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Unpacking 'Bengal Exceptionalism' vis-à-vis Governance

The West Bengal National University of Juridical Sciences
The Sixth Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee Memorial Lecture

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[I extend my sincere gratitude to the West Bengal National University of Juridical Sciences, and especially to the Hon'ble Vice Chancellor, Professor Nirmal Kanti Chakrabarti, for the invitation to deliver this memorial lecture in honour of Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee. I am also grateful to Justice Jyotirmay Bhattacharya, former Chief Justice of the Calcutta High Court, for chairing the session.

Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee remains one of the most formidable intellectual figures in Bengal's modern history. A polymath of rare distinction, he combined profound erudition across disciplines with exceptional administrative and legal acumen. As an educator, jurist, and judge, his contribution was both institutional and intellectual. His principled engagement with colonial authority, conducted entirely on his own terms, earned him the enduring epithet "Tiger of Bengal." In an era increasingly marked by processes of de-institutionalization, Mukherjee's legacy offers a compelling model of institution-building grounded in a robust commitment to intellectual and civic advancement. His efforts remain a foundational reference point for understanding the educational and legal modernity of Bengal.

I consider it a particular privilege to participate in this event, given that the University of Calcutta—both my alma mater and my professional home—bears the enduring imprint of his visionary leadership as the second Indian Vice Chancellor.

This lecture, situated within that larger tradition, also examines the evolution of the legal dimension of the 'Bengal tradition' through a range of analytical perspectives: the constitutive relationship between law and governance, the ambivalences inherent in colonial legal frameworks, the transitions of the postcolonial legal order, and the shifting perception of law as a systemic force.]

Abstract

The lecture looks at 'exceptionalism' in terms of Bengal's historical and cultural identity as both self-identity and strife. The 'Bengal tradition' forms the basis of a dialectical relationship with governance (and law), where a disengagement from governance, and by extension its power politics, creates a counter-force. This relationship must be understood by acknowledging a dynamic of governance recognition fighting a historical impulse to resist. The lecture takes a non-linear approach to time and suggests that no understanding of independence and governance in India can treat Bengal as the exception that proves the rule, but rather as a valuable historical movement in its own right. While developing 'exceptionalism', the lecture discusses the various historical phases of governance in Bengal. It notes that particularly for the Bengali community, a history of marginalization that began under colonialism, political exclusion that has followed independence, and the imbalances of representation, especially at the national level. In this process, the lecture reveals the ways that a sense of deprivation has contributed to multiple perceptions of cultural autonomy. In this way, exceptionalism has been mutable in regards to political oppositionality, while it has remained constant for respect as a way of life. In conclusion, it is stated that Bengal's tradition of exceptionalism, is also dynamic and plural rather than fixed.

Keywords: *Agitational Politics, Bengal Tradition, Exceptionalism, Governance, Legal Perspective, Political-Ideological dialectics*

The lecture explores the concept of 'exceptionalism' in the context of Bengal's historical and cultural identity, emphasizing its dual nature as both a quest for self-identity and a source of conflict. The 'Bengal tradition' is identified as a key player in the dialectical relationship with governance (and law), where a perceived disengagement from mainstream Indian power dynamics fosters an oppositional stance. This relationship is characterized by a complex interplay between recognition of governance and a persistent impulse to challenge established norms. The narrative adopts a non-linear temporal approach to understand this intricate phenomenon, suggesting that a comprehensive analysis of India's governance trajectory is incomplete without considering Bengal's unique historical context.

In elaborating on 'exceptionalism', the lecture traces the historical governance of Bengal, noting the Bengali community's historical marginalization, particularly during colonial rule, and the ongoing struggle for political representation. The lecture reveals how a sense of deprivation fueled movements for autonomy and cultural pride. In this regard, exceptionalism has manifested as a resilient force, adapting to political changes while maintaining its core attributes.

The conclusion underscores that Bengal's tradition of exceptionalism is neither static nor monolithic; rather, it is a dynamic concept that has evolved through various historical phases. Despite criticisms and challenges, exceptionalism remains deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of the Bengali people, transcending class and community boundaries. The lecture calls for deeper exploration into how exceptionalism continues to shape contemporary Bengali politics and identity, suggesting that while it may face new challenges, its strong survival instinct ensures its relevance in ongoing discussions about governance and cultural identity in Bengal.

