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Elusive Search for a Society:
Beginnings of Modernity in 19th Century Bengal

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I

'Eradication of an undesirable *custom* prevalent in a society under foreign rule should be possible by educating the people', said a correspondent of a Bengali periodical in 1842. 'The effect of knowledge, however, may fail to fructify', continued the correspondent, 'and it takes a long time for the desired effect of knowledge (which education attempts to impart) to be realised. Giving proper education to the entire population requires a long time. It is, therefore, very difficult. Good kings realise it, and *abolish bad customs by legislation*. That is what we consider the best way, and request the *government* to do that.'[1] The correspondent said this in a letter to the editor after an editorial in the preceding issue of the periodical had advocated abolition of polygamy among *kulin brahmins*. The editorial had argued against polygamy on the following grounds: (a) God did not desire polygamy. (b) One knows both from directly visible proof and inference that men and women are of equal number. (c) Whenever a society has adopted polygamy, it has experienced a wide variety of bad social practice. And, (d) polygamy is opposed to the dictates of both reason and the *shastras*.[2]

In 1853, the Bharatvarshiya Sanatan Dharmarakshini Sabha repeated the plea made by the correspondent cited above. In a public announcement, the Sabha said: 'Many famous *brahman* scholars, landlords (*raja* and *bhumyadhikari*), respectable and knowledgeable men of wealth, and others attended a congress of the Sabha to discuss the evils of polygamy and dowry. They were unanimously of the view that these could be abolished either by establishing the necessary social norms/custom or by law. The majority was of the view that legislation was the better way.'

Two years later, Prasanna Kumar Thakur requested the government to prohibit polygamy by legislation. Some *kulin brahmins* marry even one hundred women, said Thakur, and all the hundred women become widows when only one man dies. They have never been able to lead a happy life within the boundary defined by the *shastras*. Another two decades later, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya opposed any legislation against polygamy. In a rejoinder to Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, he argued that: (a) incidence of polygamy was declining fast and it would wither away with the spread of 'good' education; (b) nothing could be achieved by proving that polygamy

was a violation of the *shastras*; and (c) if the state considered legislation necessary for welfare, then there was no need to justify it by invoking the authority of the *shastras*. Here is how Bankim Chandra saw the relationship between what is sanctified or codified by religion (in the form of this or that *shastra*) and *lokachar*, or behaviour sanctified by custom: 'Suppose everyone in the society agrees that polygamy violates the *Hindushastra*. Will polygamy be abolished then? We have our doubts. Not all of the social customs prevalent in the Bengali Hindu society are sanctioned by the *shastras*. *Lokachar* (custom) is stronger here than dharmashastra. What custom sanctifies is deemed legitimate even if that violates the *shastras*.'[3]

Such evaluation of the efficacy of legislation by the state when 'law' is in conflict with custom was, however, not shared by many. *Tatvabodhini Patrika,* the most widely circulated periodical of the Brahmo Samaj until the seventies of the past century, had a different understanding. Welcoming the proposed legal prohibition of polygamy, in 1886, it said: 'It is true that, if we let the state intervene in the matter of Hindu code of conduct and rituals, it will harm Hindu religion. But, considering the harm done by polygamy, we cannot help approving of state intervention in this case. . . . *Sati* was a similar practice sanctified by the religious custom of the Hindus. Had we waited for the wide spread of education to create the condition for the abolition of the practice, it would not have been abolished at all. . . . We still prefer not to let the state intervene in such matters. But, there is little to permit us to hope that the Hindu society will ever come out of its inertia for doing what it should do.'

My focus here is on the reformers' approach towards the relationship between the state and what, in the absence of a better term, can be called the 'society.' The issue is implicit in all the extracts and references cited above, spread over a period of forty-four years since 1842. Actually it was relevant over a much longer period as I want to show later. The reformers or the reformist critique wanted the state to make a law for prohibiting this or that practice, polygamy in this case. The colonial state, on the other hand, did not want to intervene unless it was confident that state action would not provoke as strong a public discontent as might create effective disaffection against the state.

