

essay

Secularism and the Bengali Middle Class

by Serajul Islam Choudhury

Continued from last week

BANKIMchandra who had written in unforgettable language on the great famine of 1776 created by Company's rule thought that trade with England was bringing prosperity to Bengal in the shape of cash and goods, and blamed the misery of the weavers on their own laziness and failure to change their inherited profession. He advised them to take up farming, forgetting what he himself had written about the inhuman misery of Paran Mondal and Hashim Sheikh, typical cultivators groaning under the yoke of the Permanent Settlement. This blindness was not personal, it was typical of his class. Not that the class did not feel insulted; occasionally it did, and that was the prime reason for its turning to nationalism. But on the whole it was happy with what it got from the rulers. The intelligentsia was thankful for the mental gifts obtained from the English. Bankimchandra, for example, was particularly grateful to them for concepts of individualism and nation-building, which he likened to divine gifts. This is not, it cannot be, the outlook of a secularist, who by definition is a materialist.

Thus there is no reason to doubt that the non-secular ideology of Rammohun continued to function, taking turns in different directions, none of which was leftist, or even left-leaning. To many Vivekananda (1863-1902) looks secular. He certainly is different from Bankimchandra in several respects, among which are his views that bread comes before faith, that Hindu-Muslim amity is not only desirable but also feasible, and that the richer classes in India should be prepared to accommodate the less privileged classes in their consciousness as much as in the social system itself. He was immensely patriotic, and was almost the first Indian to make the Indians feel proud of themselves as Indians not in the communal, but in the collective sense. The prose he wrote reflected the democratic elements in his outlook inasmuch as it was less Sanskritized than that of his great predecessors. But Vivekananda was not secular; he was, and remained, a man of religion.

Arabindo Ghosh's (1872-1950) case is also typical. He was educated in England, but returned to Calcutta as a nationalist and joined the anti-partition movement in 1905. He preached violence, was jailed for a year, but while in

1857 was a turning and testing point in the ideological history of Bengal. The sepoys who rose against the rule of the East India Company were not enlightened; culturally, they were affiliated to a decrepit feudalism, but what they were doing was fully secular in character. For one thing, there was no communal enmity among the soldiers; for another, prompted as they were by insults and discrimination perpetrated on them by the racist English soldiers, they rose against the colonial system itself. The Bengali middle class of the day, on the other hand, defined its attitude, historically, to colonialism by its open siding with the English. What is worse, the middle class, which prided itself on being Hindu, called the uprising a Muslim phenomenon, painting it with a communal hue, which is precisely what the revolt was without.

prison went through a spiritual transformation, and, in consequence, left politics, deciding to be a monk. The road ahead was not clear to him, and the failure to drive the English out immediately must have created frustration, pushing him further to the right.

The anti-partition movement had achieved its immediate objective of forcing the government to annul the partition, but, ironically, it made a more permanent and destructive partition, that of 1947, inevitable. This happened because of a process set in motion by the arrival of the Muslim middle class on the political scene. The Muslim League was formed in 1906 at Dhaka, which in 1905 was made the capital of the newly set-up province of East Bengal. Naturally, there was the competition between the two middle classes, both Brahmins, really, though not in the religious sense, for both were unconnected with productive labour and depended on British support for survival. And both considered themselves natural leaders of their respective communities. The Muslim middle class was behind its Hindu counterpart by at least to fifty years, but it was impatient to catch up, particularly because of its awareness that the Muslims constituted the majority of the population of Bengal.

Bankimchandra was absolutely right when he said that it is on the unity of language that national unity has to be founded. But the Bengalis were divided on communal lines even by their language. Mir Musharrif Hossain, who began as a secular writer and had written forcefully even against the Muslim practice of sacrificing cows, took, in his later career, the contrary direction of writing on patently religious matters. The change was not unlike Bankimchandra's; both had lost their ways in the same anti-secular darkness. There was, in Musharrif's case, the additional factor of sensitiveness to neglect and insult the newly fledged Muslim middle class

felt it was being subjected to by the Hindu middle-class writers and readers.