The lecture seeks to grapple with this significant quote from Tagore, to gradually build up an exploratory narrative by combining select glimpses and reflections related to the main theme. It is a brief exposition of what is undoubtedly a huge, exceedingly complex issue with large temporal dimensions. The basic premise here is that the phenomenon of 'exceptionalism' has its foundational value in having a quest for self-identity but at the same time it has ample quantities of predicaments and vicissitudes as well. My main contention is that the 'Bengal tradition', with the 'exceptionalism' phenomenon at its core, has a dialectical relations with governance. It is in the sense that while the phenomenon takes into account the act of governance in more ways than one it shares an 'uneasy', if not slippery, relationship with it. The motive force of such dialectics is what I would describe as the interplay of the recognition of governance, and the oppositional impulse, instinctively sourced from a perceived and proclaimed disengagement from the mainstream governing arena of power of the pan Indian variety. The latter privileges agitational politics and cuts across political-ideological and temporal differences to acquire a regime-neutral character. Let me also add that the narrative here adopts a back-and-forth approach regarding time to avoid a unilinear and mechanistic temporal journey. I shall also go the extent of claiming that without an understanding

of the 'tradition' the mapping of the Indian trajectory of governance remains incomplete.

At the outset let me briefly explain some of the key concepts in the narrative. It needs to be clarified here that the 'Bengal tradition', as depicted here, has two focal points. In the pre-Partition era it is located in the undivided Bengal while in the post-Partition period it has an overwhelming focus on West Bengal even if occasional references will be made to the erstwhile East Pakistan which eventually emerged as Bangladesh by asserting 'exceptionalism' in a robust manner. 'Exceptionalism' is viewed here primarily as a phenomenon initiated by the Hindu elite upper-caste Bengalis, which is based on the belief, conviction and perception engraved in the dominant value-system that a species or a community or a society is 'exceptional' — not of the mainstream genre — insofar as the prevalent norms are concerned. As an ambitious thought, as an 'alternative understanding', it inscribes an exclusivist sense to the point of high-scale eulogisation(1), occasionally tinged with self-delusion, a sense of being superior or better in comparison with others, of being non-equivalent, on occasions even at the cost of detachment or isolation. It also involves an evolving quest for identity. 'Governance' may be defined as the exercise of economic, political, and administrative authority to manage a country's affairs at multiple levels. With decision-making at its heart, it involves various mechanisms, processes and institutions, and also varying articulations of interests but it comes with the stipulation that it has to incorporate a substantial degree of spirit of sharing and commonality to get it going. Let me also specify that 'governance' in this narrative is used in a broader sense, as a coherent and methodical act of governing, and it should not be taken as synonymous to the now-dominant idea of governance carrying the baggage of the neoliberal scheme.

It seems Bengal is fated to have a special encounter with governance, which makes it a distinct case. Historically speaking, Bengal has very infrequently been governed by its own people, but even when it has happened there is little solid historical accounts. Describing the Bengalis as "powerless, leaderless" community suffering also from self-denial one observer directly hits this blind spot with the words which have much relevance in our context:

"There is no detailed description of how the Bengali king or emperor (sic) used to rule the land. Their time of origin, work during their lifetime and the story of victory is so shrouded in historical mystery that even a historian with sharpest intelligence hesitates to arrive at a definitive conclusion; everybody understands the brittle nature of their system of territorial rule…. How was Maharaj Sashanka ruling his territory? How was the system of governing of Maharaja Dharmapal Deb? To what extent the governance was developed by the deep erudition of Ballal Sen and Lakshman Sen and the perfect knowledge of *shastra* of Halayudh-Pashupati? What was the relationship of Jatkharga, Gobindachandra and Haribarma with the subjects? How were the judiciary, policy of war, peacekeeping, agricultural education and industrial policy were managed in Bangladesh (sic) before the coming of the Muslim rule? All these questions occur in the mind of the Bengali. But even imagination fails to provide a perfect solution to them." (Anonymous, n.d., pp. 44-45, brackets mine).

