

Bengaliness and its Evolution Across India and Bangladesh

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Bengaliness and its unique evolution find a new watershed through the twin memoirs of Amartya Sen and Krishna Bose; **Somjyoti Mridha**, through his review, seeks to delve deep into issues responsible for cataclysmic changes Bengal has undergone since the mid-18th century.

Two eminent Bengalis recently published their memoirs. Amartya Sen, the renowned economist, published *Home in the World: A Memoir* which recounts his journey from Dacca to the world of global academia via Shantiniketan, Kolkata and New Delhi. Sumantra Bose translated and published his mother, Krishna Bose's memoir titled *Lost Addresses: A Memoir of India (1934-1955)*. Krishna Bose, an academic and former member of parliament (MP) from the Jadavpur constituency in West Bengal wrote her memoir during the tumultuous decades of the 1930s to the 1950s.



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In the 21st century, Bengaliness resides in the interstitial space between Lost Addresses and a Home in the World. Bengal has undergone cataclysmic changes that swept across the Indian sub-continent since the mid-eighteenth century—from being the richest province of the Mughal Empire, the first province in the Indian sub-continent to embrace colonial modernity along with the economic depredations of British colonization and the partition of the province resulting in communal riots, mass migration and subsequent economic hardships for millions trying to eke out a precarious existence in altered socio-political circumstances.

The Historical Phenomenon

The collective fortunes of the Bengali people in recent past has been conditioned by the gradual shrinking and partitioning of the erstwhile administrative behemoth, Bengal Presidency created on the basis of British territorial conquests in the eastern part of the Indian sub-continent. This historical phenomenon was aided and abetted by official Indian and Pakistani nationalism since the 1950s and Bangladeshi nationalism since the 1970s.

In contemporary times, Bengaliness is shaped by the imprints that macro-historical factors have left on the Bengali psyche along with recent economic and socio-political developments like globalization. Bengaliness or the essence of being Bengali is fractured due to the construction of Bangladeshi identity after the creation of Bangladesh while the Kolkata centric Bengali *bhadralok* identity touted by the Indian state of West Bengal as the standard form of Bengaliness.

Formation of Bengali Identity

Identity formation is a complex and ambiguous process that entails myriad possibilities, permutations, combinations and negotiations. Bengali identity is complicated by the presence of Bengali speakers in two neighbouring nation-states of India and Bangladesh. While Bengali is the pre-eminent language in the nation state of Bangladesh, it is one of the twenty-two scheduled languages in India.

Occasionally, Bengaliness transcends the constricting nature of national identity, though there are instances when nationality overrides linguistic identity. Bengali society has been riddled with religious polarization since the emergence of nationalism in the Indian sub-continent. The cataclysmic event of partition and communal disharmony of the 1940s is the resultant effect of religious identity overriding the commonality of linguistic community.

Partition of Bengal

Partition of Bengal was a violent historical event which left an indelible mark on the collective psyche of the Bengalis on both sides of the border. Selective victimization of Hindu minorities primarily on account of their religious identity in contemporary Bangladesh is a reality that cannot be neglected.

History of Bengal is part and parcel of the larger patterns of communal relationship in the Indian sub-continent which has an impeccable history of communal harmony and camaraderie interspersed with bouts of communal frenzy. Partition of the erstwhile Bengal Presidency has scattered the Bengali community across the Indian sub-continent and beyond.

The historical event of partition is primarily responsible for Bengali emerging as the second most spoken language in India apart from West Bengal and Tripura where it is the language of the majority community. Loss of homeland and memory of partition is one of the most important characteristics of Bengali culture and society in contemporary times.

The geographically spurious prefix 'west' added to a state located in the eastern part of India testifies to this geo-political reality. It has also created a social bifurcation among Hindu Bengalis—the Bangal/*Ghoti* divide. Bangal refers to people from eastern part of Bengal who came to West Bengal as refugees during partition and *Ghotis* refers to the original inhabitants of West Bengal, the ones unaffected by partition.

These labels have an enduring presence in Bengali society, though social stigma associated with these labels have mitigated with time.

