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Explorations into the Dynamics of a Hidden Nation"

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Review Article

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Beyond Nation : A Re-consideration of Akbar Ali Khan's *Discovery of Bangladesh: Explorations into the Dynamics of a Hidden Nation*

by

BINAYAK SEN*

I. NATIONALIST PROJECT OF HISTORY

In 1880, Bankimchandra noted that "Bengalis have no history" and charted out an agenda for nationalist historiography: "Bengal must have a history, or else there is no hope for it. Who will write it? You will write it, I will write it, all of us will write it. Every Bengali will have to write it." Bankim's views on history were not exceptional, nor was his nationalist call to history writing.¹ After all, history is the source of nationhood. Conversely, nationalism, like tradition, is much about history, about "pastness".

Bankim's plea was an agenda for self-representation, for setting out to claim for the nation a past that was not distorted by foreign interpreters. In the preface of *Discovery of Bangladesh: Explorations into Dynamics of a Hidden Nation* (henceforth, referred to as *Discovery*) by Akbar Ali Khan, we read how the author "used to dream of writing some day a history of Bangladesh revolution". But, the initial project was not pursued: "Like the French Revolution in the nineteenth century, the history of Bangladesh revolution degenerated into squabbles of contemporary politics. I started having second thoughts about the competence of participants like me in making an objective assessment of the liberation war. I thought that it might be easier to search for the historical roots of this new nation. I presumed that the remoteness of historical events might give me an opportunity to delineate a framework for Bangladesh revolution" (p. xv). It was clear that the idea of writing history in this case was not undertaken for its

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¹ See, Bankimchandra, "Bangalar Itihas Sambandhe Kayekti Katha". In Bankim Rachanabali, Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 1965, pp.336-40.

own sake, but was conceived within a nationalist project of self-representation. As with the case with Bankim, it was to claim for the nation in Bangladesh a past that would be of her own.

II. STRUCTURE OF NARRATIVE

The book is structured in five main chapters apart from Introduction and Conclusion. In Introduction, which provides the theoretical background to the study, the author reviews the competing theories on the origins of nationalism. This chapter also presents the analysis of the historiography of Bangladesh, thus setting the stage for subsequent analysis. In Chapter 1 entitled anatomy of rural settlements, the author examines the peculiarity of the village organisation in eastern Bengal currently constituting the territory of Bangladesh. This is done by drawing comparisons with the village organisations prevailing in other parts of India, including those located in the territory currently constituting West Bengal. Chapter 2 entitled dynamics of rural settlements explores further the issue of peculiarity of the village organisation, this time from the viewpoint of "the degree of corporateness" of the Bengal village. Using the documents of the ancient, medieval, and modern (colonial) periods, the author argues that the Bengal villages were loosely structured (more "open") while those in north and south India were "corporate" in nature. The greater the degree of corporateness, the stronger the village leadership, the more visible is the factor of "village community". Within the Bengal presidency, villages were less loose in the western areas and more loose in the eastern areas.

The weak village organisation and the near absence of all forms of village authority create the possibility of political fragmentation. This issue has been explored in Chapter 3 entitled dynamics of political instability. The analysis suggests that the part comprising eastern Bengal has been largely outside the centralised rule of the state, which dates back to the reign of the Maurya and Gupta empires. As a result, the degree of political autonomy and fragmentation was much greater in eastern Bengal with the latter being divided into independent political entities. However, such entities were always small and short-lived. The other aspect of the political life was the endemic political instability that was rife in ancient Bengal. The size of polity was significantly modified, however, by the establishment of the Muslim rule in the thirteenth century. The new rulers of Delhi succeeded in unifying the most areas of Bengal. While the Bengal zone had experienced plunder of resources by foreign invaders throughout history, the extent of drain increased during the new political order. With superior military technology, the overlords of Delhi established a

system of continuous drain of resources from the Bengal zone. The author opined that economic exploitation was intensified in medieval Bengal. The appointed governors of Delhi-based empire was under the constant pressure for increasing revenue demands. The collection of revenue was implemented through a system of intermediaries, landlords and Zamindars of the pre-colonial periods. Despite the establishment of the centralised rule, forces of factionalism persisted however, resulting in political instability throughout this period.

With more loosely structured village organisation, the scope for deviation from the norm was greater, the risks of ostracism was much less, thus creating the fertile ground for the spread of new ideas in eastern Bengal. The latter included new religious faith and practices, including non-conformism, heretic and esoteric beliefs. This also creates the space for examining the role of Islam in eastern Bengal. Chapter 4 entitled dynamics of proselytization addresses the factors and processes that led to the preponderance of Islam in rural Bengal, especially in the eastern part. The peculiarity of the deltaic Bengal villages in terms of pre-existing weak social organisation (the habitat) was combined with the specificity of Islam (the faith) in the backdrop of increasingly exploitative fiscal centralism (the centre-periphery relation). Such a mix of contextual factors produced the kind of cultural-political milieu triggering the expression of the particular brand of nationalism that foreshadowed Bangladesh.

Chapter 5 entitled dynamics of dichotomy and confrontation examined further the political-ideological moments in the development of nationalism in eastern Bengal. This is examined in terms of rising contradictions in the nineteenth century between Hindu and Muslim elites, and within the latter, between the non-aristocratic Bengali-speaking elite and aristocratic Urdu-speaking elite. The elite conflict became particularly acute during the post-Partition years. As the author notes, "the dream of Pakistan united the Muslims of Bengal; its realization divided them". The relationship between "east and west wings of Pakistan was the mirror image of Hindu-Muslim relations in the undivided subcontinent", eventually leading to the rupture, War of Liberation and emergence of Bangladesh. The final section of the book, Conclusion, provided the summary of the main findings and outlined key lessons from history for the future development of Bangladesh. In all, Khan's *Discovery* represents a significant act of erudite nationalist scholarship, an outcome of an important intellectual enterprise, marshalling evidence from history, sociology, literature, and economics.

III. LOGIC OF "DISCOVERY" : THE NATIONALIST RULE OF DIFFERENCE

Re-writing the history of a nation often requires a new sociology. In Discovery sociological argument provides the clue to a different genesis of the nation. The central thesis runs as follows:

1. Compared to other regions of South Asia, "the political, social and religious institutions at the grassroots in Bengal were weak and loose" (p.114). They were "significantly different from their north Indian counterparts" (more about this in chapters 1 and 2).
2. The weakness of the village organisation is derived from the characteristics of physical and social environment of Bengal: "Most rural settlements in the riverine Bengal, where the supply of flood-free land was limited, were small and not entirely self-sufficient. The village organisations in Bengal were, therefore, weak, they did not function as administrative and economic units. They were mainly social organisations with very limited coercive power" (p.114).
3. There was also significant variation in the nature of village organisation within Bengal: "the pattern of rural settlements was not, however, uniform throughout the whole of Bengal. The corporateness of village organisations in Bengal gradually waned from the western to eastern districts" (p.114).
4. The relatively weak village organisation also explains why "centralised exploitation" of the type implied by the model of Oriental Despotism was found difficult to be administered. For Bengal, at least, the Asiatic Mode of Production was irrelevant: peculiar eco-sociology precluded both the rigid caste system as well as the despotic and centralised nature of state rule. Another effect of such a decentralised system was the high-level of political fragmentation and political instability: "eastern and southern Bengal experienced endemic political fragmentation". Because of the "absence of a strong central government throughout history, political instability was rife in the Bengal delta" (p. 73).
5. The relative weakness of village organisation in eastern Bengal had implications for long-term social change. First, "the power of the caste Hindus varied in proportion to the strength of the

village government", as a result the hold of Brahminism was "stronger in western Bengal" compared with eastern Bengal. Second, weakness of village organisation allowed "unbridled individualism in much of Bengal. There was no effective restriction on individual's choice of beliefs and practices". As a result of these two factors, "costs of ostracisms were less" which, in turn, promoted "a congenial environment for heresy, heterodoxy and esoteric practices" (p.114).

6. The less authoritative social setting implied by a relatively weak village organisation not found elsewhere in South Asia set in motion a dynamics of Islamic proselytization which witnessed individual conversions in large numbers protracted over a period of four hundred years.
7. Dynamics of the proselytization process gave rise to further social contradictions: "Despised by both Muslim nobility and Hindu upper castes, the converts to Islam faced a dichotomy of faith and habitat" (p.126), with rising tensions between extra-territorial and territorial loyalties, between fundamentalist and syncretist tendencies.² By nineteenth century, two distinct Muslim middle classes emerged in Bengal: the ashraf Muslim (mainly urdu-speaking ashraf, or the traditional aristocracy linked with landlordism) and the vernacular elite which consisted primarily of educated jotedars and rich peasants. The vernacular elites among the Muslims of Bengal were proud of their Bengali cultural heritage. They became a major political voice in the twentieth century and spearheaded the language-based nationalist movement that eventually led to the emergence of Bangladesh.

This is the summary outline of an elaborate sociological argument traced through the ups and downs of history, which has been pursued in the 157-pages long narrative.