One can add more names in the list but the existing one is more than adequate to substantiate the lament by many eminent Bengalis themselves that the Bengalis have no history, including that of governing, as they never cared to write one. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee was one of them and he had reflected in a deeper vein on this in "Banglar Itihas" (1954). He begins the essay with these words: "History is written even if the sahibs go to kill birds but Bengal does not have history" (1954: 330). In "Banglar Itihas Sammandhe Kayekti Katha" Bankim went a step further: "Bengal's history is needed. Otherwise the Bengalis will not attain maturity." (1954: 336). To refer back to the issue of governance, during the Mughal rule there was no question of the Bengalis being at the centre stage of governance. Ahmad Sharif (1960: 205) makes a pertinent observation that even during the heydays of Muslim rule Bengali Muslims did not get berth in the higher administrative set-up — not even in Bengal during the reign of Siraj ud Daulah and Mir Qasim. At the top of the governance hierarchy were the Arab, Iranian, Middle Eastern and North Indian Muslims. During the colonial era the Bengalis at best were part of the 'back room' team mostly in the form of English-knowing administrative assistants to the rulers. An extensive discussion on why it has been so is however, beyond the scope of this lecture.

To make a leap forward from history to contemporary times, the only instance in which a segment of Bengalis is at the helm of governance is that of Bangladesh which is inhabited by two thirds of the Bengali-speaking population. Then again, the process has not at all been

smooth. Several factors, especially religious divide, made governing Bengal a major bone of contention among Bengalis and the pre-Partition Bengal witnessed fratricidal war between two of its largest religious communities, culminating in the implementation of the Great Calcutta Killing in 1946. In the violent confrontations for the 'governance pie' there was no question of the Bengalis living together happily ever after. History bears witness to the fact that Syama Prasad Mookerjee, the son of Sir Ashutosh, had summarily rejected the plan of undivided sovereign Bengal in the form of the Free State of Bengal, which was mooted by Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, a staunch supporter of the Communal Award based on religious divide, who eventually became the Prime Minister of Pakistan. Incidentally, Mookerjee, who held the portfolio of Industry and Supply in the Nehru-led cabinet, had resigned over a disagreement on the Nehru-Liaquat Pact and till his untimely and controversial death in Kashmir he remained a staunch anti-Centre activist. It may also be mentioned that the 'exceptionalism' phenomenon received a grievous blow in the run-up to the Partition, when the Hindu-Muslim communal divide came to dominate thinking and action, including 'Bengali exterminating Bengali'. But all this did not make 'exceptionalism' obsolete. It resurfaced soon after, confirming its power of resilience.

The Partition of India had dealt a devastating setback through the partitioned Bengal and though belonging to two separate polities the inhabitants of both parts of Bengal could never really recover from the disaster. The Bengalis were more or less marginalized from the business of governance — in political decision making as well as in top-level bureaucracy — even if there were some instances of tokenism here and there. In the aftermath of the Partition much time on both sides of Bengal was spent on ruminating how the Bengalis were being deprived of their presence in the central power corridors of governance in both India and Pakistan. It became a classic case of sharing a sense of victimhood. The value of independence began to be questioned as a 'new bondage' in both cases. The only difference was that In West Bengal the sense developed with rapid pace and in the case of East Pakistan it developed gradually and reached a boiling point when the Punjabi-dominated Pakistan on its part in a brazen act deprived the Awami League and its supremo, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman from forming the government at the Centre, despite the party having secured the majority of seats in the parliament. This led to the attempt of secession by East Pakistan, and the discrimination against the Bengalis, not just political and economic but also cultural, became the prime motive force of the Mukti Yuddha (liberation war) and the foundation of an independent State. A cardinal feature of the Mukti Yuddha was that it democratized 'exceptionalism' to a great extent by bringing under its rubric the ordinary people, poor and long repressed, who eagerly and actively participated in it with the conviction that not the religion but the language should become the foundation of a new nation-state.