But why did the reformer want the state to do the job? The only logically tenable answer is that there was no way of making a reform programme socially acceptable except by statutory provision for or against it. All the important reform actions in the 19th century—from the abolition of *sati* in 1829 to widow remarriage; prohibition of polygamy and child marriage; and special marriage—were decreed by law. And, in each case the reformers, including Rammohan Roy and Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, chose to mobilise public opinion mainly for persuading the state to intervene. In other words, it was recognised that repealing a customary law or abolition of practice embodied in custom—and often seen as sanctified by religion—could be done only with the help of the state. For the legitimacy of the colonial state

did not depend on its ability to supervise and legitimise the pre-colonial ideology of this or that section of the society. Neutrality in matters of religion and custom was another matter. It could be and was maintained so long as religion or custom did not obstruct revenue, trade, or other surplus-extracting channels. At the same time, of course, there was a determined preference for reconciling the continuance of traditional ideas and related institutions with a kind of 'modernising' ideology which the state preferred for producing ideologues who could build up a system of auxiliaries of colonial rule including the bureaucracy.

In the eyes of the reformers, there was a clear division of the jurisdictions of the state and the society. That is what the aforesaid correspondent meant when he said that education as an instrument of social reform fails to produce the desired results in the short run. The implied meaning is that legitimising the abolition of a customary law or practice is easier when the state decides to exercise its power than by creating a new ideology or a system of values through propagation of 'humanist' ideas associated with individualism. Of course, spreading of education through the formal system, too, was accepted as a function of the state. But that could have been deemed as a welfare function which the 'society' would welcome as a step towards what was deemed as 'progress.'

I use the term 'society' largely as an abstraction for demarcating, to begin with, what is exclusively political or economic in a relatively empirical sense from the sum-total of relationships which together constitute the religious-cultural-spiritual domain. I have consciously avoided 'civil society' because it has at least three distinct connotations, depending on whether one is using it in the Hegelian, Marxian or Gamscian sense of it. Consider the structure of relationships at any historical time between individuals and between individuals and their collective as an abstract entity. These cannot be separated from the structure and character of production relations in their broad sense. Still, there are domains where the non-political and the non-economic elements have a certain degree of autonomy. It is within this domain that relations emerge and operate without a visibly corresponding class differentiation in its static dimensions. A folk song, for example, may be popular among different sections and classes, despite the distinctive aesthetic/spiritual appeals it makes. These differences are largely dependent on the specific character of the experience of, and conscientisation among, this or that group. That is what distinguishes the structures of mediation, among varying groups, between the empirically concrete relations and the latent relations in their abstraction. The latent can and does embody an infinite range of combinations of the past and the present. So, class/group differentiations of the present time do not always surface up as a domain differentiation factor. Such differences can, of course, emerge over a longer period, especially during periods of faster transition. But it is difficult to get a glimpse of that dynamic process without an elaborate evidence from recorded literature.

The example of language may be more useful for explaining my point. Classes or social groups acquire and use somewhat different languages, no doubt, and this difference varies according to the stage of development of the society with the structure of social organisation on which it sustains itself. But, there is a difference here between the modern period with its print media and all earlier periods. With the emergence of printing, literacy becomes the main instrument of differentiation between those who have direct access to printed literature and those who do not have it. The possibility of communication between educated and literate social groups and others becomes restricted. Division of labour consolidates the process. If the existing or the new division of labour reduces the necessity for regular communication between literates and non-literates, then communication comes to be restricted only within the domain of transactions directly related to the process of production and exchange. It has wide-ranging implications for differentiation in what can be called the 'cultural-spiritual continuum' among individuals belonging to different classes or social groups. Which includes perception of observable relations in particular and *reality* in general, and the framework within which the individual responds to these. The use of concepts and categories, or the very fact of their construction, as parts of the lexicon of a language is correspondingly differentiated.