² Richard Eaton (1994) and Asim Roy (1983) hypothesised that un-Islamic practices, beliefs and rituals were rampant in the initial stages of Bengali Muslim society because of the pervasive indigenous faiths and traditions. They maintain that weeding out of un-islamic practices in the final phase of Islamization during the nineteenth century was unique to Bengal. Criticising these views, Khan concluded that it is "not correct to assume that fundamentalism followed syncretism. On the other hand, fundamentalism and syncretism existed side by side and competed with each other" (p.123).

IV. NATIONALISM AS A PROBLEM OF PASTNESS

Nations and nation-states are generally taken to be of fairly "recent origin", accomplished at most over the last four hundred years on a global scale. In contrast, nationalism--the national consciousness, or to borrow an adjective from Brennan (1990), "the national longing for form"--is claimed to be a "old" survivor, and is traced back to deeper folds of history, legends, and myths. The modern-day discourse on nation thus, of necessity, becomes engaged with the pre-modern past. Indeed, the agenda of "nation-building" must produce a branch of knowledge of its own, a special theory of the past, a hidden history of the nation, one that can provide *raison d'etat*. One could even say that there exists a distinct nationalist method of writing social history, whereby polyphonic history of people is transformed into a monolithic narrative of nation. Nationalised history is a linear history: everything at the end must culminate into nation as the ultimate destiny.

There is a certain kind of artificiality in the "discovery" of a particular tradition, determining the "identity of a nation". This is because tradition cannot be seen as fixed and natural bedrock against which change unfolds. Besides, what is often passed as tradition may be afterthought, result of modernist re-writing of the past. The Hobsbawm and Ranger volume of *The Invention of Tradition* (1983) shows that traditions too can be invented and can serve as instruments to achieve, or justify, certain political ends. Claims to "authenticity" of a particular "national" tradition and heritage are contestable precisely because of the same reason.

In the topos of nationalism, the questions of authenticity and invention in regard to tradition become particularly problematized. Nationalism of the Third World was articulated under colonialism. The language of nationalism, as articulated by the intellectuals and the elite in colonised societies in their battle against foreign rule, is shaped by the cultural idioms of the West.

However, it is also equally true that Third World nationalism cannot see itself merely as the mimicry of the ideals and ideas that are vindicated by the history of the West. It must measure itself in its own terms as well. It must see itself projected as a derivative of its own past, rooted in deep recesses of its own history, as an expression of difference (*vis-a-vis* the West), mapped in terms of demography, economics, politics, culture, sociology and so on. Nationalist enterprise in the colonial and post-colonial context is thus driven by the imperative of "discovering" one's own "roots", since without having

a "nationalist past" one cannot have a "nationalist future" either.³ As a result, what we often have as "history" is actually a rehashed account of the past by deliberate nationalist reading, where past has significance in nothing other than as a moment of development of nationalist aspiration, or, "national self". Much as Hegel's Absolute Idea realises itself through the zigzags of history, "national self" too gets realised in the terrain of history, progressing from the lower phase to higher phase of nationalist consciousness, culminating in the "ultimate destination" of Nation-State.

In dealing with the past, nationalism is armed with various disciplinary practices, which are brought to bear on the issue of national identity. Sociolinguists, folklorists, anthropologists, historians of religions, archeologists, political scientists, economists, and historians (to name a few disciplines) seek to negotiate over what the relevant "texts" are, how much they can and must be read as part and parcel of the "history of a nation". The act of "discovery" (the main title of the book) is thus also an act of coming to terms with one's own past, which cannot be done without re-working history. The act of "discovery" (as in the case of Nehru's classic text on "Discovery of India") is a nationalist project of engagement with, and reconstruction of, the past. It is also a political act of shaping nation-centric future.⁴

The nationalist interrogation of history, however, is but only one of the many possible ways in which past can be viewed, interpreted, put to practice, sung, played, and narrated, much like the South Asian rich

³ Modernity and tradition in the making of a nation can be understood in different ways. Chatterjee (1995), for instance, holds that West and East in anti-colonial nationalism represent the material and the spiritual domain, respectively. The material is the domain of the "outside", representing economy, statecraft, science and technology where the West has proven its superiority. The spiritual is an "inner" domain bearing the essential marks of cultural identity. The greater one's success in imitating the West in the material domain, the sharper would be the need to preserve the distinctness of one's spiritual culture in defining the nationhood. This particular symbiosis between the West and the East in Third World nationalisms is what demarcates them from the nationalism of the West. It also shows that nation seen as "imagined community" cannot be "constructed" via mechanical imitation of some external features of the western models. Imagination has to be de-colonised first, for if the only problem was to choose suitable imagined community from certain "modular" forms already made available globally by Europe, and the Americas, what is, then, left for us to "imagine"? On this, see Chatterjee 1995, chapter 1.

⁴ An excerpt from Khan's narration shows his awareness of the complicity of nationalism with historiography. In the introduction he tells us that "nationalist historicism is not actual history, it is an appeal to history to justify that the nation is defined by the past" (P.6). However, as the present review will show that Khan himself lands into the trap of nationalist construction of history in "explaining" the emergence of Bangladesh.

oral and textual traditions such as purana and itihasa. Not all of the received traditions are mere "inventions", either. Cautions against overemphasising the traditionality of tradition do not imply the denial of the importance of "tradition" in explaining context-specificity (path-dependence) of development. Societies do manifest certain configurations because they have come to be shaped in certain ways, by values and beliefs, customs and conventions, rights and practices, in short, by institutions. But, tradition is not an unchanging "essence", certain "fixity" of history. Tradition, like modernity, is another zone of contestation. It is not a positivist discourse but a reflective and reflexive one. In it, and through it, societies explore the limits of their histories, and replay the points of tension in these histories. It is a metadiscourse, which allows the past to cease to be a "scarce resource" and allows it to become, to borrow an adjective from ecologists, a renewable resource (Appadurai *et al.* 1994). It is in this context of alternative perspectives on the past that one would like to subject to critical examination the nationalist reading of our history, as attempted in the book under present review.

V. "THE FAITH AND THE HABITAT" :

FRACTURES WITHIN THE "IMAGINED" COMMUNITY?

Benedict Anderson (1983) in his influential essay on nationalism termed nation as the "imagined community", indicating that much that goes into the making of a nation has very little to do with historical objectivity. Nation may be a mere "construct" (as is implicitly suggested by the term "nation-building") undertaken to serve the political purpose for uniting the nation. However, even at the level of idea, nation-centric imagination is never complete. According to a strong view, nation is doomed to be an insufficiently imagined project. This is because nation, by its very nature, tends to homogenise, even when the greater need of the historical present is to recognise heterogeneity. As a result, the social outcome is one of creating more dissent than consent within the rubric of nation. Of course, capacity to imagine will vary across societies. Some societies can emerge through the process of history as more imaginative than others. Some societies are capable of imagining on their own without being dependent on the received Western (or, for that matter, Eastern) "modular forms", or models, of nationalism in approaching nation-building. This has given rise to a variety of nationalism and related theories.

In the beginning of the book, Khan points to the presence of two major strands of thought on the origins of nationalism-- the primordial and the instrumental. According to the primordial view, the essence of

nation is psychological and rooted in the shared sense of "primordial attachment". Following the definition of Connor (1978), the latter is defined as one that "stems from the givens or, more precisely, as culture is inevitably involved in such matters, the assumed givens--of social existence, immediate contiguity and kin-connection". Primordial attachment can also be shaped by the givens that "stem from being born into a particular religious community, speaking a particular language, or even a dialect of a language, and following particular social practices" (p. 5). Ernest Renan, who was an influential thinker of this school, opined that "the nation, even as the individual, is the end product of a long period of work, sacrifice and devotion" (Hutchinson and Smith 1994, p.17). In short, according to the primordial view, nationalism is seen as the natural product of the long-drawn process of shared social history where historical sociology becomes a central arena of research.⁵ This view has influenced several writings on nationalism: "the history of Bangladesh nationalism begins where all histories begin, i.e., in the midst of prehistory" (Osmany 1992, p.1); "the Bengalis of East Pakistan have declared and demonstrated their intention to form a nation based upon their peculiar cultural and historical heritage. Nationhood gave societal expression to what had always been a distinct consciousness" (Ziring 1992, p.2). Nationalism as historical naturalism is not mere construction, not a particular brand of class-based ideology, but a societal articulation defined by the shared past. Even if it is viewed as "imagined political community", it is a historical product of "collective imagination".

In contrast, the instrumental view of nationalism challenges the view that "nations are inscribed into the nature of things and nation-states are the manifest ultimate destiny of ethnic or cultural groups" (p.6). Khan cites a few strands within the instrumental point of view. The broad meeting ground of these views is that nationalism has very little to do with the past history of the people. Its roots can be located in the "modern" period, as defined by the age of enlightenment in Europe (or, by the colonial-modernity, as in the case of post-colonial countries). But, more importantly, it is the "idea of nation" that matters most, and ideas can be constructed, or, contested. Nationalism as idea (or ideology) can grip the minds of the millions and catch the imagination of the masses, and, therefore, can be a powerful tool for achieving certain political or developmental ends. In

⁵ This view has had many converts, starting from Renan writing about nationalism of the West in the late nineteenth century to modern-day Cambridge School historians such as C. A. Bayly (1999).

this approach, nationalism as ideology defines a community as a nation: "it is nationalism which engenders nations and not the other way round" (Gellner 1993); the nation-state is an artifact, "an imagined political community" (Anderson 1983). The others such as Hobsbawm (1983) were much more explicit on the links between nationalism and elite politics, whereby nationalism is constructed as part of the overall mobilisational strategy of the elite.