Incidentally, the Calcutta station of All India Radio played an unparalleled role in foregrounding the victimhood syndrome vis-à-vis the Bengalis as part of its propaganda act in favour of the establishment of Bangladesh. Any close reading of the script of *Sambad Parikrama*, scripted by Pranabesh Sen and read out in a dramatic and highly emotional way by Debdulal Bandopadhyay will substantiate the point. Insofar as West Bengal is concerned the liberation of Bangladesh gave a sense of satisfaction, however elusive in real terms, that at long last at least a section of Bengalis were being catapulted to the highest echelons of governance of a country. Rahman, who was voted, mostly by the Bangladeshi audience, as the "greatest Bengali in Thousand years" (making Tagore a distant second) by a survey conducted by the BBC Bengali Language Service in 2004, himself attained a larger than life status in West Bengal for being the first Bengali in modern times to head a country. But let it be noted that even Rahman could not get rid of the obstinate 'opposition' tag. As an observation (Schendel, 2013:288, italics mine) goes, "Mujib relied on his personal popularity and political intuition to tackle the new challenges. It was an almost impossible balancing act and it soon became clear that *he had been far more effective as an opposition leader than he was as a statesman* — fiery rhetoric was more his style than forceful governance. *He was unable to transform his personal relationship with his followers into an established authority structure independent of his personal qualifications*. However, this was not an issue at all in West Bengal's 'Mujib hysteria'. The creation of Bangladesh lent some balance to the brooding idea that West Bengal remained only a constituent state of India and nothing much could be done about it. To my mind, the euphoria of *E Par Bangla, Opar Bangla* and the imaginary of 'border-defying unity' of an ethno-linguistic

community hitherto divided, was more evident in West Bengal than in Bangladesh because to a certain extent it was related to some kind of latent inferiority complex and to the sense of failure on the part of the Bengalis of this side of the border, in being unable to capture the highest reins of governance in India. Paradoxically enough, it continued with a self-contradictory and divisive perception, in which many Bengali-speaking Hindus of West Bengal distinguish themselves as 'Bengalis' and describe the Bengali-speaking Muslim population simply as 'Muslims'.

The trait of exceptionalism is found to have a consistent correlation with 'the zeal to oppose' prevalent governing as systemic malfunction. It was quite evident during the freedom struggle in which Bengal was a forerunner. The list of leaders and activists vehemently and steadfastly opposing the ways of governance by the Britishers is excessively long. Historians have also done a great job in providing us with several chronicles of the respective activities of the 'militant' revolutionaries and the 'peace abiding' Gandhians in Bengal. The two streams may have different paths but they nevertheless had the same slogan: down with governance of the foreign rulers. Subhas Chandra Bose was in several ways a torchbearer of the Bengal tradition. In one instance he has been described as the "Her Majesty's Opposition". Bose was like no other figure from India of his times in terms of sustained opposition to the British mode of governance. It was something which even Gandhi could not do due to his occasional 'tactical' suspension of movements against the colonial rulers, as was the case during the First World War. Even in opposing Gandhi and in having a tumultuous relationship with him Bose was distinct from the likes of Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel. Even if Bose along with Nehru had prepared a roadmap of national planning for governing India after independence Bose's image was much different from Nehru in the sense that not to mention his admirers, even his detractors would not associate him with any irrepressible 'urge' to govern independent India by himself. Bose's mysterious disappearance as well as the periodic instances of his 'reappearance', that too based on a detached and lonely persona, perfectly reinforced his place in the 'exceptionalism' tradition and one of its major elements — political accumulation by opposition.

It is interesting that while the Britishers originally had their focus on Bengal in choosing the source-location of the seat of colonial governance they shifted the capital of India from Calcutta to Delhi in 1911. The impact of the shift was not only substantive but also symbolic. In having the capital and subsequently losing it, especially a few years after the failed attempt at partitioning Bengal (1905) by Viceroy Lord Curzon and the successful occurrence of the Swadeshi movement which made the "settled fact unsettled" in 1911. The movement has provided a fillip to the 'Bengal tradition' both in terms of the oppositional instinct and in terms of exercising 'exceptionalism' in greater doses. But at the same time the immediate shift of the capital had generated a sense of loss among the *bhadraloks* of Bengal and it also added fuel to their sense of deprivation. There is an argument that the shift of the capital was meant to fulfil two goals: first, to make the British Empire safe from political disturbances and turmoil; and second, to safeguard the British traders and entrepreneurs from the competition from their emerging Bengali counterparts. In any case, with the capital shifted, the *bhadraloks*, the fulcrum of the civil society, constructed and publicized the representation of the city of Calcutta as the "cultural capital of India". Still invoked in public discourse, it may be viewed as a kind of reactive cultural assertion of a community which was robbed of its political capital. At times, the 'exceptionalism' thesis would even receive a boost from the 'non-Bengalis', as in the classic and oft-quoted statement of Gopal Krishna Gokhale — "What Bengal thinks today, India thinks tomorrow." In any case, in the 'Bengal tradition', culture, having some debt to the 19th century Bengal 'Renaissance' and a series of modernist-reformist movements (such as ban on *Satidaha* and introduction of widow remarriage), is posited as something which is generically 'creative' and 'superior', something antithetical to the 'narrow' and 'mechanical' act of governance conducted by 'others'. This high emotional quotient also resulted in an astonishingly rich and diverse anti-establishment genre of literature, theatre, films and songs. Little Magazines, Group Theatre, Ganasangeet made phenomenal contributions to 'exceptionalism'.

