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LEGACY AND TRANSFORMATION: BENGAL'S MIDDLE CLASS INTELLIGENTSIA IN POST- INDEPENDENCE KOLKATA

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Abstract: This paper examines the transformation and continuity of Bengal's middle-class intelligentsia in post-independence Kolkata, tracing its intellectual lineage to the Bengal Renaissance. Under colonial rule, the bhadralok emerged as a culturally dominant and intellectually influential class, shaping discourses in social reform, literature, science, and politics. However, the Partition of 1947 constituted a decisive rupture, producing demographic upheaval, economic dislocation, and a reconfiguration of Kolkata's urban and social fabric. The influx of refugees, combined with industrial decline, weakened the material base and cultural hegemony of this class.

In the decades following independence, the intelligentsia underwent a complex process of continuity and crisis. While they maintained a significant presence in cultural production—particularly in literature, theatre, cinema, and political thought—their earlier role as national leaders diminished within an increasingly centralized postcolonial state. This marginalization, alongside rising unemployment and economic stagnation, fostered disillusionment with state-led development. Consequently, sections of the intelligentsia gravitated toward Marxist and leftist ideologies, culminating in their engagement with radical movements such as the Naxalite uprising. This phase revealed both ideological commitment and internal contradictions, as revolutionary aspirations often gave way to critical reassessment.

The paper further explores the impact of economic stagnation, professional insecurity, and intellectual out-migration, which fragmented the coherence of the bhadralok identity. The liberalization era introduced new middle-class aspirations shaped by consumerism and globalized values, challenging earlier intellectual traditions. Despite these shifts, elements of critical inquiry, secularism, and cultural engagement persist. The study argues that Bengal's middle-class intelligentsia represents a dynamic

interplay of legacy and adaptation, offering a crucial lens for understanding postcolonial urban and intellectual transformations in India.

***Index Terms* - Bengal Renaissance, Partition of Bengal, Middle-Class Intelligentsia, Post-Independence Dislocation, postcolonial transformation.**

Bengal has always shown a robust legacy of intellectualism and a rich cultural history, evident across several domains of social life, including art, literature, science, politics, and journalism. The state benefited from a rich academic heritage, thanks to the Bengali middle-class intellectuals. Before the British introduction of Western scientific education, Bengal was already home to intellectuals and visionaries who critiqued British rule and recognized the flaws and malpractices within Bengali society of their era. Collectively, these intellectuals initiated the Bengal Renaissance. The Bengal Renaissance is a social reform movement that occurred in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in West Bengal, India, under British colonial control. The period is marked by the contributions of Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1775-1833) and concluded with Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), but subsequent academics continued to further the intellectual legacy. The nineteenth century in Bengal is characterized by a dynamic amalgamation of religious and social reformers, professors, literary luminaries, journalists, patriotic speakers, and scientists, together embodying a renaissance and signifying the shift from the 'mediaeval' to the modern period (Basu, 2013).

Bengal's economy and culture were profoundly transformed as a result of the Partition, which resulted in a significant divide between the industrial West and the agrarian East. However, businesses in Calcutta are no longer able to get agricultural supplies from East Pakistan after 1947. Before that time, Bengal was the center of a booming jute industry that was known all over the world. After the country gained its independence, there was a significant lack of food because paddy fields in West Bengal were converted into jute manufacturing lines. The most expansive estates and the most fertile land are allotted to East Pakistan, while millions of refugees, largely members of the Hindu aristocracy who had been made penniless and ostracized as a result of Partition, came to West Bengal in search of a place to live wherever they could. Individuals who can effectively keep property in that area are burdened by relatives who were living in poverty. This is because Bengali refugees were granted formal rights to recover land as a result of the Liaquat–Nehru Pact in 1950. As a result, they did not get the public aid that was awarded to those who were residing in Punjab (Bag, 2011).

The caste system in West Bengal is notable for being localized and fractured, which made it less dominant than the cow belt caste system; yet, it continued to have an impact on the class order. While Brahmins were less established, educated castes were more popular, notably in politics. Rural capitalists relied on family trading and banking networks among Marwaris, who are believed to be descendants of Rajasthan merchant-caste migrants from the late 18th century. Brahmins were less established than

educated castes. The people who were without land and living in poverty were often members of a low caste, Muslims, or both. One of the highest percentages of Dalits in India is found in West Bengal, which accounts for 23 percent of the state's total population. Twenty-five percent of the state's Muslim population is concentrated in the southeastern districts, close to the border that was established in 1947 (Patra, 2024).

Calcutta is a city that is defined by a population of intellectuals from the middle class throughout the twentieth century. A class in modern Bengali society that consists of professionals like as doctors, professors, lawyers, filmmakers, engineers, managers, and artists is referred to as the professionals. When Calcutta was serving as the capital of India, the British built this intellectual elite to strengthen and improve their commercial endeavors. During the 21st century, Kolkata is proud of the achievements of its middle-class intellectuals. These intellectuals include well-known filmmakers, actors, and novelists, such as Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak, Uttam Kumar, Utpal Dutta, Suchitra Sen, Soumitra Chatterjee, and Bikas Roy, respectively. A wealthy industrial zone existed along the Hooghly riverbank in Calcutta till the middle of the 1960s. Before and throughout independence, Howrah was the focal point of the industrialization process in the northeastern region. Following Singapore as the most important port city in Asia, Calcutta was the second most important port city in Asia. Based on the production and exports of jute and tea, Calcutta was able to establish itself as a global leader in the industrial sector. The area encompassed by Raniganj, Asansol, and Durgapur was referred to as the Ruhr of India due to the presence of coal mines and industrial infrastructure (Sindianeagle, 2019).