The term *samaj*—the Bengali word for 'society'—came to acquire its differential meanings in 19th century Bengal. From personal experience I know that it had a different meaning in at least some parts of eastern Bengal in the forties of the present century. It was an inviolable norm among the peasantry in the southern parts of Khulna district to invite and feed all the adults residing in at least seventeen neighbouring villages, irrespective of the religious identity of villagers, who were either *namasudras* (now listed as a scheduled caste) or Muslims. The 'rule' was to invite the entire *samaj* which, in this case, was constituted by seventeen villages partly due to the relative homogeneity of these villages influenced, as it was, mainly by the pattern of habitation and viability of regular communication. Most of the *samaj* population were, however, tenant-peasants under the *bargadari* (share-cropping) system and the landlords lived in just one village, the one where I was born. Differentiation within the peasantry was not very sharp. In other words, there was an effective homogeneity in terms of occupation, income, tenurial relations, and class in its Marxist sense. What is important is that *samaj* meant some unit of the social organisation closer to the 'village community' of the much-talked-of Asiatic type. In the lexicon of the Bengali *bhadralok*, on the other hand, it meant that domain of social relationships where the state did not figure in. The importance that was attached to religion in the standard models of social reform was due to this exclusiveness of the *samaj* in forming consciousness and values, or ideology in a more generalised sense. Within that, however, it was narrowed down to the Hindu population to begin with, and then to the upper castes, or the relatively 'Westernised' *bhadralok*, depending on the context. The *Tattvabodhini Patrika*

observed some difference when it said in 1889 that 'What we call the *Bangasamaj* today is not the one for the educated Bengali. The *samaj* is constituted by some bald-head *brahman pandits* ignorant in Sanskrit, some uneducated and anti-reform rustic *brahmans* and *kayasthas,* and some uneducated or half-educated women with half-a-cubit long veil over their head. Even among the educated ones, there is no unity. The educated has no *samaj* of their own either.'

I have argued elsewhere that the concept of collectivity inherent in the meaning of *samaj* among the east Bengal peasantry, its genesis and evolution, and its implications for social relations, constitute very important landmarks in the history of the Indian society. These are relevant even in our attempt to understand the India of the 90s of the twentieth century, with the revived importance it has attached to religion as having a more direct role in nation-formation.[4] That is how the continuing impact of the 'village community' becomes an important subject of scrutiny. One does not, however, have to be sure about whether it was as self-sufficient as it was assumed to be, or whether it reconciled with private property. There is a plausible case for the argument that the innumerable territorially homogeneous village communities existed as 'little societies' in pre-colonial India with their own class structure. These had a relative autonomy, though there was a broader unity in the structure of the language of many neighbouring communities. A good deal of social-cultural characteristics of these 'little societies' has been preserved despite all the changes during and after the colonial period.

We need a framework for adequately identifying the properties and dynamics of what is generally meant by 'society', and a corresponding theory. I do not get that framework within the connotations of 'civil society.' Mainly because in each of the three variants of it, referred to above, the state remains an important category in the structure of interconnections inherent in the meaning ascribed to 'civil society.' In the historical process I have in mind, there was a greater discontinuity between the state and the society, and the relative autonomy of the latter was decisively greater. In each of the concepts of 'civil society', on the other hand, the society is subsumed in the state, though in varying degrees.

Let me state how I see it. Given the specificities of the social formation and the essentials of the dynamics inherent in the class structure, the first constituent of a society is its language. Language unifies despite the differentiation within a language-society. So, the first step for conceptualising a society is to identify it as a territorially homogenous linguistic community. At the same time, the process of unification is conditioned, sometimes determined, by the intensity and regularity, or the absence thereof, of transactions within the process of production and exchange. The possibility of effective communication plays an important role here, and that is largely determined by the development of productive forces—the stage of development of technology, if you like—on the one hand, and the society's need for extending the geographical limits of communication. The print

media—or the audio-visual media today—operates somewhat independently of the other means of physical mobility, and to that extent it can play a role even under a 'backward' technological configuration.