In post-independence India West Bengal came to be known as the 'headquarter' of agitational politics in India, a brand of politics which not only originates but also sustains itself by critiquing and subverting governance. To extend a point mentioned earlier, this is precisely where the dialectics play a vital role because the Bengal tradition has never been indifferent and/or ignorant of governance. It has been consistently targeting mainstream mode

of governance even if it has not yet produced a viable alternative paradigm of governance. One may argue that the 'Bengal tradition' is very vocal with attempts to subvert mainstream governance but remains more or less silent when it came to its alternative version.

That perhaps is an inevitable feature and a logical outcome of the ultra-agitational mode. Calcutta had earned the dubious reputation of being 'the city of processions'. The key slogan that has dominated Bengal politics for a long time is instructive in this context: 'Break, Demolish' (*Bhenge dao, Gunriye dao*). It only invites putting an end to the establishment. Same is the case with two other popular ancillary slogans: 'Meet Our Demand, Else Quit' (*Amader dabi mante hobe, noile gadi charte hobe*), 'Nothing Moves, Nothing Will' (*Cholche na, cholbe na*) and 'Not obeying, will not obey' (*Manchi na, manbo na*). I have discussed elsewhere (Sinha, 2013: 19-22), elaborating the "same side goal politics" becoming the state's "new brand image", how such slogans signify efforts to bring anything and everything under the sun to a screeching halt. The slogans were also backed up by an astonishing number of strikes, often paradoxically sponsored by the West Bengal government itself. Here too the slogans do not show any ambition of taking over the reins of power. They only reflect antagonistic attitude towards governance and/or the Indian State as sources of centralized power. Even in otherwise rich accounts of "Bengali and Bengaliness", especially in the literature emerging for a century, there is a constant lament about deprivation from the scope of governance, but no concrete blue print of the 'Bengal tradition' of governance. One may provocatively argue here that in having such lack the 'exceptionalism' phenomenon tends to share a blurred line of distinction with escapism.

It is indeed interesting that the negativity and consequent alienation inscribed in 'exceptionalism' has guided Bengal's politics. To provide a snapshot view of the temporal cycle of agitational politics in the state, the Tebhaga Movement, the Food Movement, the Tram Fare Movement, the Naxalite Movement and even down the line, the post-millennial movements in Singur and Nandigram — all were 'successful' instances of exceptional agitation, not exactly accompanied/followed up with a blueprint of 'better mode' of governance. This is where the issue of escapism comes to the fore. In the fascinating case of the Naxalite movement, if there was any utterances about 'best possible governance' it was fundamentally about the Mao Zedong-led Chinese variety. The preference for this variety was epitomized in the slogan "China's Chairman Our Chairman". Even for the ruling Marxists of West Bengal the best model of governance was to be found in the erstwhile Soviet Union and/or China. The agitation-bound trait has often raised concern among observers that it facilitates 'self-inflicted wound', 'corrosive' and 'suicidal' politics, but the 'Bengal tradition' remains largely undisturbed by such deadly apprehensions of degeneration, even today. It is no less significant that whichever political force rules the state of West Bengal, from the Left to the Right, the dominant image of the Chief Ministers is that of a 'stiff and uncompromising opponent' of the Centre. In general, the successive rulers of West Bengal seem to enjoy being in the 'opposition in perpetuity', even if it means forfeiting the comparative advantages in development, which the state used to enjoy in the then newly independent India. This point holds true despite periodic manifestations of political aspirations designating both Jyoti Basu and Mamata Banerjee as 'perfect candidates' for the post of the prime minister of India. Both Basu and Banerjee accumulated enviable political capital out of sustained oppositional posture, laced with high rhetoric against the 'conspiracy" and/or "misrule" of the Centre. Delhi, for both of them, remained an ever volatile political counterpoint.