The founders of the Hindu Mela (1867-1880) were pronouncedly patriotic and had strong feelings of affection for the Bengali language. What they thought, felt and did represented, as a recent writer calls it appropriately, the Bengali Hindu's attempt to establish itself as the Bengali nation.⁵ The attempt was not limited to any particular institution, the practice of setting up an equation between the community and the nation being widely prevalent. The Muslim middle class founded their own associations, beginning with the Mohammedan Literary Society (1863) and the National Mohammedan Association (1876).

There were, of course, leaders of public opinion like Chittaranjan Das (1870-1925) and Subhas Chandra Bose (1897-1945) who tried to achieve Hindu-Muslim unity, working on secular lines. Chittaranjan's weekly, *Banglar Katha*, urged upon the Bengalis in its first editorial (September, 1921) to remember that "whether Hindu, Musalman, Christian, Bengali is a Bengali for all that".⁶ Chittaranjan was a political realist, and he knew that sentiments were not enough, and that what was urgently needed was a material basis of the unity, which must, in the context of the communal divide, be made up of parity in both employment and representation. He had succeeded in getting the leaders of the two communities sign a pact, called the Bengal pact, but it looked like failing even as it was signed in 1923, because of opposition from the uncompromising sections of the Congress, and Chittaranjan died a broken-hearted leader in 1925. With him died the last hope of placing the nation before the community that his weekly had spoken of. After him politics became increasingly acrimonious, leading to the ultimate triumph of the communal spirit in

1947. In Subhas Bose's non-communal politics had tried to assert itself once again, but he left Bengal in 1941, leaving politics, even though unintentionally, in the hands of the communists of the two communities.

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Iswarchandra Gupta, a very influential poet and editor, wrote editorially in his journal *Sangbad Probhakar* on June 20, 1857 to say that the sepoys had acted 'irreligiously', he was bringing in religion to interpret an anti-colonial uprising and was being as wide of the mark as he was near the attitude of the class which he represented.

Middle-class politics grew along the line defined by its collaboration with the English. And it was when jobs were not readily available that disaffection developed. Surendranath Banerjee was an outstanding leader, but he would not have entered politics if he were allowed to continue to serve on the Indian Civil Service. And it is not at all surprising to note that eminent persons like Arbindo Ghosh, CR Das, Subhas Bose and Jyoti Bose had taken the civil service examination before emerging as politi-

cal leaders.

The process of transformation is neatly epitomised in the history of the Tagore family. Dwarakanath Tagore (1794-1846) was an employee of the company with interests in land, industry and trade. But he was obliged to wind up Union Bank and Carr and Tagore company set up with European collaboration. His son Debendranath (1817-1905) farsook industry and trade, concentrated on land, founded the Landholders' Association (1838) and turned to religion. His particular concern was to persuade the youth to desist from hobnobbing with Christianity. Satyendranath (1842-1923) of the third generation was the first Indian ICS officer and was among the founders of the Hindu Mela (1867). The movement was from economic enterprise towards politics via religion.

The Indian National Congress was a middle-class undertaking. Whereas some individuals, who had gone beyond the class, had sought to drive the British away from the country, the middle class as a class-for-itself wanted to thrive on British favour and not to initiate a radical movement to overthrow the colonial system, because what it feared more than dominance by the British was the hungry people, who, if allowed to build up a movement of their own, would bring down the class system itself, dismantling the arrangement for the appropriation of what the rulers might be pleased to grant the middle class. That is why the Congress demand was for things like Dominion Status, Home Rule, Swaraj, Autonomy and Responsible Government, all of which designated methods of sharing power with the British, keeping them as rulers.

Continuing to thrive on the platform of material interests of the Muslim middle class, the Muslim League, which was patently a communal organisation, demanded its share of privileges, and

raised the slogan that the Indians did not belong to a single nation, they were two; whereas the fact of the matter was, that India was a land of not one or two, but of many nations, each having its own linguistic, as distinguished from religious, identity.