Khan holds the view that most of the academic works on nationalism in Bangladesh are carried out in the instrumentalist tradition, while the primordialist interpretation was mainly articulated in the speeches of the nationalist leaders. He cites "four major instrumental schools on the origins of Bangladesh". The first school views the 1971 divide as the culmination of the divide and rule policy of the British Raj (Addy and Azad 1975). The second school maintains that Bangladesh was a "reaction of a marginalised community in quest of its due share in economic and political milieu" (Mallick and Husain 1992). Sobhan (1992) upholds this view of reaction to economic deprivation.⁶ The third school characterises the emergence of Bangladesh as the outcome of elite conflicts (Broomfield 1992). The fourth school explains the emergence as the result of Pakistan's failure in national integration rather than the culmination of a long drawn historical process (Jahan 1994; Maniruzzaman 1980).

Khan's own position, according to his own implied admission, lies "somewhere between the two extremes" (p. 7), though his sympathy is clearly not with the instrumentalist school. For him, one reason for undertaking this exercise has been is to show that nationalism in Bangladesh is deeply rooted in history. The emergence of Bangladesh is not all that "puzzling" as may have seemed to some observers because of the apparent shifting basis of nationalism from religion (in 1947) to language (in 1971). Khan finds that the dominant views on nationalism—Bengali and Bangladeshi variety alike—provide only one-sided story. Bengali nationalism "glorifies the secular and

⁶ In general, the writings of most Marxists on the "national question" subscribe to the second school of thought within the instrumentalist position, viewing the emergence of Bangladesh as the end product of the people's struggle against the "semi-colonial" rule (Umar 1987). The Third Communist International under Lenin earlier identified two contradictory--progressive and regressive--aspects of nationalism in the context of colonial countries. The progressive aspect is that it helps to mobilise the people of these countries to fight out the colonialist/ imperialist powers, while the regressive aspect is that it tends to accord the national elite a natural advantage in vying for leadership in the course of the nationalist struggle. Given this dualism, it was hardly surprising that Marxists of the Third World often found themselves torn apart between these two tendencies and swayed between the one extreme and the other.

linguistic heritage of Bengal" (p.8), while Bangladeshi nationalism underlines "the Islamic identity of the Bengalis in Bangladesh vis-a-vis in the neighbouring state of West Bengal" (p.8). Both are found lacking in being unable to provide a comprehensive story within which religion and language would be linked to form an interwoven story of the development of the integral national consciousness. This is because "no theory has been advanced as yet to reconcile the contradictory strand of nationhood in Bangladesh" (p.8). He believes that the tension between (what he calls) "faith and habitat" is a real tension that has been shaped by the social history of eastern Bengal. It is this history that he sets to "discover".

In effect what he proposes to do is to explain what may be termed as the "new nation-state, but old nation" paradigm: "the hypothesis of the recentness of nationalism in Bangladesh is not consistent with historical facts. The nationhood in Bangladesh may be new. The dichotomy of territorial and extra-territorial loyalties which caused the flip-flops in Bangladesh's search for identity is, not, however at all new" (p.16). Nationalism in Bangladesh must be shown as "deeply rooted in history" (p. 16). At the end of narrative, he derives the conclusions on this central problematic: "Bengali and Bangladeshi nationalisms are not two distinct nationalisms, they are two different strands of a complex and multidimensional nationhood. Nationalism in Bangladesh was shaped by an interplay of faith and habitat, religion and language and extra-territorial and territorial loyalties. Both linguistic and religious strands constitute inseparable ingredients of nationalism in Bangladesh. For the historians, the dichotomy between "Bengali" and "Bangladeshi" nationalism is, therefore, unreal. Both the strands were woven into the warp and woof of nationhood in Bangladesh" (p.152).

While the reconciliatory spirit of such an approach is noteworthy, the conclusion itself is hardly surprising. The problem of deciding on what weights to be given to language and religion in the cultural construct of official nationalism in Bangladesh is not new, but the problem is anything but epistemological. Khan's simplified approach of dismissing the dichotomy of Bengali vs. Bangladeshi brands of nationalism as "unreal", perhaps, stems from the belief that it is the ignorance as to what constitutes the nationhood in Bangladesh that is the root cause of squabbles of contemporary nationalist and polarised politics. But, Bengali and Bangladeshi nationalism may still continue to differ (even after reading Khan's discovery) simply because they may want to put different weights on the faith vs. habitat, and no amount of

historicising can resolve this problem of weighting.⁷ The issue of relative weight among factors that shaped the making of a nation is not a matter of interpreting the past only. The future is only rudimentarily contained in the past, and the past contained many future possibilities. Whatever has been the actual weight in the formation of nationhood, it tells nothing about the direction in which the relative importance of one factor over another would (or, should) change in the future. The issue of future choice over the making of the nation, and/or going beyond the nation, remains a wide open question.

What remains unanswered is whether such a dichotomous but inseparable existence of faith vs. habitat in the psychology of nations can eventually be resolved politically and whether the nation can finally escape the trauma resulting from this enduring tension. Khan remains silent on the psychological ramifications of such split-consciousness with fairly complicated psychological processes of inclusion and exclusion in relation to the referential concept of "nation". Is "imagined community" *a la* Anderson possible in the context of such dichotomous setting? If possible, "whose imagination" will it be? Or, perhaps, the synthesis is a virtual impossibility; what we have before us is merely the fragments of a nation, with some fragments at the center and some at the margins of the nation, but fragments all the same, as anticipated in the classic work by Partha Chatterjee (1995)? Is "nation" as a form of imagining a particular community the only available form of imagination? Can a community think itself "beyond nation"? Khan's analysis stops way short of asking these important questions without which the "explorations into dynamics of a hidden nation" (the sub-title of the book) may turn out to be a journey into nowhere.

VI. MAJOR OMISSIONS

The seven-point outline of the argument, as summarised earlier, hinges on the basic premise that the village organisation in Bengal (especially in its eastern part) did not know strong corporate structure of authority known to the allegedly Asiatic villages of the North India. It was not a self-sustained village community; it did not function as an

⁷ As is known, the problem of fixing weights falls within the normative domain of knowledge, which cannot be derived as a matter of positivist research. The problem can be circumvented through the use of explicit and informed social dialogue to address the issue of weight fixation democratically, as in case of theories of social ethics and justice. However, the voters must be "informed" and "free" to make evaluative judgments, which shows the critical importance of the informational bases of competing principles. On this, see Sen (1999).

administrative and economic unit. It was a social community with loosely held relational authority beyond the informal institutions such as samaj. Khan cites from the census report of 1871 to substantiate his view: "Villages in Bengal proper are scattered about to a degree unknown in northern India and there is almost a total absence of communal organisation" (p. 30).

The above argument is vulnerable to critique at least on one fundamental theoretical ground. As would be argued below, the self-sustained village community of the kind implied by the theories of Asiatic Mode of Production, or for that matter, Oriental Despotism, is a myth. It has not been found--as a matter of general description--in north India either, not to mention south India. Its absence in Bengal is, therefore, not surprising. Given the importance of the issue, we present in the next section a broad overview of the debate on the "economically self-sustaining village community" in different parts of India.

Economically Self-Sustaining Village Community: Myth or Reality?

The Orient was conceptualised by the colonising West through the prism of two influential views. The first one related to the hypothesis of "self-sustaining village community" (the little republics). The second one pertained to Oriental Despotism as a way of characterising the political rule in the non-Western context. These two views were inter-linked and reinforced each other. Both the concepts were later voiced as part of Marx's articulation of the Asiatic Mode of Production.⁸

The concept of economically self-sustaining village community, particularly the Bengal village community, had been the thesis of colonialist-orientalist writings of the English writers such as Munro, Wilks, the authors of the Fifth Report (1812), Raffles, Metcalfe, Elphinstone, and Campbell. According to this view, "the village ran its own affairs, governed by its own practices, the customs of the Bengal villages generally, and in doubtful and contentious cases, by the village panchayat or council. It was largely self-sustaining, raising its own food crops and consuming its own manufactures, wanting little for its material sustenance from the outside world" (Krader 1975s; p.317). Sit C.T. Metcalfe followed the views of the Fifth Report in depicting the village communities in India as "little republics, having nearly everything they want for themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations" (ibid, p.63). The Hindu, Pathan, Mogul, English rulers come and go, the village community remains the same.

⁸ For a detailed and extremely insightful exposition of these views in the light of controversies on Asiatic Mode of Production, see Krader (1975).

