Social Impact of Colonial Rule & the Changes of Bengal Traditional Rulers in the Indian Subcontinent

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ABSTRACT

Before the advent of the British rule, the Bengal people had a well-organized and structured empire system that totally brought order and harmony to various communities. The Empire, known as *Ruler,* were graded according to population of towns and, more importantly, historical importance. The Empires that is the paramount ones, had the power of life and death which made people venerate their positions; or treated with reverence. They had total control over their people and were responsible for all socio-cultural, political, economic and military experiences of their people. However, the British colonial rule came and totally disorganized the empire systems, desecrating, to a large extent, the spiritual powers of the Empires and usurped their powers; making them subservient to District Officers, in this regard, the Empires become mere rubber stamps, with the status greatly reduced, though while still repeating their positions and given full powers that were, however, not challenging to British rule.

INTRODUCTION

According to P. C. Lloyd, "Anthropological studies of Indian provinces have tended to portray a static picture of their political and administrative structures, only too rarely is an attempt made to describe their development".[1] The pre-colonial Bengal's administrative set up easily makes one reject this notion since, rather than being static, it underwent gradual changes which endured till the mid eighteenth century during the Europeans onslaught on Indian culture. In this regard, it is necessary to examine the place of the Ruler, the traditional rulers or empires, Bengal's colonial socio-political structures. This is to make one see the changes that took place over a time, under the Bengal dynamic monarchical system.

It is good to also note that, contrary to the images of primitively presented by euro-centric views, evidences abound that show that the Bengal people had well-ordered and organized patterns of political organization, before colonization, and upon which the Europeans or colonial adventuress even built their indirect system of administration.

Before the advent of the Europeans, the Bengal provinces, and most Indian provinces, did not have any negative ethnic consciousness or group agitation, since, according to history, all the eighteen crowned heads who founded the Bengal province migrated from Punjab.

The discrepancies might have been due to the problem of tussle for leadership which started during the colonial era, since each Ruler wanted to have his own autonomy that would give him the right of supreme ruler ship at the period. Be that as it may, the Bengal province was increased into twenty provinces at the inceptions of colonial rule for administrative convenience. The empires were also placed into categories of A.B and C. Category an empires were regarded as paramount rulers. This drastically changed the ruler ship relationship to one another as the Bengal Rulers as was discussed above formally regarded themselves as brothers. In order to understand the changing status of the Bengal traditional rulers in colonial India, it is necessary to start by examining the people past experiences and the position of the Bengal's traditional rulers in the pre-colonial era.

The Traditional System and Socio-Political Organization in Bengal
The greatest disruption in Bengal's history began on June 23, 1757 when the East India Company (an English mercantile company) defeated Nawab Siraj-ud Daulah and became the de-facto ruler of Bengal. Territorial rule by a trading company resulted in the commercialization of power and the effects of the British rule were highly destructive.

As historian R.C. Dutt noted:
> '*The people of Bengal had been used to tyranny but had never lived under an oppression so far reaching in its effects, extending to every village market and every manufacturer's loom. They had been used to arbitrary acts from men in power but had never suffered from a system which touched their trades, their occupations, their lives so closely. The springs of their industry were stopped; the sources of their wealth dried up.*'

The plunder of Bengal directly contributed to the industrial revolution in England. The capital amassed in Bengal was invested in nascent British industries and, ultimately, resulted in the de-industrialization of the Bangladesh region. The muslin industry virtually disappeared as a result of British rule.

In the long run, British rule transformed traditional South Asian society immensely. The introduction of British law, a modern bureaucracy, new modes of communication, the English language, a modern education system, and the opening of local markets to international trade created new horizons for development in various spheres of life. New ideas originating from the West produced intellectual movements which have often been compared those of the European Renaissance. Furthermore, the idea of "Pax Britannica" which was imposed on South Asia, created a universal empire that brought different areas of the subcontinent closer to each other.

British rule in Bengal simultaneously promoted the forces of unity and division in the society. The city-based Hindu middle classes became the fiery champions of All-India based nationalism. At the same time, the British stoked rivalries between Hindus and Muslims, which had lain dormant during the previous 500 years of Muslim rule. Class conflict between Muslim peasantry and Hindu intermediaries during Muslim rule had

previously been diffused by the fact that these intermediaries themselves were agents of the Muslim rulers. Furthermore, the scope of exploitation was limited in the subsistence economy of pre-British Bengal.

Economic exploitation of Bengal provoked an intense reaction against the British Raj although grievances against the British varied from community to community. The Hindu middle classes, who referred to themselves as the Bhadralok, were the greatest beneficiary of British rule. They originated primarily from the trading classes, serving as intermediaries of revenue administration, and occupied subordinate jobs in the imperial administration.

On the other hand, the establishment of British rule deprived the immigrant Muslim aristocracy (Ashraf) of state patronage. The "Immigrant Muslim/Upper-Caste Hindu" coalition, which characterized Muslim rule, was replaced by a new coalition of British and Caste Hindus. The new land settlement policy of the British ruined the traditional Muslim landlords. The immigrant Ashraf classes, which had hitherto been disdainful of their native co-religionists, sought the political support of these downtrodden Muslim peasants (Atraf), who were being exploited by Hindu landlords and moneylenders. The Ashraf manipulated the insecurity of these less-privileged Atraf, without giving up their upper-class exclusivity.