Renaissance in Bengal

The Bengal renaissance coincided with the high tide of colonial expansion and economic exploitation during the nineteenth century. It has informed the contours of modern Bengali identity. In fact, all the icons of contemporary Bengali culture belong to the nineteenth century irrespective of their political predilections and contribution in public life.

The political events that led to political subjugation and untold economic exploitation also catapulted Bengal to the forefront of Indian society primarily due to Bengali alacrity in adopting what has been academically termed as colonial modernity. It was tantamount to emulation of the colonizer's language, ways of life and philosophical outlook. This sociological phenomenon led to Bengali dominance in spheres of government employment and Anglicized education for almost two centuries.

Bengali nostalgia for the 19th century is primarily because of their preponderance in the services sector. It is crucial to note that Bengali dominance in government service and Anglicized education during the 19th and 20th century has diverted them from commerce and entrepreneurial ventures transforming the Bengalis into an impoverished, employment seeking community.

Middle class Bengalis consider permanent government jobs as the pinnacle of personal success. It is most likely a social outcome of the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793 which fixed the taxation on land thereby making landed estates more lucrative than business enterprises.

To be Continued in Part-2

Link: <https://eastindiastory.com/bengaliness-and-its-evolution-across-india-and-bangladesh/>

Evolution of Bengaliness Across India and Bangladesh

MAY 24, 2025



Evolution of Bengaliness delves into how colonial rule reshaped Bengali identity, often overshadowing rich pre-colonial history. In the second part of his three part composition, **Somjyoti Mridha** explores the complexities of Bengali culture and modern amnesia.

Continuing our exploration, this article examines colonialism's lasting impact on **Bengali identity**, culture, and memory.

The spread of English and the rising fortunes of the British in the Indian sub-continent had earlier provided easier jobs with fixed monthly salary for educated Bengali youth proficient in English during the colonial era; it moulded the mindset of the community. British, Armenian, Marwari and Gujarati traders filled the vacuum left by Bengali entrepreneurs who diverted their attention towards zamindari estates providing fixed income. In a rapidly changing economic scenario of a post-colonial India, it has greatly diminished the economic heft of the community.

It is rather ironic that British colonization, its cultural ramifications and subsequent negotiations of the dominant cross-section of the Bengalis have emerged as the determining factor of contemporary Bengali identity and culture, completely disregarding the pre-colonial history/culture of the region.

How is it that two hundred years of British rule (1757-1947) is more consequential than five hundred years of Islamic rule during the Sultanate and Mughal era (1204 -1757) or four hundred years of the Pala Dynasty (750-1161) with all its cultural glory.

A General Amnesia

There is a general amnesia about the socio-political and cultural achievements of these glorious pre-colonial periods. There is a need to interrogate the cultural contours of this development whereby a period of servitude is recognized by the community as a golden era.

The 'glorious' history of the Bengalis during the colonial period is a history of collaboration and servitude. Most of the cultural icons including historical figures with supposed nationalist credentials were collaborators of the East India Company and subsequently of the British crown in some sense or the other.

What is also interesting is the fact that the cultural memory of colonization is restricted to the advent of colonial modernity and cosmopolitan urbanity of colonial Calcutta. Colonial hangover is so prominent in the city that Victoria Memorial Hall, built in the memory of Queen Victoria, continues to be a landmark architectural edifice of Kolkata; a new miniature Big Ben has been constructed to realize the present Chief Minister's dream of transforming Kolkata into London.

Public discourse on urban infrastructure or civic amenities always brings forth the absolutely illogical comparison of Kolkata with London. There is curious amnesia about the atrocities perpetrated by British colonizers. The great Bengal famines of 1770 and 1943 artificially created by the machinations of empire building significantly depleted the population of the province. These historical moments of humanitarian crisis have been completely wiped out of public memory. The destruction of the globally famous Dacca Muslin textile under the aegis of East India Company is also a forgotten episode in collective memory.