The market in a colonial configuration cannot unite the little societies into a larger language society as a step towards unification into a nation-state or a 'state-society.' The rule of capital in a colony is subservient to the rule of capital in the metropolitan society. The emergence and growth of liberal individualism here has to be examined with this constraint in view. The historical process of formation of the nation-state, including the continuing rigidity of the incompleteness of that process, is correspondingly qualified by this specificity. The print media does become an instrument of unification of the traditional little societies, depending on the extent and regularity of interactions between those with access to the print media and those without it. But that does not necessarily lead to the contraction of the domain where the society retains its relative autonomy from the state.

In the process, the foundation is created for an uneasy co-existence of the past and the present, manifested as the revived ascendancy of the stubborn caste-system, obscurantist values (sometimes deemed as synonymous with *kusanskar*, or a blind faith) and different forms of mystification of relations which retard the crystallisation of liberal individualism. The market can keep expanding without demolishing the archaic or primordial relations which the old little societies had inhered and which had acquired the status of symbols in the lives of the people during the colonial period. Even the customary autonomy is sometimes preserved to a large extent, and the state cannot enter there without applying direct force. Most scheduled castes, for example, have retained the old system of caste panchayat, which performs legislative and judicial functions. The recent publication of the Anthropological Society of India under the People of India project carries ample evidence for this. In general, custom or customary law—mainly within the domain of what is called 'personal law'—often overrides state law. In sum, the little societies do not get integrated into a large language-society and the state's dictates run mostly when its law is of a prohibitive nature. Permissive laws like widow remarriage and inter-caste or inter-community marriage are hardly honoured. Even the prohibitive laws are generally violated where custom has remained strong enough to overrule the state. This strength is largely determined by the extent to which the material conditions of living require rejection of custom; and there is a wide area in which material life can go on without questioning the sanctity of custom.

II

Let me cite some types of constraints posed by the *bhadralok* society on the crystallisation of liberal individualism in the nineteenth century and its ideological bridge with rationalism based on Newtonian science and capitalist political economy. The print media brought the Bengali *panjika*,

the analogue of *panchang*, into wider prominence by making it available for personal possession. Many functions of the erstwhile *brahmin*-priest (what Marx had called 'calendar Brahmin') were taken over by the *panjika*. Several versions of it were published by the 1820s, apparently because the publisher was keen to propagate the code of conduct and rituals as also to make some money out of it. There were periods when the *panjika* was identified as a best-seller.

A preliminary scrutiny of the *panjika* over 50 years since 1825 shows that many prohibitions remained constant despite all the organised attempt to disseminate science and rationalism through both the formal system of education and books and periodicals. Prohibition of black gourd on the first day of the lunar fortnight, of brinjal on the second day, and of specified vegetables on other days, was common all through. Consumption of brinjal on the thirteenth day was cited as one reason for losing one's son. Then there was a calendar of inauspicious days for the commencement of the menstrual cycle, and there were rules for observing austerity after the death of a relative, which had wide caste- and sex-wise variations.[5] In a lecture before the National Association on Hindu Customs and Rituals in 1872, Manmohan Basu argued in support of honouring many rituals and prohibitions. He defended some of the ordainments of the *panjika* and added that, 'the code of auspicious behaviour for women cannot be undermined.' An unusually large number of copies of Ishanchandra Mukhopadhyaya's *Achar* (1895) were sold and the author advocated bathing in the Ganga, evening prayer, vegetarianism, and observance of food restrictions suggested in the *panjika*. Bhudev Mukhopadhyaya has even greater renown for his *Samajik Prabandha, Paribarik Prabandha,* and *Achar Prabandha.*

Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, on the other hand, said, in the editorial of a periodical in 1850, that child marriage was sustained by the peoples' faith in the *dharmashastra* of Manu and others: 'We are unfortunately imprisoned by *lokachar* and the code ordained by the *shastras*.' In the first issue of the journal, he said that the new periodical was being launched for highlighting the evils of *kusanskar,* and that the journal would disseminate history, geography and physics for imparting rationalist—scientific values.[6] In the well-known simultaneous equation presented by Akshay Kumar Dutt, one of the early editors of the *Tattvabodhini Patrika,* God was equated with zero.[7] Dutt's purpose was to argue that there was no need for introducing God as a relevant variable in the search for knowledge or in organising the production of the material needs of social life.