It is common knowledge that governance has an intimate connection with law. But what about this connection insofar as the 'Bengal tradition' is concerned? I would argue that the link is both ambivalent and change-oriented, and it needs to be deeply explored in research. The ambivalence had its origin in the colonial era and it also pervades the post-colonial era, though not in the same form. For a fairly long time the harbingers of the 'Bengal tradition' the colonial era had a love-hate relationship with the British legal tradition and system of justice, and with governance it was complemented by a hide-and-seek relationship. There was a general admiration of the British legal and juridical tradition among the chief architects of the 'Bengal tradition', right from Raja Rammohan Roy and Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, but it was moderated by a critique of the 'deviation' by the colonial rulers to repress the Indians. Let me refer to a few of Tagore's writings in this context, which acutely reflect this ambivalence. In 'Prachya O Pratichya' (1989[1892]) Tagore would write that even if we received many laws and many courts during

the English rule and we also came to be familiar with Englishmen's carefulness, alertness, sharp intelligence, orderly work skill, what was found lacking was "heavenly compassion". He would go on to add that he would feel "agitated" to an unlimited degree seeing the misuse of compassion through its manifestation in undeserving places. He was more forthright in *Paschim-Jatrir Diary* (1929:71) in noting that law and order during the colonial era was a "gatekeeping system" (*darowani byabastha*), a "wrestling show" (*paloyani pala*). Tagore would also reaffirm this stance in *Sabhyatar Sankat* (1941) in which he refers (p.4) to the "distorted form" of a great civilization (that is, the British variety) in developing "contemptuous indifference" to crores of ordinary people and repeats (pp. 6-7) described the law and order as "totally imported" and "mere gatekeeping" . In *Prachalita Dandaniti* (2018 [1937]) Tagore would bemoan the fact that despite the "civilized" English legal principles in place many innocent people were suffering punishment and insult. He would add that his definition of "barbarism" was "extreme form of application of punishment" (p. 360). But in "Russiar Chithi" (1989[1930]) he would present his foundational stance, when, after expressing many instances of his experience of the colonial rule, he would affirm (p. 416) that the English mind was far more liberal in comparison to any other European colonial powers, and he would even admit to having "less expectations" from the local kings and landlords whose meanness he would repeatedly mention. His most significant observation in this context was that the "life and mind" are as valuable as the law and order. Tagore was convinced that if the Empire could get rid of the imperialist policy of Divide and Rule the legal-administrative scenario would have been much better. However, with the passing of time due to numerous constellations of forces and events the 'Bengal tradition' took a more radical turn during the freedom movement and played a leading role in opposing the exclusionary nature of the British rule and in demanding the exit of the colonial rulers from India.

In post-independent India the sense of deprivation, as mentioned earlier, gradually turned into angst. The successive central governments were perceived as 'anti-West Bengal' not only in political terms but also in economic terms. One may cite here a book by Ranajit Ray, *The Agony of West Bengal: A Study in Union-State Relations* (the Bengali version has an apocalyptic title: *Dhwangser Pathe Paschim Banga*. "The Road to Ruin" has been made the first section in the English version). The whistleblowing book, ironically dedicated to the Indian National Congress and the Government of India with a grateful acknowledgement to the former Union Minister Pranab Mukherjee, highlighted the design of the Government of India to systematically weaken the economy of the state by step-motherly economic, fiscal, monetary and political treatment. Ray finds a continuation of the colonial practice of the Drain of Wealth in post-independent India — with regard to West Bengal and other Eastern Indian states. Beyond the pages of books such sentiment has always pervaded the arena of governing in West Bengal. One clear manifestation of such sentiment is the 'frictional" relations, periodically leading to outright hostility, of the successive governments of the state with the Governor who is seen as the "agent of the Centre".