The conflict between Atraf and Bhadrolok was reinforced by the rivalry between Hindu and Muslim middle classes for the patronage of their imperial rulers. In the 19th century, both Hindu and Muslim middle classes expanded significantly.

The expansion of the Muslim middle class was not confined to the traditional aristocracy, which consisted primarily of immigrants from other Muslim countries. British rule of Bengal contributed to the emergence of an elite class from locally-converted Muslims in the second half of the 19th century. This was facilitated by a significant expansion of jute cultivation in the Bangladesh region. The increase in jute exports benefited these surplus farmers (Jotedars) in lower-Bengal where Muslims were a majority. The economic affluence of the Jotedars encouraged the expansion of secular education among local Muslims. As a result, the number of Muslim students in Bengal increased by 74% between 1882-1883 and 1912-1913.

Faced with economic and cultural domination by the Bhadralok and the Ashraf, the Jotedars and Atraf closed rank. Despite their outward unity, this coalition was fragile.The interests and ideological orientations of the two groups were starkly. Unlike the Jotedars and Atraf, the Ashraf in Bengal spoke Urdu. The Jotedars and Atraf in Bengal wanted agrarian reforms whereas the Ashraf were staunch proponents of absentee landlordism. The Jotedars and the Atraf identified themselves with the local culture and language whereas the Ashraf were enthralled by Islamic universalism.
The internal contradictions of Muslim society were naturally mirrored in politics. Leadership of the Muslim community in Bengal belonged to the Ashraf. At the beginning of the 20th century, the problems faced by the Jotedars were of their small population size and the fact that they tried to imitate the traditional aristocracy. Because

of this institutional vacuum in rural areas, it was very difficult to mobilize the Bengali Muslim masses politically. The easiest way to arousing the passions of Bengali Muslims was to appeal to religious sentiments and emotions. In this charged atmosphere, the natural leadership of the Muslim masses in Bengal fell back to the immigrant Ashraf, who owned a monopoly in religious leadership.

Political rivalries between Muslim Ashraf and Hindu Bhadralok first surfaced when the British partitioned the province of Bengal in 1905. The nascent Muslim middle class under the leadership of the Muslim Nawab of Dhaka supported the partition in hopes of gaining the patronage of their British rulers. To the Hindu Bhadralok, who had extensive economic interests on both sides of partitioned Bengal, the move to separate the Bengali-speaking areas in East Bengal and Assam was a big jolt. They viewed it as a sinister design to weaken Bengal, which was at the forefront of the struggle for subcontinental independence. The Bhadralok class idolized the idea of "Golden Bengal".

Though initially the anti-partition movement was non-violent, the anger of the Hindu middle class soon found its expression in terrorist activities, culminating in communal riots. The partition of Bengal ultimately turned out to be a defeat for all. The Raj had to eat humble pie and annul the partition in 1911. To the Muslims middle class, the annulment of the partition was a major disappointment. It weakened faith in their British rulers. To the Hindu Bhadralok of Bengal, the annulment was a pyrrhic victory.

"The net result of these developments in Bengal during the first decade of this century, so far as the Bhadralok leadership of Bengal was concerned, lay in the exposure of its isolation, its inner contradictions and the essentially opportunistic character of its politics."

The communal politics of confrontation and violence, which erupted during the partition of Bengal, were interrupted by a brief honeymoon during the non-cooperation movement led by the Indian National Congress and the Khilafat movement of the Indian Muslims during the 1920's. The charismatic leader Chitta Ranjan Das had the foresight to appreciate the alienation of the Muslim middle classes. In 1923, Das signed a pact with Fazlul Huq, Suhrawardy and other Muslim leaders. The Bengal Pact, as it was known, provided guarantees for representation of Muslims in politics and administration. However, the spirit of Hindu-Muslim rapprochement evaporated with the death of Das in 1925, leading to an intense communal backlash

Communal problems were not unique to Bengal however. They became the main issue in All-India politics. As communal tensions mounted in the 1930's, the Muslim Ashraf of Bengal, who had close ties with the Muslim leadership in other parts of the sub-continent, pursued a policy of communal confrontation.

Colonial Administration and the Ruler ship Position
After the re-organization of the sole Native Authority, the economic power of the traditional Rulers in Bengal were reduced as traditional tributes and gifts to the Rulers,

his chiefs and Bales were outlawed. Instead, the colonial government introduced taxation; which was not forthcoming because most people evaded taxation by running away from homes, hiding in their farms. People naturally fashioned their methods of evading taxes and the periods to stay away from towns and villages to avoid tax collectors. It should be noted that the salary of a Ruler was based on the percentage of all the taxes collected in his province.

This meant that apart from the reduction of the Ruler's power, his regular source of income and his economic value were also reduced. However, after some time, the status of some paramount Rulers were enhanced after the 1930 Intelligence Report had been written on all the Bengal Districts. This enabled the Rulers to be gazette as the Rulers in council but some Rulers and chiefs were poorly paid, in spite of their sitting allowances which were also too small. As a result of this, many Rulers hardly maintain their extended families. This was unlike the position in the North where the Native Authorities made the Emirs very financially buoyant because of the efficient nature of their tax collection.