Let me cite some evidence for indicating some types of problems related to 'individual freedom' as it was perceived by the educated *bhadralok* ideologue. 'The unity of two minds is the source of love', said Vidyasagar, while arguing against child marriage, in 1850. 'This unity depends on age, station in life, beauty, qualities, character, external manifestations of personality, and the emotions. Our boys and girls cannot have any idea about

the intents of each other, cannot bathe in the pursuits of the other. They have no idea about the antecedents of each other. . . . only the vain talks of a callous and talkative matchmaker become the final determinant of the parents' decision to choose the spouse of their children. That is why genuine love in married life is so rare in our society. Only the husband becomes a master and the wife lives her life as a maid-servant.'[8] The *Tattvabodhini Patrika* said in 1889: 'The girl has to be married before she attains the age of twelve. So, the wife (of an educated husband) is both ignorant and unwise. The husband deems his wife as a source of happiness. But he cannot marry the kind of wife he wants. . . . "I had built hopes of a happy life, but it has all been in vain", says the educated youth.' The situation of the wife in such a marriage is portrayed in Rabindranath Tagore's *Nashtanir*, the base for Satyajit Ray's *Charulata*.

III

With the above in view, let me proceed to make some broad generalisations. I have not referred to the doctrinaire aspect of the thought about the relationship between the individual and the society; the concept of nation or the emergence of nation as a component of ideology; or the perceived relationship between religion and theology on the one hand, and social reform on the other. There is no dearth of descriptive literature on these. I make only a few brief observations for delineating the background to some important questions pertaining to the framework I have talked of. Monotheism was seen by Rammohan Roy as the best cure for the evils of a society pulled back by custom and *shastras*. Some Brahmo Samajists thought that scientific thinking, with its 'rationalist' moorings, would lay the foundation for monotheism. The theologically oriented resistance against it was based on a variety of understanding about religion and its role in social 'progress.' There was the *panjika*-centred approach to the preservation of the '*samaj*' via codification of inter-personal and intra-family relationship of Shashadhar Tarkachuramani at one extreme. At another extreme was Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya's doctrine of perfection of human 'faculties' by harmonious cultivation as the path to the attainment of the best in an individual. The latter incorporated, though only in an *ad hoc* manner, patriotism and nationalist awareness as virtues to be cultivated. Nowhere was the society clearly defined except for identifying all Hindus as belonging to the entity called 'society.' There was a new concept of *samaj* at its core, though its actual composition or habitat was often left undefined. If there was a single area of emphasis, it was the *samaj* of the upper castes, substituted by the *samaj* of educated *bhadralok* and its upper caste fringe.

In the idea of 'progress', therefore, these were the sections viewed as referents. Occasional investigations were attempted into the state of the peasantry, no doubt, and quite a few thinkers criticised the excesses of landlordism as a major reason for the oppression of the peasantry. The idea

that capital and enterprise are the source of national wealth, or that national wealth is the basis of material progress, was occasionally articulated during the later half of the century. But there was no comprehensive political economy, as there was no sound basis for a theory of dynamics of the political process.

But, how does one approach the problematic: one that is inherent in the uniqueness of the character of such a process? One way is to restrict one's investigation within the realm of ideas, ideology or thought and look at the 'structure', or lack thereof, in that spectrum.

I am not quite knowledgeable about 'discourse' or 'discourse analysis.' But, on the basis of whatever little I have read and heard, I have derived a somewhat naive meaning. 'Discursive formation', I have come to believe, implies two things: first, a structured view of things within the realm of idea/thought derived from idea/thought itself; and, second, identifying *that* as a historical process, as a system of ideas/thoughts without crossing the realm of ideas.