Yet, in terms of its trajectory and inner dynamics the 'Bengal tradition' in the post-independent era drew and maintained an invisible *Laxmanrekha*. The 'identity as difference' is not pushed deep enough to reach the brink of breaking away from the Indian Union. It did not in the past and does not at present make any secessionist attempt, unlike its East Bengal counterpart. The demand mainly revolved around the demand for greater autonomy of the states. The *Laxmanrekha* is evident even in the case of decisive exponents of 'exceptionalism'. To provide an example, in the Preface to the book *Bangali*, Probodhchandra Ghosh (1952: 4) writes: "I do not think there is any ethnic community other than the Bengalis, who have felt the Indian way of life as comprehensively, and at the same time has maintained their specialty to influence the same Indian way of life in a deep and extensive manner. Though now fragmented and scattered for various reasons in terms of number, consciousness and cultivating spirit, as a community the same Bengalis are in the forefront." However, he subsequently refers to Suniti Kumar Chatterjee's *Jati, Sanskriti O Sahitya* (1945) to seek some kind of balanced approach even while acknowledging the "specialties of Bengaliness". This remains true even for the Marxist rulers of the state, who would in the earlier era of independence of India would decry the "liberal bourgeois State" and raise the slogan "Yeh azadi jhuta hai" ("This independence is a sham"). One may mention in passing a cryptic remark by Partha Chatterjee (1997, p. ix) — that the self-appointed Marxist guardians of national integrity as "vigilantes more

nationalist than the nationalists themselves." Some of the finest parliamentarians from West Bengal, such as Hiren Mukherjee and Bhupesh Gupta, were Marxist politicians to the core, with a 'nationalist' bent of mind. Incidentally, their party, the Communist Party of India had emerged as the largest opposition in the very first election after independence.

In some cases the case of amputation of West Bengal from India was invoked. But the instances like 'Bangalisthan' as a separate homeland for Bengalis, demanded by some fringe elements, failed to have takers. Rather such efforts are treated with amusement, if not outright indifference. This is precisely why there was a "this far and no further" stance in the post-Independent version of 'exceptionalism'. This kind of a 'boundary line' exists in simultaneity with the oppositional-agitational psyche being discussed here. The phenomenon is exclusivist but not secessionist. The angst of being left out of the highest precincts of governance itself revealed the urge to stay put and articulate the voice of dissent from within, rather than carving out a sovereign state. This self-imposed limit, itself a huge dialectical struggle of sticking to 'statist nationalism' and resisting its mode of governance, is to be treated as a hallmark of the Bengal brand of 'exceptionalism'. In yet another paradoxical stance, even without effective plans of governance of its own it seeks to reorder the Indian 'nation state' and also visualises a global-cosmopolitan link in which India would recover its position as the greatest in the world meet — with the 'Bengal tradition' acting as the medium. It reminds me of poet Jibananada's line: My Bengali mind is filled up with the fragrance of the distant world.

History has shown that while a lot of criticisms and sarcastic remarks have been hurled at it no one actually ventured to announce with certitude the end of 'exceptionalism'. In the context of the resilience of the phenomenon it may be mentioned that significantly in some cases the reactions to 'exceptionalism' are sought to be deterred by its strategic maneuvering itself. Thus, noting that now (the late 1940s and early 1950s) the Bengalis face "great disaster" in the form of anti-Bengali sentiment germinating in various parts of India, and having made a conjecture that it might have emerged as a reaction to the exclusive traits of the 'Bengal tradition', a very interesting book, *Amra Bangali*, (Chattopadhyay, 1952) paradoxically recommends (pp. 218-220) the way out for "our self-defence": utilising the exceptional attributes such as work skill, modesty, service orientation and commitment to social-welfare to "endear people of other states" and to prove "our greatness".