Metcalf's conclusion is: "This union of the village communities, each one forming a little state in itself, has, I conceive, contributed more than any other cause to the preservation of the people of India." (ibid). The village was a little republic, not a sovereign power but a community within a sovereignty; it was a corporate group. It was headed by a village headman who was the representative of the village interest to the society beyond. His position was two-faced: he was the agent of the village in the matter of tax collection, and conversely the agency whereby the taxes were made over to the treasury of the states.

If the thesis of self-sustaining village community was mainly developed by the English writers, the other view of Oriental despotism was mainly developed by the French and German intellectual traditions. In that they were initially guided by the seventeenth century travellers such as Bernier, Tavernier and Manucci. Bernier was the author of the view that characterised the oriental ruler as the absolute owner of all the lands, thereby triggering the thesis that private property was absent in India. Those who followed Bernier composed a picture of the Oriental society, which, if taken literally, puts the central political authority in a passive role: all it did was own the land, it did nothing with it. Montesquieu, on the one side, the physiocrats on the other, further developed the idea of the Oriental despotism. However, it was Hegel who put the oriental despotic view in most categorical terms: "if China is a moral despotism, then what can be called political life in India is a despotism without any kind of foundation, without rules of ethics and religiosity, for ethics, religion, insofar as the latter relates to the actions of men, clearly have freedom of will for their condition and basis. In India, therefore the most arbitrary, wicked, dishonoring despotism is at home. China, Persia, Turkey, Asia generally are the soil of despotism, and, in the evil character, of tyranny, but the latter is not in the order..it should not be. But in India it is in the order of things, for there is no feeling of self here, with which the tyranny could be compared, which would provoke a rebellious disposition".⁹ Both the theories of self-sustaining village community and Oriental despotism had the force of a popular prejudice among the eighteenth and nineteenth century political economists, philosophers, students of oriental languages and

⁹ Hegel separates out India from other Asian states in the lack of history as deeds or events. The latter view influenced William Hunter's *Annals of Rural Bengal* (1897) where he makes the point that while the Chinese have recorded the local, provincial, national, and international annals, the Indians have left great gaps in their records. The inhabitants have not made the history of their country their own, but have limited themselves to the history of the fields they cultivate or let.

literatures, and have a following even today. These writings have contributed to the creation and development of what Edward Said later termed as "orientalist discourse" (Said 1979).

This view also influenced the early thinking of Marx on the subject. Part of the influence on Marx came via Hegel; the other part was fashioned by the French influence via Bernier and Montesquieu. However, most of the empirical materials used by Marx in his early writings on the topic were derived from the English colonialist-orientalist writers cited earlier. All these sources of diverse influence shaped the early articulation of Marx on the subject. In the famous passage from the first dispatch to New-York Daily Tribune where Marx talks about the social consequence of the colonial conquest also points to the link between the concept of self-sustaining village community and that of Oriental despotism. Marx wrote:

"Now, sickening as it must be to human feeling to witness those myriads of industrious patriarchal and inoffensive social organizations disorganised and dissolved into their units, thrown into a sea of woes, and their individual members losing at the same time their ancient form of civilization and their hereditary means of substance, we must not forget that these idyllic village communities, inoffensive though they may appear, had always been the solid foundation of Oriental despotism, that they restrained the human mind within the smallest possible compass, making it an unresisting tool of superstition, enslaving it beneath the traditional rules, depriving it of all grandeur and historical energies."

The question that springs up is: can we take the above passage as an evidence of Marx's support in favour of the thesis of self-sustaining village community as applied to South Asia? While a comprehensive discussion of Marx's changing view on the subject is beyond the scope of this essay, some pertinent observations are noteworthy.

First, it is true that the image of South Asia as an unchanging, "vegetative" place was part of the inherited world-view in the post-enlightenment Europe. Aijaz Ahmad, also reminds us that "the image of the self-sufficient Indian village community that we find in Marx was lifted, almost verbatim, out of Hegel" (Ahmad 1994, p. 224). Second, at the time of writing of the above passage Marx had access to a few sources only, namely, Bernier, Wilks, the Fifth Report of 1812, Metcalfe and, perhaps, a few others. It is these sources which produced the "unchanging view" of Indian villages. In the 1870s a new phase of Asia studies began with the publication of new materials, which have considerably altered Marx's previously held view on Asiatic

Mode of Production.¹⁰ Marx's writings of the period are contained in his *Ethnological Notebooks*. These changes can be identified in the following directions:

- a. The internal history of the Indian villages is not to be summed up as stagnant. The source of the study of the village in the Asiatic Mode of Production is to be sought not in Wilks, Raffles, Campbell, and Maine, who argued in favour of the antiquity of the village and its unbroken continuity. It lies with the approach which argues in favour of contemporaneity and adjustment to changing conditions. Self-sufficient village community with its emphasis on communal ownership of land had a different meaning in Marx's system of thought compared with the authors of those Orientalist sources, which he used in his studies. For Marx, it served as an analytical counter-point to the bourgeois private property rights and, in discussions of Russian Mir, he developed a great interest in the communal form of landholdings as a possible basis for socialist transition (on the latter point, see Shanin 1983);
- b. Every one of the outside observers felt that he understood some province or village, and projected his understanding onto the whole. Mark Wilks felt that he knew the ancient texts of Manu and the province of Mysore. The same may be said of George Campbell, who claimed knowledge of the North. John Phear's study of Bengal and Cylone provided a similar partial cut at the issue. These accounts provided a complex mosaic of differential intra-village, inter-village, township-village, and state-village relations across the various parts of India not captured by the catch-all phrase of self-sufficient village community. In the later writings Marx became acutely aware of the diversity of the land-tenure arrangements in India.
- c. The diversity of opinions comes out clearly on the issue of property rights on land. Opinions differed as to the nature of proprietorship of the land in India. Wilks and Campbell were utterly opposed to the idea that proprietorship of the land was the right of the sovereign. This was in contrast with the views of Bernier, James Mill (and the East India Company who supported him), and John Stuart Mill. Opinions also differed

¹⁰ Marx's Asia studies fall into two groups: the works he read in the 1850s and 1860s, which were applied to his writings for the *New-York Daily Tribune*, in the *Grundrisse*, the *Critique* of 1859, and *Capital* form the first group. The second group of materials was taken up by Marx in the period of 1879-81; the authors are Kovalevsky, Phear and Maine, whose writings were critically treated in his *Ethnological Notebooks*.

regarding the nature of landownership within the village community. While one school of thought (Alexander Dalrymple and Richard Jones, for instance) upheld the view of communal ownership of land, the other view (the French orientalist Anquetil-Duperron supported by Muttu Krishna) concluded that community property does not exist in India. They cited the existence of private property in land in Madras. Anquetil's exposition of the land tenure question shows the diversity of tenurial arrangements as it pertained to the coast of Coromandel in the South of India and to the Mogul Empire: some lands belonged to the Prince, the Government, as domain; some lands belonged to the preachers, while some lands belonged to the people, the subjects. Some subjects were the original proprietors, some were farmers of long-term lease; some were limited lease-holders, who sub-let it no further, and who were the direct cultivators, called by Anquetil day-laborers. In short, in place of self-sufficient village communities, which supposedly look alike and are to be found all over India, we now have a much more complex picture of cross-regional diversity and intra-regional difference.

- d. The recognition of this diversity is also vindicated by the fact that the British did not follow a uniform land reform policy throughout India. Even as the colonial land reform attempts were "caricatures" (as Marx would term it), they are not to be seen as seemingly unrelated exercises: there was a "method in the madness". In fact, the colonial administrators advocated a number of different policies concerning landownership by the peasants or villages of India based on some differing pre-existing notions specific to a particular region. Some views pointed toward private ownership, some toward collective, some derived support for their policies from a speculative origin in ownership of the land by the sovereignty, or by the village community, or by the local landlord, or by the individual peasant. If the concept of economically self-sustaining village community--along with idea of village republic--was the guiding (homogenising) principle, the outcome could not have been so different. The colonial speculations about the Indian past and the policies built upon them were the subject of Marx's critique in his *Ethnological Notebooks* and serves as the potential corrective to the Orientalist expositions that Marx uncritically echoed in his early writings, especially in the famous dispatches to New-York Daily Tribune of 1853.