I have tried to underline that in drawing his own map of the society, the reformer's perception was seriously restricted by the character of the structure of social relations inherent in a colonial formation. These are more clearly identifiable in the fall-outs of Permanent Settlement including the large number of intermediaries between the peasant and the state, and in the relative lack of the necessity for widening the network of transactions between the little old societies, despite some degree of commercialisation of agriculture. Individualism was a guiding-post in the formation of the reformer's ideology of progress, but the *commodity* did not arrive for mediating the relations between those who produced the material conditions of life and those who controlled production. That was a fertile environment for ideas to acquire a more decisive role in the perception of 'social progress' or as a tool of reform. The reformer preferred to migrate from the little old societies, but conditions did not prompt him to postulate the transformation of these into a unified language society as a necessary condition for progress or modernity. In other words, there was no scope for projecting such transformation without simultaneously projecting radical restructuring of the aforesaid relations. The ideology of liberal individualism was inspired by Western capitalism, and yet conditions for constraining its crystallisation were strong enough to produce a kind of hybrid individualism. The basis which created the conditions for the continuance of a system of customs opposed to individualism (which itself was not delinked from a wider view of society or an attendant political economy of nationhood) has, therefore, to be sought in the structure of relations of production and exchange, specific to the colonial rule.

There are enough indicators in contemporary India to show that the little societies are still there, and that custom still defeats the modern state in many matters. Child marriage, for example, is prohibited by law. And so is the dowry system. Relative increase in literacy or the penetration of channel

television has not changed things. In fact, the latter might have even strengthened a kind of implicit loyalty to custom. Newspapers are full of reports every week of how a 'caste' community killed a married couple due to 'violation' of what is seen as the ordainments of custom. The modern idea of crime, associated as it is with the idea of individual rights, has not taken roots in these remnants of old communities. Looking at the geographical entity called 'India' as the society of the entire population, it is not difficult to see that it is a loose aggregation, not integration, of innumerable discrete units. That is not what a nation-state is supposed to be. The Indian state does preside over the system of production of surplus, but the rupture between the state and the society continues to stare at us. There is no reason to anticipate that the market in its new dispensation will do any better. It is more likely to intensify the conditions for a new kind of mysticism, fed by the lack of a perceivable bridge between the life of daily experience and the advertisement-attracting fairy-tale environment of the soap opera, or the visual representing fluctuations of the exchange rate of the rupee.

I do not see how such a process, the dialectics of its genesis, or the revival of communalist consciousness can be located exclusively within the realm of ideas or within the limits of a discursive formation for that matter. I cannot see even the signposts of the required framework for identifying the dynamics of the specific process discussed above. That is what leads me to stick to what I see as the Marxist system of thought, without however, forgetting the need for recreating by deriving from the essentials of the Marxist theory. The state-society relationship can be seen in an empiricist way, and it can be seen as the historically influenced product of the relationship between the dynamics of the material conditions of life and that of institutions and ideas. I find many revealing insights in some recent writings about the uniqueness of modern Indian thought and history, but rarely any framework which enables me to understand its genesis or its implications for current-day political practice. Perhaps the time has come to reassert that the history of ideas cannot be located only within the realm of ideas.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Vidyadarshan, Bhadra, 1764 Shakabda, cited in Benoy Ghose, *Samayikpatre Banglar Samajchitra*, Vol. 3.
2. Ibid.
3. *Vividha Prabandha*.
4. 'Community, Society and the State: The Eroding Evolution.' Paper presented at a seminar at Hyderabad.
5. 'In case of women, rules are identical for all castes.'
6. *Sarvashubhakari Patrika*, Bhadra, 1772 Shakabda.
7. In *Bahyabastur Sahit Manavprakritir Sambandha Vichar*.
8. Ibid.