At the beginning of colonial rule, the traditional courts were set up by the District Officers for administrative convenience. The Rulers were allowed to set up a Council of Ruler, collecting some resources from their own traditional courts. This experience increased the image of the Rulers or made their positions more prestigious. Thus, the Council of Ruler became more important because of the judicial powers given to them by courts. The seasonal courts were introduced by the British in Ado, but British officers were indirectly controlling these courts. But the implication of this was that, as already explained, the ordinance that created Grades A and B courts upgraded some Rulers and demoted others. It is by considering what took place in these courts that one can critically understand the changing role of the Ruler. The new positions of the Ruler in the colonial era encouraged power struggle among the Rulers for supremacy since the colonial administrator had destroyed their longstanding unity and love through the policy of divide and rule or indirect rule. It can be correctly said therefore that the indirect rule was meant to be a way keeping the Rulers divided so that colonialism could achieve their objectives.

As a result of this development, there were agitations from different provinces in Bengal for independent provinces. At the period, if a province did not have a paramount ruler or did not have an independent status, it would be impossible of any Ruler or king to wear the beaded crown, meaning that he would not get reasonable benefit from government. He must also be paying homage to other senior Rulers. The Rulers of these towns protested but the colonial administrator refused to consider their petition so as not to encourage other towns to ask for independent. The position at the time can be compared to the politics of State and Local Government creation in modern times when many people desperately request for States and Local Governments. According to the Annual Report in Bengal Division, this period was saturated with various demands for Ruler's upgrading and independence for towns.

No doubt, the degrading of many empires made them lose their power to appoint new Bales lesser Rulers in the subordinate towns. To do this, approval must be got from the colonial administrator. Evidently, the status of the traditional Rulers was being drastically reduced since these traditional rulers began to lose their traditional sovereignty to the British imperialists. This brought lack of political cohesion and unity among different sub ethnic cultural groups, not only in Bengal, India, but also in Africa.

However, in 1938 there was the re-inauguration of the confederation of Bengal council and legal right was granted to the Grade A or paramount rulers. The Bengal people's reaction to the Native system became unpopular as they took their cases to the empires to adjudicate for them, but in most cases the Divisional Officers usually saw this as illegal. The chiefs and Bales, minor empires, were no more able to receive gifts as was the practice before the advent of the Europeans.

In 1940, a new political consciousness was growing among the educated elites because many Bengal sons and daughters were among the Indians who had attended the Fourth Bay College in Sierra Leone. Many Bengal students had also obtained degrees in the British and American Universities. The educated elites naturally developed a political ideology that challenged, very instrumentally, the abhorrent British administrative and general political policies.

These new Bengal educated elites along with those in other Punjab divisions, drastically influenced the changing role of the Ruler in Bengal in particular and the Western Region in general. With this development, the Bengal educated elites became a powerful force in the newly established District councils which were founded in the West in 1952. This development began to prepare the ground for democracy at the local level.

However, the Western Region Local Government Law gave a maximum of one quarter of the council membership to the traditional rulers. But the real person in charge of the District was the District Officer called D.O. who also took directives from the Provincial Resident in Akure. Unfortunately, this administrative set-up made the Rulers a mere rubber stamp. The new administrative position could be compared to the situation in the traditional set up when government of each province revolved around the Ruler. And eventually, the Ruler's position dwindled with the introduction of political parties in Bengal. The Western Region had two conflicting parties: the Action Group (AG) and the Indian National Democratic Party (INDP).

The INDP was in coalition with the National Council of Indian and Cameroon (NCIC). Meanwhile, the Ruler's institution became politicized and invariably any Ruler who refused to identified with any of these parties was regarded as being partisan and therefore suspended or deposed if he refused to accept the popular party in power or what was regarded as people's party. Many Bengal Rulers, thus, found themselves in an uncomfortable political dilemma. No Ruler was allowed to be on the fence. The positions of the Rulers were demystified. Contrary to the position before colonial rule, the traditional rulers were the undisputed head of their provinces before the British colonial administration supper-imposed their British political system in form of indirect

rule for the sake of administrative convenience. The positions of the Rulers were no more sacrosanct but seriously secularized, thereby disorganizing the highly workable traditional empire system of Bengal. The colonial government was unable to preserve the organic unity and traditionally well-structured governance of the Bengal traditional rulers.

CONCLUSION

It would be erroneous and misleading, as believed by some early Europeans and Anthropologists, that the Indian society was static and resistant to change; the position that has however been challenged by W. Rodney who has also affirmed that no society was stagnant. Every society no matter how simple or complex has contributed its own part to the socio-political order and organization through the above discussed traditional system of government. In Bengal, like in other places in India, through imperialism and colonialism, the British usurped the powers of the traditional rulers, the Rulers, and entrenched their own alien government, thereby changing the status of the traditional rulers that were dynamically venerated by the traditional Bengal people before colonization.

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