- e. The concept of corporate village or "little republic" was derivative of the thesis of economically self-sustaining village community. As Wilks has put it, "every Indian village is and always appears to have been in fact a separate community or republic". The idea of the autonomous village republics isolated from the history of empires further cemented the myth of economically self-sustaining village community. This ideal type, to use the phrase of Lawrence Krader, was "the product of romantic reconstructions by Munro, Campbell, Main and Phear" (Krader 1975, p.318). The critique that Marx undertook during the later (1879-81) period was directed to the sources of knowledge of India, and against colonial-imperial interpretation of Indian history and society.
- f. Individual positions expounded by different writers were linked with their ideological interests as well. Hence, the criticism of these colonialist-orientalist texts must start with the laying bare of the interest of the writer. Thus, Bernier attached himself to the mercantalist interest of Colbert, according to which the noninterference by the sovereignty, the freedom of trade within the country, *laissez faire*, was advanced. The advocates of mercantalism pointed with pious horror to the miseries of the Orient, where the sovereignty allegedly intervened in all matters, being the owner of all. As opposed to the freebooters let loose in the eighteenth century both Cornwallis and Wilks were liberal, seeking some notion of land rights for the Indians drawn from the pool of English conceptions. Cornwallis wanted the zamindars to be established as something like English squires. In contrast, Wilks sought to establish the independent ryot as landowner, though without success. Campbell and Maine had the overt interest of protecting what they imagined to be the Indian village community. These later servants of the English interest in India, however, differed from the earlier ones; for they had no interest in rights which derived from English practice; they constructed a set of rights which they postulated as having been the primordial system of Indian land rights. Hence, their emphasis on private property rights in India as flowing from the ancient texts of Manu, with common Indo-Aryan past, rights, institutions and language. The figure of the original Indian village community, as it appears in successive phases of colonialist thought from Wilks to Maine, was a convenient abstraction. Such a thesis had doubtful relation to ethnographic

reality, but it was a means of making a coherent picture of the administrative needs of the time. It is this politics of knowledge formation during the colonial period that needs to be taken into account in surveying the commentaries of the British administrators in Bengal.

About 150 years have passed since Marx wrote his first dispatch to the New-York Daily Tribune. What is the broad conclusion of the current scholarship on the issue of "self-sustaining village community"? We cite Aijaz Ahmad who summarises the emerging view-point in the following manner:

"Modern research shows that each of the props of Marx's general view of India--the self-sufficient village community; the hydraulic state; the unchanging nature of the agrarian economy; absence of property in land--was at least partially fanciful. Research in all these areas is still far from adequate, but the available evidence suggests that the village economy was often much more integrated in larger networks of exchange and appropriation than was hitherto realized ; that the small dam, the shallow seasonal well and the local pond built with individual, family or co-operative labour were at least as important in irrigation as the centrally planned waterworks; that property in land and stratification among the peasantry was far more common than was previously assumed ; and that agrarian technology was, over the centuries, not nearly as stagnant." (Ahmad 1994, p. 241)

What is the current status of the doctrine of Oriental despotism--the political superstructure corresponding to the economic concept of self-sustaining village community? The issue is best summarised by Lawrence Krader, as quoted below:

"The thesis of the despotism in the Orient as derived from the landownership monopoly by the monarch is as simple-minded as the thesis of the Oriental despotism; the thesis of the Oriental despotism as the source of the weak development of private landownership in the Orient is no less a simplification. Both are causal characterizations which explain nothing, account for nothing. Marx early abandoned all thought of the concept of Oriental despotism, he then abandoned the Oriental society as an independent and meaningful category." (Krader 1975, p.320)

The upshot of the above is to point out that the hypothesis of self-sustaining village community as applied to non-Bengal parts of India was found to be as problematic as its application to Bengal (or, for that matter, eastern Bengal). Orientalism was the discursive practice (to use the Foucauldian term) that authorised such a

statement. Khan remains insufficiently alert to the formation as well as politics of orientalist-colonialist knowledge as articulated in the seemingly "changeless" self-sufficient Asiatic village community with little dynamism and history. As a result his thesis about social peculiarity of east Bengal villages as a potential contrast to the grand narrative of self-sustaining village community allegedly pre-existing in north and south India becomes a false counter-point, both historically and analytically.

The lack of validity of the description of the Indian village in the image of self-sufficient corporate entity also indirectly comes through Khan's own admission: "The village community which was romanticised by the British administrators was a corporate village. Such villages existed in certain parts of north and south India" (p. 44; emphasis added). It follows that in other parts of north and south India a certain lack of corporateness (and hence, the possibility of the "open village") was not to be ruled out. Lack of corporateness, then, cannot be seen as an exclusive proposition for Bengal, or for that matter, eastern Bengal. At places Khan criticises the conventional paradigm of self-sufficient village community and questions the assumption of universality of such a catch-all description (see, for instance, pp. 23-24). However, his critique of the universality is intended to claim a special case for east Bengal: he does not extend the critique to other parts of India, which also did not fit in the conventional picture of the "little Republics".

Variation of Village Organisation within Eastern Bengal

In the preceding section, we have seen that the contrast that Khan draws between Bengal and non-Bengal villages along the line of economically self-sustaining community appears rather unconvincing. The evidence suggests that both the types of villages lacked that capacity. However, his project of "discovery" must proceed still further, this time by drawing contrasts between East and West Bengal villages: "the villages in the deltaic areas of Bengal which now constitute Bangladesh were open. The villages in west Bengal region which contains nucleated villages were a mix of corporate and open villages where the elements of corporate villages were predominant" (p. 44). The weakness of the village organisation in eastern Bengal is argued on the basis of the rural settlement patterns. Villages in eastern Bengal were mainly "linear settlements" (with little demarcation "where one village ends or where another begins") whereas in western Bengal (as in most of the South Asia) it was mainly "nucleated settlements" ("with tight cluster of houses surrounded by the fields of

villages"). Beyond these apparent contrasts voiced in some colonial survey and settlement reports, one gets very little evidence on the social life of the village community itself. Evidently more evidence is needed and until then, the thesis on the "peculiarity" of village organisation in terms of its less corporate nature must be taken as a tentative conjecture.

In his keenness to show contrasts between villages of East and West Bengal what Khan glosses over is the equally important variation among the villages that currently constitute Bangladesh. Villages of southern Bengal (such as Barisal) have little resemblance to the villages of the east (such as Comilla) in terms of agrarian structure, customs and culture. Similar contrasts exist between the north-western Dinajpur and the north-eastern Sylhet. Regional and social differentiation within East Bengal was no less significant than the differentiation between eastern and western areas of Bengal, and hence, the articulation of distinct nationhood on the basis of pre-existing village organisation of the type cited by Khan becomes problematic, if not unconvincing.

The contrast which Khan draws between the villages of East Bengal (termed as "open") and West Bengal (termed as "corporate") is the romanticised construction of a nationalist historian.¹¹ Diversity in the physical and social environments within eastern Bengal is ignored altogether. Similarly, commonness in the physical and social environments between the two Bengals is de-emphasised as if they are two strangers in the mists of history. Also overlooked is the fact that the case of many villages in East Bengal being "open" is not unique after all: such a variation existed between "settled" and "frontier" societies.

Khan's argument draws on the selective readings of some colonial administrative texts that seemingly highlight the comparative difference between some districts located in two Bengals in terms of the topology of the rural settlement patterns. He cites Browne, a nineteenth century administrator, in support of his thesis about the "openness" of the east Bengal villages (p. 49), about the "total absence of all recognised village authorities" in these villages (p.30). He cites Beverley, the Superintendent of the first census of Bengal in 1871, and W.W.Hunter in support of the "dispersed nature" of the east Bengal villages in terms of physical location and landscape. He, however,

¹¹ Openness is related with greater social freedom; conversely, the more corporate the village structure, the greater is the degree of unfreedom (as in the cases of Marx's Asiatic village community).

escapes the begging question as to how and to what extent these otherwise differential physical characteristics of east Bengal villages entailed a qualitatively different social milieu compared with west Bengal. The matter is complicated further by the speculative distinction that Khan made in one place between village as economic-administrative unit and village as social unit. As the author notes, though "a village in Bangladesh region lacked the characteristics of either a distinct administrative unit or well-defined economic isolate, it displayed some of the marks of a social unity". This distinction makes little sense as the system of power and authority that existed in the village were built on both social and economic relations that cut within and outside the rural settlements.

While discussing the life in the villages of deltaic Bengal it is important to make explicit distinction between the most ancient past and the more recent past. Khan's own view on the subject also appears to be ambivalent at times. We illustrate the issue by examining his other categorical assertion about the absence of "village officials", though often it is not clear whether the denial refers to the pre-colonial or to the colonial period. Furthermore, if it refers to the pre-colonial period, then it remains to be specified as to what time-frame is being used to settle the question.

Did the System of Employing "Village Officials" Exist in Bengal?

Khan's denial is expressed in no equivocal terms: "the system of employing village officials did not at all exist in the region. The posts of Patwari or village accountant are unknown here. The only village official who was occasionally employed in the rural areas was the village watchmen or chowkidar. The posts of other village officials were conspicuously absent in Bangladeshi villages" (p.40).

Since Khan's main source of evidence on the weak village organisation is based on the re-reading of the official documents of the colonial administration, we cite several primary documents from the Mymensingh District Records to argue that the emerging picture may not have been so categorical as it might have appeared. There is ample evidence to suggest that the British established the offices of Canoongoes and Putwarries in different districts of Bengal following the Regulations 5 of 1816 and 12 of 1817. Referring to the Mymensingh district, a pertinent document shows that "Canoongoes were established in all the pergunas of this district in the year 1227 B.S." and "Putwarries have been established in all the pergunas of this

¹² Extract from the Letter of G. Collins, Collector of Mymensingh, to the Acting Secretary to the Board of Revenue, Fort William, as of 17 September 1824, Mymensingh District Records, Vol. 32, pp. 178-183.

district".¹² The question is whether such offices existed before 1793. Again, here we are talking about the recent past, not in relation to the ancient past on which evidence is limited to support the either view.