The state dominated; it influenced, even controlled, not only the politics but also the culture of the people, particularly of the two middle classes, who, Brahministic as they were, thought it was their vested and perpetual prerogative to lead their communities. Under British rule, the middle class became dependent, the masses poor. Poverty begets religiosity. Religion becomes, as Marx has put it in his near-poetic language, 'the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, the opium of the people'. Its promises may be illusory, but they are necessary for this who have nothing else to turn to.

The middle classes also clung to religion as a refuge against the heartless thrust of a foreign and irreligious culture. What Bhudev Mukhopadhyaya, the educationist and writer, had once said, rather plaintively, to his sympathetic English boss is symptomatic of the unexpressed feelings of his class. On Bhudev's declining an invitation to dine with him, the boss wanted to know the reason why. Bhudev said that the natives, having lost their political freedom and finding their religion under attack and vernacular literature yet to be developed they looked upon religion as the only inheritance they could claim to be of value. That being so he would not like to compromise on religion, dining with a non-believer. This was how the middle class felt.

The compromising middle classes wanted the masses to land support to their politics of bargaining with the rulers. But having no living contact with the masses, they found to convenient to rouse religious sentiments and present themselves as defenders of religion. The peasantry being uneducated, it was impossible to speak to them even through the Bengali language. Religious myths and symbols were, therefore, made use of for communication.

Thus the state during the British period was acting against secularism, both directly and well as indirectly. With Pakistan coming into being, secularism had genuine reasons to be apprehensive. As was to be expected, the new state called itself an Islamic Republic.

To be continued

book

The Young People's Book Fair in Montreuil

by Sylvie Thomas

The Young People's Book Fair in Montreuil (in the *département* of Seine-Saint-Denis) has become an event you cannot miss. The Fair attracts all kinds of people and gives priority to literature for young people, a sector which used to be considered as a minor activity and the "poor relation" of literature.

A few years ago, books for young people were hardly considered as literature at all. Young writers learnt their trade in them before moving on to something more serious. Today, they are one of the most prolific and flourishing sectors in the world of publishing and the most

The Fair, which is a big shop-window for young people's book publishing, of-

famous authors of books "for adults" venture into this area.

After fourteen years of existence, the Young People's Book Fair in Montreuil draws 150,000 visitors in five days. These include 32,000 children, 25,000 "professionals" (publishers, journalists, librarians, teachers and bookshop keepers) as well as 700 authors and illustrators. In a 10,000 m² marquee, thousands of picture books, novels, documentaries, comics, magazines and multimedia products are presented by more than 150 exhibitors.

The Fair, which is a big shop-window for young people's book publishing, of-

fers orders and promotion for authors and publishers. A fine example of this is the "Colosse Machinal" (the automatic Colossus) project, created for the 1996 book fair, which was later awarded the big prize at the Biennial Illustration Fair in Bratislava and an exhibition was devoted to the artist Martin Jarrie at the Young People's Book Fair in Bologna.

The Fair holds an international colloquium and two days are reserved for professionals which allow publishers, teachers and librarians to meet. But, above all, the Fair is five days of festivities and encounters during which

children are given priority and really take over the place. A set designer is used to organise an attractive itinerary and publishers propose games and competitions. The young readers meet their favourite authors. "It is the opportunity to show that reading is on the move, it is alive, concrete and dynamic". Nathalie Donikian, in charge of external relations, points out. "Of course a lot of preparatory work is done upstream with schools and libraries. But the Fair is a magic moment, a unique moment to create a desire, whet the appetite and arouse curiosity."

This event has managed to bring the sector of books for young people out of

its isolation and to bring it into the movement of ideas, arts and society and that is no doubt one of the reasons for its success. It does not content itself with following the event, it often creates the event itself placing orders which produce astonishing books, the fruit of unexpected encounters.

The Fair is outward-looking and open to foreign countries. This year, it puts the Latin-American continent in the spotlight. There is also a competition on the theme of the fantastic, aimed at helping young illustrators from all over the world. Moreover, it has managed to adapt and even to precede technological developments. For

years, it has made a place for CD-Roms and has installed an area for the Internet.