Nostalgia for the “Golden Era”

Nostalgia for the ‘golden’ era of the 19th century has emerged as a popular cultural trope in Bengali literature, cinema and culture signifying amnesia about the profound sense of disenfranchisement, cultural servitude and precarious existential conditions of most Bengalis during the colonial period. This overarching sense of nostalgia for a period of political subjugation may be due to the loss of pre-eminence of the Bengalis in education, cultural sphere and government jobs in post-colonial India.

Bengali cultural icons from the period known as Bengal Renaissance still have a lot of cultural relevance in contemporary West Bengal and Bangladesh. Rabindranath Tagore always has a place of pride in contemporary Bengali literary discourse. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore and Sarat Chandra Chatterjee have greater cultural relevance in contemporary West Bengal than any contemporary writer.

Satyajit Ray and Subhas Chandra Bose have the same stature in cinematic and political discourses respectively. Ray is generally considered a Renaissance man though he was born in 1921. Tagore and Ray are touted as popular icons of cultural modernity. The culture industry in Bengal also possesses a curious myopia about other literary icons like Tarashankar Bandopadhyay, Manik Bandopadhyay, Shankar or Ritwick Ghatak while concentrating on the global success of Tagore.

Renaissance in the evolution of Bengaliness

Bengal Renaissance as a cultural phenomenon may have really influenced a very small cross-section of Bengalis, mostly urban Bengalis living in and around Calcutta during the 19th century. The epithet of ‘Renaissance man’ has a much broader application and longer after-life. It has been historically applied to cultural icons like Soumitra Chatterjee and others.

Literary modernity/nationalism of the late 19th and early 20th century has been reconfigured to frame the contours of Bengali sub-nationalism in post-colonial West Bengal without apotheosizing new literary-cultural icons. Literary modernity continued to be constitutive of Bengaliness since the 19th century. The decision by the Trinamool Congress government to play Rabindra Sangeet tunes on traffic signals in Kolkata in the recent past may be considered as a case in point.

In fact, Bengali cultural discourses seem to have an overdose of anodyne nostalgia for the 19th century, exposing contemporary decay and devolution. Of course, the Bengalis of Bangladesh have a completely different trajectory

since it is a Bengali majority nation-state founded on the basis of linguistic nationalism in the 1970s.

Emergence of 'Bhadralok'

It is crucial to understand that fruits of colonial modernity were enjoyed by a small cross-section of the Bengali society which primarily comprised the Kolkata/Dhaka centric, upper-caste, upper middle class, urban Bengalis labelled as the Bhadrlok. While there is no singular definition of the Bhadrlok, yet it ubiquitously refers to Bengalis touched by colonial modernity as opposed to the traditional orthodoxy termed as Babus during the 19th century.

Bhadrloks emerged as the dominant section of Bengali society with the aid of Anglicized education which opened up channels of social mobility transgressing hierarchies of caste/class/region thereby modernizing Bengali society to a certain extent.

The majority of rural gentry, peasants, the urban poor and people belonging to the marginalized castes were outside the purview of colonial modernity therefore in extension from the ambit of dominant forms of nationalism spearheaded by Congress. Post-colonial Bengal continued the tradition of excluding every segment of society apart from the educated Bhadrlok.