Post-Independence Dislocation and Realignment

The socio-political landscape changed drastically as India gained independence from colonial rule in 1947 and following the Partition of Bengal. Kolkata, previously the capital of British India up until 1911, became the administrative capital of West Bengal. With the great influx of Hindu refugees from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), there were unmanageable demands placed on urban infrastructure, housing, and employment. The sudden demographic changes did not merely disturb the city's social make-up but caused the pre-existing bhadralok elite to lose the cultural hegemony they enjoyed (Biswas, 2023).

In the post-independence years for the middle-class intellectuals, there was a period of both loss and renewal. Although they maintained their social and cultural positions of influence, they had lost the earlier promise of being the national leaders and policy makers that had been handed over to the pan-Indian elite in Delhi. Many Bengali intellectuals, who had previous serious investments in both the anti-colonial politics and were now at odds with India's evolving Nehruvian vision, which was largely a vision centered on scientific temper, economic planning, and more technocratic forms of governance (Saha, 2008).

Throughout this new republic, Kolkata's intelligentsia remained important voices in the culture of literature, theatre, film, political thought, etc. However, their ideological direction began to shift.

Disillusionment with a Congress-led developmental model, mostly due to rising unemployment and inflation in the 1950s and 60s, pushed many toward radical ideologies. Marxism and leftist thought, so resilient in the late colonial period, finally found their way to students, teachers, and writers (Bose & Chakravarty, 2012).

The Rise of Left Ideologies and the Naxalite Movement

Bengal's middle-class intelligentsia after independence is best illustrated by the adoption of Marxist and communist ideologies. The upheaval of the 1960s and 70s was marked by the explicit movement of class dynamics in Bengal. The CPI made substantial progress to establish itself in urban and rural conditions, and built its strength with organization and cadre. The intellectual life in Kolkata became increasingly appropriated by left-wing ideologies that came to perceive the middle class as a channel for change (Bhattacharya, 2016).

The Naxalite movement began in the late 1960s in a rural area called Naxalbari, and it followed a trajectory to Kolkata, where students and young professionals are enthusiastic supporters of Naxalite ideas and ideology. Students and young radicals are eventually disillusioned with parliamentary democracy as well as existing capitalist arrangements that exploit and oppress the poor and marginalized in society. A certain section of the intelligentsia began to romanticize armed revolution, and campuses like Jadavpur University and Presidency College enabled a hotbed of radical student activism. Additionally, writers, poets, and filmmakers such as Mahasweta Devi, Mrinal Sen, and Utpal Dutt grappled with ideas around oppression, resistance, and class struggle in their work. Aside from violent confrontations with the Indian state, the Naxalite movement faced its contradictions. Many of the intelligentsia who had initially supported the radical left subsequently retreated from its violence and dogmatism (ideology) within their left-liberal practice. This was a time of a moral and intellectual crisis in middle-class liberalism with tugs of revolutionary impulse alongside the disillusionment of pragmatism (Singh 2020).

Economic Decline and Professional Insecurity

The economic path only worsened post-independence for the middle class in West Bengal. With industrial stagnation, labor unrest, and little new capital investment, employment opportunities dried up. This stagnation occurred simultaneously with the half-century dominance of the Left Front (1977-2011), whose focus on land reform and rural empowerment and failure to create industries had a deteriorating effect on employment opportunities. For the middle-class intellectuals, this resulted in job insecurity. The traditional professions of government service, teaching, and law became oversaturated. Many families continued to promote out-migration, to Delhi, Bombay, Bangalore, or abroad. The out-migration and resulting professional intellectual dispersal led to many Bengalis becoming leading professionals and scholars elsewhere in the world (Barai et al.,2023).

The advent of the private sector within India from the 1990s opened up more divides within the middle class. The old intelligentsia, whose identity is grounded through public sector work and their forms of culture, now came up against a new aspirational class whose identity came from consumerism and technology that crossed the borders of the country and who had worldviews that were post-national. This eroded the collective ideological identity of the bhadralok classes that they had embraced before (Lahiri, 2014).

The experience of Bengal's middle-class intelligentsia in post-Independence Kolkata exemplifies a relationship of inheritance, change, and persistence. Birthed from the colonial paradigm as cultural leaders or reformers, the middle-class intelligentsia derived social standing and status from the intellectual capital it produced. Partition, economic decline, political instability, and changing national priorities required a reconceptualization of their identity and role. Where prior generations had contributed ideologies, social movements, and cultural experiments, subsequent years are marked by ideological disillusionment, alienation, and professional dislocation. Even as the economy stagnated and their earlier cultural hegemony ebbed, the intelligentsia continued to contribute significantly to society through literature, theatre, education, and cinema. Moreover, regardless of the neoliberal turn in the 1990s, which induced a shift towards materialism and individualism in public life, many aspects of critical thinking, secularism, and community had an afterlife for some sections of society, in which the values of the bhadralok remain influential. Moreover, the inheritance of the bhadralok shaped not just the historical identity of Bengal, but also provided a different heuristic for understanding the postcolonial transformation of India, which emerges from, and is understood through the interplay among culture, conscience, and critique, and the development of a democratic society (Sen, 2020).

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