The evidence suggests that such offices possibly existed albeit in a modified form even prior to the legislation of 1793. This may be judged by the manner British colonial officials recounted the matter, trying to establish some historical precedence to these offices. The document cited below is important because it was penned by Mr R. Chamberlain who at the time of writing the letter (1819) was "employed in the organization of the Canoongoe system, and the reformation of the office of Putwaree".¹³ The letter clearly talks about re-establishing these institutions in Bengal: "The offices of Canongoe and Putwaree being so intimately connected with each other that the beneficial results looked to from the reestablishment of the former must in great measure depend on the degrees of efficiency and success with which the reforms in the latter may be carried into effect under the provisions of regulation 12 of 1817 extended to the province of Bengal by regulation 1 of the current year" (emphasis added).¹⁴ The same document cautions against making too much deviation from the already established tradition in the matter of appointing Putwarees and "judiciously guards against any material innovation on established usage either in regard to the nomination of these officers, or to the mode in which their salaries, or other allowances and emoluments of office are to be paid". The document further adds that "it may be satisfactory to the Board to know in what mode by whom, and in what scale Putwarees are usually paid, and to establish as far as may be practicable uniformity in their forms of account". Chamberlain further observed: "In Bengal or in those districts in which I have had opportunities of making inquiry the Putwaree appears to be paid by the landlords almost generally, either by a fixed monthly salary, or by commission on the amount (of) collections of the Estate under his superintendence, receiving from each Ryot a small present in cash or kind. Putwaries as far as I have yet ascertained appear to be kept up almost generally in this district, and from the simple mode in which they are usually paid I should conceive the acting collector will meet with no difficulty in regulating, according to the Pergunnah usage, the amount of salary or commission

¹³ Extract from the Letter of G. Warde to D. Scott, Collector of Mymensingh, as of 18 May 1819, Mymensingh District Records, Vol. 11, pp. 133-137.

¹⁴ Extract from the Letter of R. Chamberlain to G. Warde., Secretary to the Board of Revenue, Fort William, as of 18 April 1819, Mymensingh District Records, Vol. 11, pp. 113-119.

to be received by such officers in villages to which they may yet remain to be nominated". The document also mentions reforming the forms of account previously used by the Putwarees as they appear "by no means so perfect as they should be, for instance the total quantity and descriptions of lands comprising each village are not stated".

Another circular of 1818 addressed to the Collectors of the 24 Pergunnah, Nuddea, Jessore, Dacca and Backergunge discusses the immediate task of recruiting "proper officers for the conduct of the duty of Pergunnah Canongoes". It recognises the pre-existing institution of the Mufussil Canongoes in a different form: "In the Bengal districts the Mufussil Canongoes were generally Mohurers under the immediate orders of the sudder Canongoes, and appointed and removed by them at pleasure. It is to be apprehend then that the accounts of former years will not in many instances be obtainable, the Board however desire you will make particular inquires on that subject as of course it would be desirable to make the selection of officers in the district under your charge, among such person as have the means of furnishing the old records".¹⁵

What also strikes out from the pages of the district records of the period is the notion that repetitively comes through about the pre-existing persona of Putwarries. Several documents insisted that a complete list of the Putwarries be prepared for each village belonging to a particular pergunnah of a district. Thus, in the same circular quoted above G. Warde makes the following directive: "With respect to the Putwarries you will be pleased to issue a publication requiring the Zemindars and other proprietors of any village or villages paying revenue to Government to furnish a statement showing the name or names of each village or villages, with the name or names of the Putwarries".¹⁶

The reason for such a move was made explicit in the letter of G. Collins, the-then Collector of Mymensingh, describing the complexity of revenue administration on the ground: "Putwarries have been established in all the pergunas of this district, tho' in some disproportionate in number to the extent of land they have to superintend; but the office of Putwarry is in this district, thro, the chicanery of the Zemindars, in concert with the Canoongoes perfectly nugatory; the Putwarries the dependents of the Zemindars unrestricted because in general unknown, have all to gain by aiding the

¹⁵ Extract from the official circular written by G. Warde, Secretary, Board of Revenue, as of 10 April 1818, Mymensingh District Records, Vol. 11, pp. 109-111.

¹⁶ Extract from the official circular written by G. Warde, Secretary, Board of Revenue, as of 10 April 1818, Mymensingh District Records, Vol. 11, pp. 109-111.

Zemindars in defrauding the Government of rents of land liable to assessment unassessed and undefined, and everything to lose in disclosing the appropriation of such lands to themselves by the zemindars; in concealing their unassessed Halabadee lands by withholding the half yearly accounts the production of which can alone afford a clue to their discovery".¹⁷ On the Canoongoes, the document notes their "laxity in the performance of the duties of their office, entailing serious inconvenience and loss to Government in the appropriation to themselves by the Zemindars of the rents of lands unknown to the public authorities, because undefined" and that they have a stake "in conniving at the concealment by the Zemindars of their unassessed lands is evident on a consideration of the amount of their salaries by no means commensurate with the sums it may be inferred they obtained from the Zemindar for conniving at their concealment of their unassessed lands". To meet these difficulties, the letter recommended that "all the Zemindars in the district be enjoined by a general requisition issued to that effect, to deposit within a prescribed period..lists of the names of Putwarries attached to their mouzas comprising their estates, in default of which and at the termination of the term specified, Putwarries would be appointed by Government to all mouzas...that their salaries would be fixed by government, and levied from the Zemindars with their revenues".

In order to make the "the Canoongoe and Putwarry establishments more efficient" the letter further suggested that "the salaries of all the Putwarries of the district be levied from the Zemindars with their land rents, and paid from the Treasury to the Putwarries, tho' they might be appointed by the Zemindars, also that all the Canoongoes be enjoined to identify the Putwarries, to register their names, the names of the purgunas to which they are respectively attached, and the names of their relatives", and to report..to the "authorities all cases of negligence of duty in the Putwarries and of collusion and chicanery on their part with the Zemindars on pain of dismissal from the service of the Honorable company". It was hoped that such a restructuring of the institutions of Canoongoes and Putwarries would help them "to discharge their duties with zeal and honesty and the effect of their honestly performing their duty would be to prevent the richer Zemindars from oppressing and fraudulently ousting out of their possessions the petty Talookdars".

The existence of the Patwari system in Bengal prior to the

¹⁷ Extract from the Letter of G. Collins to the Acting Secretary to the Board of Revenue, Fort William, as of 17 September 1824, Mymensingh District Records, Vol. 32, pp. 178-183.

legislation of 1793 has been noted by some other writings on the subject. Taniguchi (1997), for instance, observed that. "in the middle of 1770, J. Grose, the Superintendent of Rangpur, sent his assistant, G. Robertson, to Govind Gunge in the zamindari of the nine-anna division of Edrackpore, to enquire into the real assets of the country. Robertson acquired the papers of the village accountant (patwari) in Ryampore taluk, and prepared a 'Statement of collections made from Ryampore village in Talook of the Aumil'. This statement shows the names of the villagers, the quantity of land held by each, their sadar jamas and impositions, and the actual sum realised by the amil in the preceding year" (p.155).

It is difficult to accept the thesis, in light of the above evidence, that "the system of employing village officials did not at all exist in the region", or that "the posts of Patwari or village accountant" were "unknown" here. Khan may argue that what the above evidence contained in the district record shows is the difficulties that the British faced in establishing these institutions in Bengal. But, then, the British did not invent any of these institutions, and possibly would not have introduced them in Bengal without having a pre-colonial precedence. Otherwise the issue of preparing the lists of already existing Patwarries for each village of the district would not have arisen in the first place and that too as early as 1818. While the matter must await fuller research, it is clear that a too dismissive position based on a priori reasoning, as adopted by Khan on this score, would be the less rewarding path to pursue.

Impact of Colonialism on Village organisation

Even if one accepts some validity of the thesis on the pre-existing "weak village organisation" in Bengal prior to the colonial rule, the question that naturally springs up is how relevant is this piece of pre-colonial evidence to explaining the rise of modern nationalism in Bengal? After all, the entire pre-colonial agrarian system was transformed by the two hundred years of colonial rule, which in Bengal's case was implemented in the form of permanent settlement. While there is a debate about the relative moments of continuity and rupture in the nature of colonial interventions, most opinions agree that the emerging picture is much more complex, with continuity in several aspects, and ruptures in others.

In the previous section, we have seen that the British expressed the official need for establishing the Putwaree office "on a proper footing so as to render it efficient for the objects intended by it". We also argued that it seems unlikely that the British would try to install

such office without having any pre-colonial antecedence in Bengal in the first place.¹⁸ But, even if one accepts such extreme view of disjuncture, one would still expect that such a system of colonial governance, once installed, would have strong implications for the nature of village organisation in Bengal during the period of permanent settlement. Khan disregards the moments of colonial impact on the village organisation altogether, which is not surprising, since he was not interested in tracing the evolution of village organisation in Bengal *per se*. Rather, the weak village organisation hypothesis was a much-needed fulcrum in his narratology to explain the issue of Islamic proselytization, on the one hand, and the anarchist social tendencies defying the centralised state rule, on the other.