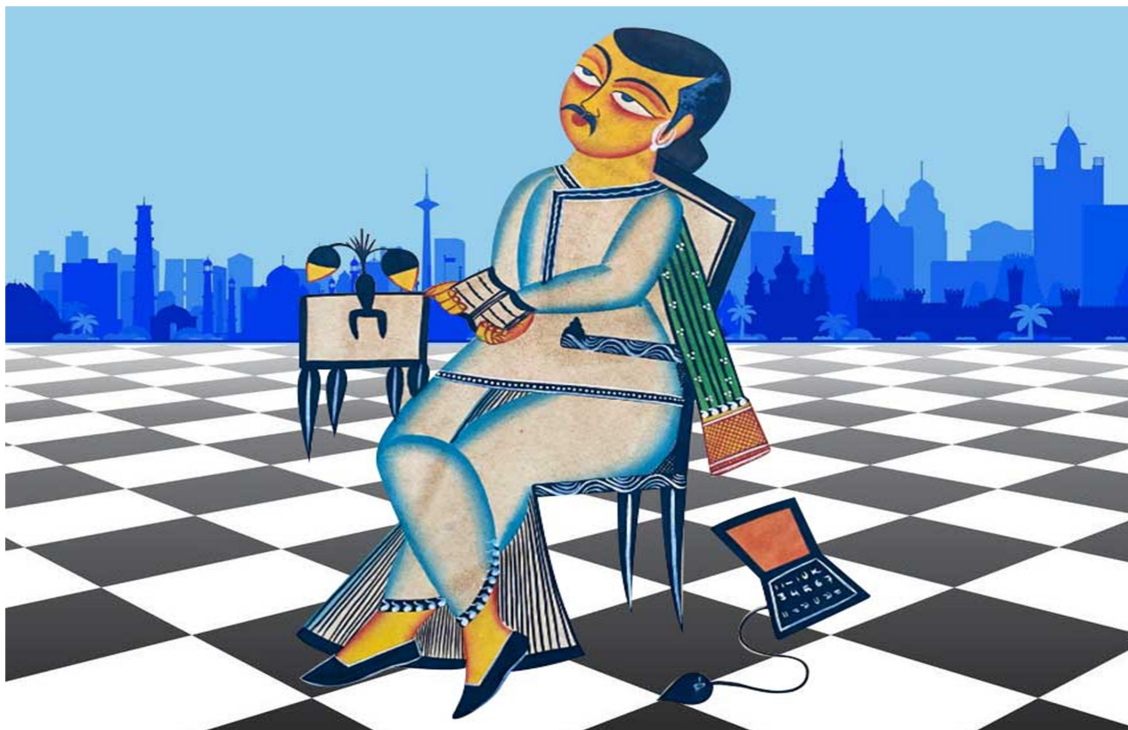
The dominance of left politics in Bengal since the 1970s kept the delusion of revolution alive among the masses while providing electoral dividends for the left parties. The cradle of Hindu nationalism of the 19th century became the fort of revolutionary /democratic left politics which became inextricably associated with Bengali identity.

To be Continued in Part 3

Link: <https://eastindiastory.com/evolution-of-bengaliness-across-india-and-bangladesh/>

Bengali Identity: How “Bengaliness” Evolved

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Bengali Identity has seen a rich evolution across India and Bangladesh, shaped by significant cultural shifts, political influences, and changing societal perceptions since the mid-18th century. **Somjyoti Mridha**'s review, the final part of his three-part series, explores the cataclysmic changes in Bengal since the mid-18th century.

One enduring stereotype about **Bengali identity** is its narrow association with the intelligentsia, which simultaneously excludes every section of Bengali society apart from the educated upper-caste Bhadrak male.

Democratic left politics also kept emergence of identity politics at abeyance which became the mainstay of political discourse outside Bengal since the 1960s. Therefore, Bhadrak hegemony continued unchallenged in the Bengali public sphere until the political change in 2011.

Curiously, the public sphere in West Bengal is thoroughly dominated by the upper caste Bhadrals having minimal engagement with the caste question either in the corridors of power or academia until very recently. The spectacular rise of Manoranjan Byapari both as a literary icon as well as a politician is a welcome aberration in the literary/cultural/political firmament of West Bengal.

The establishment of Bangla Dalit Sahitya Akademi in 2020 by the government of West Bengal provides a certain degree of recognition to subaltern caste identities, their struggle and stories.

Bengali Identity and the Rise of Identity Politics

In fact, Bengal has suddenly woken up to the myriad possibilities of identity politics. Identity politics is not just limited to caste based assertion of subaltern identities; ethno-centric organization based on linguistic identity like Bangla Pokkho is also making inroads into the political landscape of West Bengal with its variant of ethno-centric political discourse.

Since the early 19th century, Bengali collective ethos followed a universalist paradigm under the influence of European Enlightenment Philosophy of the 18th century and hegemonic colonial discourses. They have suddenly discovered the particularities of their region, language and distinctness of their identity. There are various reasons for this new development.

