explained. The move from a thematic approach to a chronological one in the last two chapters also left this reader wondering what the narration is arguing and where it fits with the previous chapters.

Bhattacharya's prose and marshalling of evidence makes for convincing chapter arguments but the decision to start in the 1920s, the significance of which is discussed in the first three chapters, begs for a more thorough explanation. For one, Bhattacharya uses the 1910s and the 1920s as indistinguishable in parts of the book (p. 27). For many of his arguments he cites evidence from the decades preceding 1920s. While it is understandable that in cultural history, unlike political history, significant dates or a watershed years are infrequent, *Defining Moments* does not make a compelling case for the 1920s. Works by Wajed Ali and Akram Khan which explored the question of connecting Bengal to the Indian Muslim community via a national language were published in 1918. The focus on the literature of the Kallol group from 1923 to 1929 is praiseworthy and while it is clear that 'conventional history of literature' (p. 37) and even Nirad C. Chaudhuri considered *Kallol* to have been a trend, Bhattacharya's acceptance of *Kallol's* significance seems to lie in the fact that it marked significant contribution to post-Tagorean literature, not its political stance or anything else. That Bengal with its rich intellectual history would continue to produce literature is not surprising, which then raises questions about uniqueness of the 1920s as a decade. Bhattacharya's discussion on women and the gender question evoke similar tensions. If indeed the 1920s had liberating potential for women because conservatives were losing ground, was this not true for the 19th century as well? Again, if indeed the small gains women achieved were 'unintended consequences', what does this say about the 1920s or the formation of Bengali identity that this decade paved the way for?

Barring some of these concerns, *Defining Moments* is a comprehensive book on the provincial history of one of colonial India's most significant regions. Comprehensively incorporating new primary sources within the growing historical research and new methodologies to contextualize Bengal's identity formation from 1920 to 1947, Bhattacharya narrates an eminently readable story that does not make the mistake of assuming the inevitability of partition. All those interested in Bengal and British India could read and enjoy this book, and it will be especially helpful for undergraduate students and researchers who want to understand the region before delving deeper into specific topics.

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