For the same reason, Khan underrates the strength of community life in Bengal, to the point of negation of institutions such as Panchayat. Often the impression is created that there has been "little of collectivist village life" (p. 42). Here he sides with Lindsay who (in his view) "rightly concluded that the village community was a myth as far as Bengal is concerned, it also did not exist in the pre-British times" (p.42). At one point he notes the epigraphic evidence of circa 6th century regarding "gramika" which may be referring to the existence of elements of village governments in ancient Bengal, but quickly adds that "it is not also clear whether the gramika is an honorific title or an employee of the state" (p. 40). Khan, of course, cannot dispute the presence of institutions of samaj, matbars, murubbis, salish and the like, but treats them as social entities of less corporate nature. The question at this point remains begging as to what is, then, actually meant by the absence of "village community" despite the presence of such, arguably not insignificant, social entities? Could people in rural east Bengal survive without mutual co-operation and self-help in the presence of successive threats of natural disasters and periodic famine-like syndromes that characterised the village economy, especially over the last three hundred years? It also becomes problematic how the Bengal peasants without having a historical

¹⁸ The job description of the office suggests a rather delicate role for the Putwaree in the newly defined context of post-1793 Bengal. According to a pertinent document (as of 19 October 1826), the Putwaree was to be considered "the joint servant of the people and the state receiving a liberal income partly from the contributions of the cultivators and partly by a grant from Government". His election was to be left "to take place according to local use, but his continuance in office and the enjoyment of its emoluments ought to depend entirely on good behaviour" so that instead of being a mere dependent of the Zemindar, and "the instrument of his exactions on the lower classes, he may become an independent officer in the village possessed of a situation liberally remunerated and thereby having a powerful motive for the honest charge of his duty."

memory of any village government could invoke images of such self-rule in the peasant uprisings of the nineteenth century?¹⁹ Or, for that matter, how in Bengal where, according to Khan, no collectivist or community village life existed, could one witness the rise of Panchayat as the accepted form of village government in West Bengal in the recent period, with few matching instances across South Asia? The development of cooperative organisational culture in Bangladesh villages over the last three decades also points to the inner vibrance of community life, notwithstanding the continued eroding and corrosive influence of the state-rule during the colonial and most part of the post-colonial periods.

Of course, one could argue about the degree of endogeneity of the Panchayats of West Bengal in support of the thesis that they were "over-determined" by the CPM's agrarian policies. Also, one could further raise the question whether such Panchayats represent, or recall, "community" organizations or class/faction based ones. Similarly, the sceptics may point out that Comilla, and even more so the NGO-based microcredit programmes, were clearly based on a negation of the "community" and a recognition of "the village in fragments". The failure of state-sponsored cooperative experiments, however, should not be seen as an evidence of the failure of cooperative dimension of the Bengal village life. Many participatory studies have shown that people's self-development plays a critical risks-insurance role in times of crisis irrespective of whether such a crisis was triggered by social, political, or ecological factors (see, Rahman 1994). It thus appears that strong community life can be sustained even in the presence of "weaker corporateness of villages" and in the absence of formally articulated village government of the allegedly North Indian type.

The success of the target group mobilisation involving rural women in Bangladesh in the more recent period should not be read only as an exercise in sectarian class-mobilisation. The massive expansion of the targeted programmes in Bangladesh villages could not have been successful without the implicit sanction of the entire community. Besides, social development programmes in the areas of education, health and population control were broad-based in the nature of intervention, addressing the concerns of the village community as a whole, and not just the problems of the poorest members. In recent years, the pitfalls of relying exclusively on the target-group approach are receiving greater attentions with respect to economic programmes

¹⁹ On such attempts to build village governments during peasant uprisings, see Bhadra (1994).

as well. The importance of community-based social mobilisation is highlighted in this regard (as in the case of "social capital approach"). Such a shift in the development thinking could not have been possible had the village existed only in "fragments".

In short, more careful works need to be carried out on the nature of rural settlements in Bengal before one begins to take note of the possible sociology that such arrangements entail in explaining the current state of the nation and/or future social development strategy.

Neglected Peasant Question

Another important lacuna in Khan's narrative is the stunning lack of attention to the colonial rise of nationalism as a derivative political discourse of bhadralok "from above" in contrast to the peasant nationalism "from below". In one place, he mentions that "apart from the Faraidi and Tariqa-i-Muhammadiya uprisings of the Muslim peasants, Bengal in the nineteenth century also witnessed two general peasant uprisings", namely, the Indigo Revolt (1858-60) and the Pabna riots (1872-73), which were "participated by both Hindu and Muslim peasants" (p. 128). He, however, does not consider the implications these joint struggles have for the search for social alternatives in contrast to the kind of colonial nationalism (communalism) eventually opted for by the bhardalok classes in South Asia irrespective of religion, language, ethnicity and caste. Downplaying the independent role of the peasantry, that famous "awkward class", is a characteristic trait of nationalist historiography. Such an approach comes through the account of the peasant struggle in Khan's book as well. He sees the Faraidi and Tariqa-i-Muhammadiya uprisings of the peasants as an evidence of enormous "potentialities of fundamentalist ideology in mobilising amorphous Muslim masses" (p. 128) and fails to discern in these events the independent class actions of the peasantry which went well beyond the rubric of Asraf-inspired religious nationalism. In this connection Khan remains insufficiently alert to the literature on peasant uprisings during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Bengal (and South Asia). This may explain his rather hasty conclusion that "the real contradiction in the nineteenth century Bengal did not arise from the conflict between the British imperialists and landlords on the one hand and the peasants on the other. The ultimate contradiction in this society arose from the scramble for power among the middle classes which originated from the changes introduced by the imperialist rulers" (p. 128). What he glosses over is that the rise of the bhadraloks took place in "the shadow of Permanent Settlement" (to use Ranajit Guha's expression) with strong conflicts of interests with the peasantry. Middle-class nationalism was rooted in the same

chain of landlordism which the peasantry of Bengal at large opposed in their passive and active display of disapproval and resistance. Such an opposition was present in both eastern and western parts of Bengal and cuts through the divide of religion.²⁰

Nation or Civilisation?

Nation as a form of imagining a particular community has remained an "incomplete project", torn apart between diverse social inclusions and exclusions. The problem has been much discussed in the burgeoning literature on the critique of nationalism and recent advances in the idea of post-nationalism. While most of the recent critique of nationalism gained currency in the backdrop of new nationalist movements in the West after the cold war, the disillusionment with the theory and practice of Third World nationalism has been one of the important sources of this new criticism.

One of the early critiques of nationalism as an instrument of human liberation can be traced back to the writings of Rabindranath Tagore. The deficiency of nation as the organising principle of societies and communities did not escape his attention even during the initial phase of nationalist struggle. Notwithstanding the later-day attempts on the part of nationalists in both India and Bangladesh to appropriate and project him as the "symbol of nationalism", Tagore has remained till date a refreshing source of the critique of nationalism. This applies to all strands of nationalist thought, whether it is Bengali, Bangladeshi, Indian, Hindu, Muslim, or, for that matter, of any conceivable variety.²¹ In spearheading the critique of nationalism from what was essentially a non-Western view, Tagore remains the ultimate unease in the modern bhadralok consciousness: he obviously cannot be rejected, but his position on nationalism cannot be accepted either. Tagore had once spoken of nationalism as a "bhougalik apadevata", a geographical

²⁰ History of peasant resistance, as part of wider project of "recovering the subalterns of History", continues to be the subject of analysis of the works of the collective associated with the Subaltern Studies since the early eighties, originally inspired by the writings of Ranajit Guha (1983). The exclusion of Guha's seminal writings on the topic as well as other researches of the Subaltern collective from Khan's narrative is a significant omission. This is especially in view of the peasant question that he so marginally and one-sidedly deals with in his account of the rise of territorial nationalism in Bengal during the nineteenth century.

²¹ For a recent commentary on this aspect of Tagore's thought, see Nandy (1994).