But the biggest special feature of this event, held in the Paris suburbs and financed for 80 per cent by the Seine-Saint-Denis general council, is that its vocation is to draw all kinds of public.

At the fair, one can see women from all walks of life and from all origins leafing through picture books and children tugging their parents by their sleeves to show them books. All socioprofessional categories rub shoulders there in an atmosphere that cannot be found anywhere else.

Actualité en France

profile

James Joyce : Author of the Century's Best Novel

by A S M Nurunnabi

AMONG the recognised one hundred classic English fictions, James Joyce's novel 'Ulysses' has been unanimously selected by a panel of American scholars and writers as the best one written over the century. The 1922 novel tells an epic story of a man's one-day journey in Dublin, where the author was born. This had been a pioneering work, employing the stream of consciousness manner of writing in which a character's thoughts and perceptions are shown as occurring without logical sequence.

Although James Joyce left Dublin very early in his career to established himself on the continent, where the radical literary experimentalists were later to look upon him as a leader, he never lost his respect for the ordering principles and sense of cultural conti-

nuity of the time. All his works are closely controlled and rationally planned. They all have firm roots in the literature of the past.

Although in his earliest years, Joyce tried his hard at all the major literary genres, his first fully formed works were short lyric poems. While in later years he devoted himself almost entirely to prose, he continued to write occasional lyrics. Most of the poems are brief, simple, direct and unambiguous. They are, however, comparatively unimportant by-products of a talent which needed a different vehicle of expression.

Describing Joyce's technique, TS

stead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the world possible for art."

In his technique, Joyce marshalls the trivia and minutiae of everyday occurrences into a controlled scenario that reveals the inner lives of the characters. Joyce manipulates to draw his characters together, since in his view, there is no chance meeting that is not fraught with purpose and possibility. In the approximately 18 years that Joyce took to ponder and to write his novel, he made sure that each of the seemingly random strands of narrative could finally be seen as coming together to form a coherent whole. Accidental encounters and topics of speculation that are reflected from one character's mind to another's serve to underline one of the novel's ('Ulysses') basic premises —

there is a shape and a form to day-to-day existence, if only we can look deeply enough to perceive it.

'Ulysses', the long and complete novel on which for many readers Joyce's reputation largely depended, had surprisingly modest beginnings. Joyce first conceived of it as a short story. 'Ulysses' expanded during the seven years of its composition to become a massive scrutiny both of the most fundamental of human concerns and of the linguistic means whereby those concerns may be analysed and presented. Among the most attractive of the book's virtues is the vitality of its 'felt Life': Joyce created a remarkably realistic image of the city of Dublin and of its inhabitants. 'Ulysses' depicts a solid three-dimensional world directly derived from the realistic fiction of the 19th century. The comparatively sim-

ple events of its 18 chapters are presented through styles and techniques of increasing complexity, leading to a multiplicity of vision which looks forward to the new French novels of the 1950s and 1960s.

'Ulysses' requires the reader to work hard for complete understanding. The difficulties of the book are not merely linguistic, but result in large measure from Joyce's inclusion of many allusions: local Irish events, comparatively esoteric book-learning and matters arising from personal rivalries and jealousies. One's understanding of 'Ulysses' is enriched by elucidation of such materials.

In order to peel away the layers of self-protection and repression to which the characters have swathed themselves, the narrative switches or changes its point of view incessantly as

we move through the novel. 'Ulysses' has been credited as the work that refines and even perfects the technique of stream of consciousness in which the reader becomes privy to the innermost thoughts of the characters, in the direct and immediate way as fragments and snippets of perception file across the screen of the mind.

In Joyce's novel, the difference between the private consciousness and the public gesture is repeatedly highlighted through the actions of the main characters. For Joyce, there is no need for formal closure, since what is of overwhelming concern in 'Ulysses' is the interaction of the characters in which they demonstrate their innate humanity.

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