Has the Bengal brand of 'exceptionalism' reached a date of expiry by the second decade of this century? In recent times the question is being deliberated by some. (Significantly enough, the question *Do Bengalis have a future?* has emerged as a recurrent theme in several scholarly and public debates.). Political analyst-activist Yogendra Yadav affirms that the "Bengali exceptionalism" has ended with the assembly elections of 2021. His main contention is that the run up to the elections and its outcome revealed that (West) Bengal politics is no longer governed by ideological fervour, and that like any other Indian state it is now dominated by issues which have no remote connection with ideology. Likewise, referring to the poll campaign of the same election, sociologist Avijit Pathak contends (2021) that the "toxic, gross and violent" Bengal politics exposes the myth of the *Bhadralok* class-sponsored 'exceptionalism'. However, the 'end thesis' seems to be a bit premature. To describe a single development, namely the assembly elections, as the solid proof of the demise of the 'exceptionalism' phenomenon, is to over-emphasise an otherwise relevant issue. He also omits the fact that the 'outsider' issue became very significant in the elections and in being so the phenomenon had acquired a new momentum. 'Exceptionalism' reinforced itself quite crudely in the elections mentioned by him, when the core leaders of the party running the Central government were branded as 'outsiders' and ridiculed for being totally unfamiliar with the "culture of Bengal". If such a stance is interpreted as only an election 'management' strategy even then one cannot but acknowledge that it has proved the persistence of the phenomenon. 'Exceptionalism' is too multidimensional and entrenched in the subconscious of its bearers to be decimated so easily by the stroke of an election campaign. Another political commentator, Swapan Dasgupta (2020), takes a more pragmatic route when he finds several unsavory shifts and turns in what he calls "Bengal's peculiar exceptionalism" at various points of time, but ultimately comes to terms with the fact that it is to continue even at its own cost. Rather than a hasty announcement of its 'death' what perhaps can be a more useful exercise is to explore whether the phenomenon is acquiring an "unbearable lightness of being" (to borrow novelist Milan Kundera's most telling phrase with deep import) with the contemporary Bengal politics,

society and economy showing signs of de-ideologised, de-institutionalised form, and the 'legitimacy' of an hyper-individualised and populist rhetoric-centric mode of governing — at the cost of governance.

To conclude, the foregoing narrative repeatedly reveals that the Bengal tradition of 'exceptionalism' is not a monolith. Nor is it static. For better or worse, it has attained various forms down the decades and centuries with substantial doses of churning, and has been dynamic all through. No doubt, as already mentioned, its genesis is highly elitist with top-heavy cultural imagination but it is also a fact that it has slowly become a part of the middle class psyche and subsequently also the of the Muslim mind, though in the latter case with certain special and additional shades grounded in history and objective conditions. Time and again it has been proved that the survival instinct of 'exceptionalism' is strong, even if it would periodically produce myriad manifestations. Thus, it is not surprising that despite many twists and turns, characterised by fissures, contradictions, denial, affirmation, limitations, tensions, dilemmas and ambiguities, it refuses to go away. This is what makes it a fascinating phenomenon, deserving further introspection, criticality included. The most special attribute of Bengal's very own 'exceptionalism' is that one may have issues with it but one cannot simply ignore it.

1.0 Notes

1. Let me mention a classic example. The catalogue of Bengali tradition's multifarious genius and brilliance, combining physical strength with cultural supremacy, is epitomised in Satyendra Nath Dutta's poem "Amra" ('We"): surviving by fighting with tigers, by playing effortlessly with snakes and by dancing on their heads, our soldiers having battled with Rama's ancestors, our son Bijaysingha leaving his own imprint of valiance by annexing Singhal (Sri Lanka), resisting the Mogs with one and the Mughals with another, the 'Lord of Delhi' fleeing Bengal on account of the order by Chand-Pratap (Chand Ray of Bikrampur and Pratapaditya of Jessore). After such show of physical strength there is a long reference to the intellectual force of Bengal: Kapil muni as the precursor of philosophy, Atisha Dipankar as the most erudite preacher of Buddhism in Tibet, poet Jaydeb enriching Sanskrit with his tender verse, architects Bitpal and Dhiman carving images in temples of Barbodas, Thailand and Cambodia, potters drawing indelible illustrations in Ajanta caves, Chaitanya and Vivekanada providing religious light, Jagadish Bose and Prafulla Chandra Ray becoming the beacons of science, and not the least, Tagore being the torchbearer of the interface of civilization and culture. The poem incorporates the optimism that despite many constraints and temptations coming on the way the Bengalis will adopt the non-violent path and pay obeisance to truth in order to march forward to repay the debt to the Creator and to occupy the best place in the world.

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