²² Letter to Jagadananda Roy, quoted in Seema Bandopadhyaya, *Rabindrasangite Swadeshchetana*, Calcutta, National Book Agency, 1986, p.22. See also, Rabindranath Chintajagat : *Shikhya Chinta*, edited by Satyendranath Roy, Granthalaya Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1988, p.24

demon.²² It is this demon which was the target of a scathing critique in Tagore's lectures on which the collection *Nationalism* was based.²³

What were Tagore's main points of criticism about the idea of nation? In the first place, Tagore's definition of nation brings out the mechanical aspect of the construct: "A nation in the sense of the political and economic union of a people, is that aspect which a whole population assumes when organised for a mechanical purpose". He further added that with the British rule "we had to deal, not with kings, not with human races, but with a nation--we, who are no nation ourselves". It is this contrast between the two principles of social organisation--one represented by Nation and nationalism of the west, and the other represented by No-nationhood of South Asia--that lies at the heart of Tagore's critique. And, in doing so, he made it explicit that he was "not against one nation in particular, but against the general idea of all nations". He recognised that the standard advice to the Third World would be: "Form yourself into a nation, and resist this encroachment of the Nation". He rejects this advice because he feels that South Asia "has never had a real sense of nationalism" and it would do South Asia "no good to compete with western civilization in its own field". Tagore outlined the principles of no-nationhood existing during the pre-colonial South Asia through colourful metaphors: "I am quite sure in those days (prior to the rule by the Nation of the West) we had things that were extremely distasteful to us. But we know that when we walk barefooted upon ground strewn with gravel, our feet come gradually to adjust themselves to the caprices of the inhospitable earth; while if the tiniest particle of gravel finds its lodgment inside our shoes we can never forget and forgive its intrusion. And these shoes are the government by the Nation--it is tight, it regulates our steps with a closed-up system, within which our feet have only the slightest liberty to make their own adjustments. Therefore, when you produce statistics to compare the number of gravels which our feet had to encounter in the former days with the paucity in the present regime, they hardly touch the real points...The Nation of the West forges its iron chains of organisation which are the most relentless and

²³ The three lectures contained in the book--first published in 1917--critically examined three principal forms of modern nationalism, namely nationalism in Japan, nationalism in the West, and nationalism in India. To quote the late English philosopher E.P.Thompson, who introduced a 1991 edition of these lectures, "it would be folly to accuse Tagore of sentimental alarmism. Nationalism is a prescient, even prophetic, work whose foresight has been confirmed by sufficient evidence--two world wars, the nuclear arms race, environmental disasters, technologies too clever to be controlled" (Thompson 1991, p.8).

unbreakable that have ever been manufactured in the whole history of man".

This burden of nationhood applies equally even for a politically independent society ruled by its own nation-state. Tagore said, to his foreign audience: "Not merely the subject races, but you who live under the delusion that you are free, are every day sacrificing your freedom and humanity to this fetish of nationalism...It is no consolation to us to know that the weakening of humanity from which the present age is suffering is not limited to the subject races, and that its ravages are even more radical because insidious and voluntary in peoples who are hypnotized into believing that they are free." Government by the Nation was Tagore's term for nation-state, which has grown in immense proportions in its bid for control over people's lives, since the original collection of essays was published in 1917.

Tagore was a significant omission in Khan's book. But, that is not the issue at stake. The omission assumes more significance in the way he contrasted nation to Civilisation arguing in favour of the former, quite contrary to the way Tagore would have argued. Khan contests the view that Bangladesh was ever "an integral part of a greater South Asian civilization" (p. 8). Indeed, his refusal to accept the common South Asian civilisational past is premised on the argument that such a "belief" acts as an impediment to the "interpretation of nationalism in Bangladesh". He is not persuaded by "the cultural point of view" according to which "Bengal was often viewed as an inseparable part of the Great Indian Tradition". Singer (1972), for instance, expressed the view that consciousness of a common culture in South Asia "provides the source for the communication between Little and Great cultural traditions and for the formation of a world view, value system, and personality type characteristic of a civilization as a whole in spite of the many internal differences and changes". Khan's reading of Singer is that such a thesis would imply a denial of Bangladesh "as a distinct historical unit" from "both political and cultural points of view". He finds faults with both the premises, and goes on to argue why this should be the case. First, as opposed to the "unitary-imperial" interpretation of Bangladesh history, he presents a "fragmentary-local" interpretation which says that "only some areas which now constitute Bangladesh were occasionally incorporated in the larger empires of South Asia" (p.9). Second, because of the dominance of Islam, culturally the territory was not integrated with the rest of South Asia either: "despite syncretization of Islam with little culture at the grass-roots level, the Muslims of Bengal remained totally outside the orbit of the Great Tradition of India; they could neither be

"sanskritized" nor "compartmentalized". On the contrary, the Islamic revivalist movements drew "the Muslims of Bengal into the Great Islamic Tradition" which not only resisted "Indianization" of Islam but also promoted the purge of folk elements from Islam in Bengal. In that he agrees with Asim Roy (1983) and concludes that "the Islamic revivalist movements provided the bedrock of religious nationalism that surfaced in the 1940s" (p.11).

From the mode of argumentation it was clear that, for the author, the primacy was to be given to nation over civilisation, while the opposite was true for Tagore. The project of discovery of a hidden nation for Bangladesh had to be ultimately carved out of an allegedly segmented past whereby the local history was de-linked from the greater currents of South Asian Civilisation, politically and culturally, economically and mentally. For the sake of constructing nationhood, the common civilisational roots were to be downplayed, or even ignored altogether. Nation had to be isolated from civilisation. The legitimacy of one has been achieved by illegitimising the other. The fracture between "the faith and the habitat" which Khan finds embedded in the making of nation in Bangladesh thus turns out to be a mere subplot in the wider story of tension that runs deep between Nation and Civilisation. This is the fait accompli of the project of "discovery" that is overshadowed from the outset by an approach to history interpreted as a narrative of nation.

Small Voices of History

As a historical narrative of nation-in-making, the essay suffers from a number of limitations, which the present reviewer has tried to outline in the preceding text. These limitations are not unique and found to be present, in general, in the enterprise of nationalist historiography. For the latter, the past is relevant only in so far it is important for the search for roots of nation-state, and, in that capacity, discourse on nationalist history made its debut quite clearly as a discourse of power, to begin with. For the history of nation, small voices of history, of peasant, of women, of marginalised cultures, do not matter, or they matter only as peripheral concerns. It is, therefore, important that these voices be given some space in the official history of Bangladesh. In this respect, one may single out the importance of paying attention to the women's question, acknowledging their agency in history. Ranajit Guha's methodological point on this score is worth emphasising: "I feel that women's voice, once it is heard, will activate and make audible the other small voices as well. Those of the adivasis--the aboriginal populations of the region-for instance. They too have been marginalised and

instrumentalized in the statist discourse. Here again, as in the case of women, the garland of praise for their courage and sacrifice is no compensation for the lack of an acknowledgement of their agency. What I have in mind here is not simply a revision on empirical grounds alone. I want historiography to push the logic of its revision to a point where the idea of instrumentality, the last refuge of elitism, will be interrogated and re-assessed not only with regard to women but all participants" (Guha 1996, p.12). This is a general outline of a project of alternative history that needs to be better appreciated in the current historiography in Bangladesh.

VII. HISTORY'S LESSONS FOR DEVELOPMENT

For each book demanding serious attention of the readers, there is a scope for alternative reading. Stripped of the hidden nationalist agenda, several aspects of Discovery demand serious attention. Three striking propositions are highlighted below for their wider developmental implications that go well beyond the original intent of the book.

First, the author observes that "the weakness of grass-roots organisations and the consequential primacy of individuals" led to the undermining of the political development of Bangladesh (p. 148). In particular, it was reflected in the rise of a fragmented polity, with the vicious effects of factionalism, high enforcement costs of social contract, widespread free-riding, and, one may add, hartalotics (Ahmed 1999). Fractured polities have important developmental implications. Polities significantly influence economic performance because they define and enforce the economic rules. Therefore, an essential part of development policy needs to be "the creation of polities that will create and enforce efficient property rights" (North 1994, p. 366). However, as Douglass North reminds us, "we know very little about how to create such polities" (ibid). Bangladesh may be already making some small progress in that direction, as partly evidenced in the constitutionalised inclusion of the provision for the Neutral Caretaker Government overseeing the national elections.

Second, the author notes that, "in sharp contrast to failure of large organizations in Bangladesh, small peoples' organizations have demonstrated enormous potentialities" as, for instance, with the Grameen Bank (p. 155). From the positive experience of Grameen Bank and other NGOs, he concludes that such institutional success has wider significance in terms of effective governance: "the establishment of new and small grass-roots institutions is the key to building of sustainable organizations in Bangladesh" (ibid). It is, by now, beyond

dispute that the success of NGOs had a favourable compensatory effect in the presence of weak state and weak market, especially as applied to credit access for the rural poor, women's empowerment, and human development. However, the NGO route alone cannot take the economy and the society to the phase of take-off that responds to the challenges of the new century. Indeed, for the sustained progress of NGOs themselves, there is a growing need for having effective state and strong market linkages in place.

Third, Khan is right in pointing out that one of the reasons for the failures of local governments in rural Bangladesh "may be its size" (p. 154). An average union--the lowest tier of local government--contains more than "twenty seven thousand people". This renders the task of establishing corporate institutions for such a large group extremely difficult. The remedy to such a dysfunctional local government structure is, however, not less, but more decentralisation, precisely dictated by the size of population. After all, governance is about governing the people, and with rising population density, the challenge of good governance proportionately increases. It is the insufficient awareness about the need for more decentralisation and imparting greater financial and administrative autonomy to the local government bodies in the backdrop of relatively high population growth that created the problem of misgovernance in this region in the first place. The ways-out from the local governance failure, therefore, lies not in the development of small peoples' organisations (which are important as demand-generating mechanisms "from below"), but through the effective realisation of a decentralised, participatory, and democratic governance at the grass-roots level.

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