Demographic advantage catapulted the Hindi belt to the forefront of national politics thereby relegating Bengal as a minor player in the corridors of power in New Delhi. Bengali identity also emerged as the mainstay of political discourse in the public domain since the ruling party is poised to contest both the left and the right for electoral victory.

Impact of NRC

The sudden explosion of discourses revolving Bengali identity also happened because of perceived threat from quasi-administrative/ political exercise like National Register of Citizens (NRC) in neighbouring Assam and the spectre of a nation-wide NRC proposed by the Central government.

The very real possibility of migrant labourers from Bengal being labelled as Bangladeshis or Rohingya Muslims in the National Capital Region or Bangalore may have also contributed to the popularity of ethno-centric politics in West Bengal.

While the Bengali society is primarily agrarian, it is impossible to ignore the centrality of Kolkata in Bengali culture. While Dhaka has emerged as a megalopolis with the formation of independent Bangladesh in 1971, it is Kolkata, the capital city of West Bengal which is considered as the centre of cultural modernity for the Bengalis.

Ascendency of Kolkata

Kolkata's ascendency as the capital city of the Indian sub-continent during the 19th century has a lot to contribute to this perception. Kolkata's self-perception as the second city of the British Empire coupled with the fact that it emerged as the locus of Bengal Renaissance during the 19th century made Kolkata—the epicentre of the Bengali cultural life.

While Kolkata's fortunes rose with rise of British fortunes in the Indian sub-continent, it ebbed with their departure. The shift of capital to New Delhi in 1911 and the flight of capital during the 1960s have reduced Kolkata's political and economic importance. Yet, its status as the epicentre of Bengali urbanity is still intact.

Possessing a property within the city precincts of Kolkata is still an aspirational goal for well-heeled Bengalis scattered across the sub-continent due to partition and lack of economic opportunities. The hegemony of Kolkata in the cultural life of the Bengalis has not remained unchallenged though. Dhaka has emerged as contender due to its political significance in Bangladesh.

Bengali Identity in a Divergent 21st Century

The well-heeled Sylheti community, demographically concentrated in Barak valley of Assam and Tripura, with a distinct cultural ethos of their own have challenged the cultural supremacy of Kolkata. The economic heft of migrant Bengalis in cities like Bangalore, Mumbai and Delhi poses serious challenge to the Kolkata hegemony. Bengaliness has evolved as a divergent discourse in the 21st century.

Bengaliness as a discursive and literary/cultural category has been in currency since the 19th century. The awareness of distinct Bengaliness vis-à-vis Indianness existed even during the heyday of Hindu nationalism when Bengal spearheaded Indian nationalist movement with Colonial Calcutta as the epicentre.

The trajectory of Bengaliness has changed since the publication of *Bengaliana, A Dish of Curry and Rice and Other Indigestible Ingredients* (1877) by

Shoshee Chunder Dutt to the most recent, The Bengalis: A Portrait of a Community (2017) by Sudeep Chakravarti. In between lay a million attempts to configure the basis of Bengali identity in the form of fictional or non-fictional prose, historical treatises and sociological studies.

The Bengali self-image has been constructed through various cultural stereotypes ascribed to the community which reified cultural contours of Bengali identity in popular imagination both within and outside Bengal.

Locus of Bengali Identity

In the post-modern digital age, Bengalis have evolved from dominant image of the bespectacled, dhoti-punjabi clad gentleman with an umbrella engaged in adda over a hot cup of tea accompanied by oily fritters. The ubiquitous presence of fish in Bengali culinary culture has given way to Biryani in the Awadhi format.

The image of a revolutionary Marxist as a representative Bengali has given way to the global yuppie savvy in corporate culture. Yet, the locus of Bengali identity is still based on cultural accomplishments of the 19th century Bengal.

Bengalis are yet to refashion their collective self in tandem with altered socio-political circumstances. Nostalgia for a non-existent 'golden' age when Bengalis were the 'leaders' of Indian society has thwarted our ability to grasp the changing socio-political conditions and technological advancements.

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