

Bengal's History, Culture, Identity, and Exceptionalism

Saugata Bhaduri and Arup K. Chatterjee

In this episode of *The Unofficial Seminar*, eminent professor, author, and intellectual, Professor Saugata Bhaduri of Jawaharlal Nehru University joins Dr. Arup K. Chatterjee to share his insightful takes on Bengal's history, culture, identity, and contemporary politics. From a Bengal that is believed to have stopped the march of Alexander to a Bengal that grapples with ideas of its own exceptionalism, this episode will challenge many misconceptions about Bengal's history and cultural identity.

ARUP K. CHATTERJEE: Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to *The Unofficial Seminar*. I'm Arup K. Chatterjee, and I'm joined by a very special guest today: Professor Saugata Bhaduri, whose student I've had the privilege of being. Professor Bhaduri is currently in Germany, where he is a visiting professor. He has had a very long and illustrious career as Professor of English at the Centre for English Studies in Jawaharlal Nehru University. He's also extremely passionate about literary theory, theatre, and especially the subject of today's conversation — the cultural history of Bengal. Professor Bhaduri is also the author of a very well-received and widely reviewed book, *Polycoloniality*, published by Bloomsbury in, if I'm not wrong, 2020, which I also happened to review at the time, in *The Hindu*. Professor, my sincere thanks to you for joining me on the Unofficial Seminar. How have you been?

SAUGATA BHADURI: I'm absolutely fine, thank you so much for having me over.

ARUP K. CHATTERJEE: How's Germany, sir?

SAUGATA BHADURI: It's fine. *[laughter]*

ARUP K. CHATTERJEE: I wanted to begin by probing your own understanding of Bengal's history — particularly its ethnic, colonial, and racial diversity. So I'm asking two things: how far do the boundaries of your discipline allow you to grasp this subject, and how far do you think Bengal actually enjoys this rich ethnic, colonial, and racial diversity?

SAUGATA BHADURI: As far as the first part of your question is concerned — how far my discipline allows me to engage with such questions — one must be thankful for the fact that English studies nowadays doesn't really mean anything, and therefore you can do everything; there's no issue whatsoever as far as my discipline is concerned in dabbling in this or that. So that question

addresses itself. But to return to the substance of your question: Bengal has had a very long history, and it's not one of those crypto-histories, or newly rewritten revisionist histories, where you try to mythologically draw roots. What we generally identify as Bengal is exactly the Gangetic delta region — with a bit of an extension here and there up to the Himalayas, perhaps, and in the east perhaps up to the lower hills of northeastern India. If the Gangetic delta is primarily what Bengal is, then we find references to that area from very ancient sources — both Plutarch and Pliny talk about “Gangaridai,” as it's called, which is the Gangetic delta region, and Ptolemy gives a map of exactly what he identifies as Gangaridai, which is precisely what we today see as Bengal. All the ancient sources talk not only about the richness of this terrain but also about its military might, including suggestions — and other historians have very different opinions about this — as to whether “Gangaridai” is indeed “Ganga,” or whether it was “Gandhari,” or something from northwestern India, the Gandhara region, since Alexander may or may not have come this far.

Megasthenes, in his account of India, talks about visiting a particular emperor called “Sandrakottos,” who has generally been identified with Chandragupta, because phonetically it seems quite similar — though some historians have identified Sandrakottos, phonetically closer, with Chandraketu. Which leads me to what I skipped over: archaeological excavations over the past close to a century now — beginning in earnest in the 1920s–30s — have discovered significant ruins dating up to the 5th or 6th century BC, proper civilizational remnants including houses and numerous artifacts, both in western Bengal and eastern Bengal — more specifically in Chandraketugarh, which is about 40 kilometres from Kolkata, and in Wari-Bateshwar in today's Bangladesh, both of which have been generally and factually identified with Gangaridai. So the kingdom of Gangaridai, which apparently scared Alexander so much that he did not want to go beyond the western parts of India, has been historically identified, from very ancient sources, with Bengal. So Bengal has had a long historical recognition of being a force to reckon with — excavations have found artifacts dating right up to the 6th–7th century BC, and continuously thereafter, including in port regions — we all know of Tamluk today, which is

Tamralipta — so it has a long and continuous historical presence in the international imagination.

Then, throughout the Buddhist era, we have so many Buddhist ruins all over — Mahasthangarh, primarily in eastern Bengal. So we've had a continuous historical presence, so much so that by the late medieval age Bengal was a sought-after entity in the European imagination — we know of Marco Polo and his mention of, and apparent visit to, Bengal in the 1290s. And then, well, the rest is well-known history. That said — while Bengal, the land, the Gangetic delta itself, has been imprinted very strongly in the European and global imaginary for the last 2,500 years or so — the ethnic composition, the people of Bengal, is a different matter. Genetic findings suggest that we are indeed a curious admixture of different races, probably more so than our northwestern subcontinental counterparts. While we do have ancient North Indian genes as a significant part, a significant presence of East Asian and Australasiatic genes makes the population of Bengal much more heterogeneous and mixed than we might think of as a homogeneous group.

So, to build a binary and cut what could be an even longer response short: we can perhaps bifurcate Bengal into two parts — the terrain of Bengal, and the people of Bengal. The terrain has had a fairly homogeneous, sought-after, often-valORIZED place in history for the last 2,500 years, whereas the people of Bengal, who do not show that homogeneity, and further, because of their heterogeneity — perhaps because of their rather mongrel nature — have often been ostracized or thought to be on the margins of the civilizational continuum. So that brings to a close my rather roundabout response to your very pointed question.

ARUP K. CHATTERJEE: This is more than impressive, Professor, but I have a few doubts, and I believe I represent a lot of curiosity among Bengalis, and Indians in general, and scholars worldwide, as to what Bengal thought of itself, and when Bengal started thinking about itself at all. Now, you didn't mention it, but correct me if I'm wrong — Dhaka has been a far more

significant commercial capital and harbour than Kolkata. Kolkata can be accused of being invented, in a pejorative sense, only three or four hundred years ago, but Dhaka goes back much further than the Pala dynasty, or the Buddhist regime of the 7th–8th century, right up to the 12th century AD. So my first question is: since when did Bengal start thinking of itself as Bengal, or Bengalis as Bengalis? And I just wanted to add — recently I discovered, and you may already know of this, a Siamese cook from the 17th century, in Buddhist Siam — Thailand — in the kingdom of Ayutthaya, who was also Portuguese Catholic, and also Bengali. She was born of a Goan-Portuguese Catholic father, who was also partly Bengali, and a Japanese-Bengali mother. So with four or five kinds of hybridity, she reached Siam, and she and her family were nearly executed — she was spared, and eventually became a famous cook. Her Siamese cooking, in Franco-Portuguese styles, had tremendous Bengali influence as far back as the 17th century. That's more of a remark than a question. So — when did Bengal start thinking of itself as an entity?

SAUGATA BHADURI: A couple of clarifications first. As far as your Siamese cook is concerned — I wouldn't think of that as very rare at all, given we're talking about the 16th–17th century. The possible admixture of Portuguese and Bengali, and people from the west coast, and people from northeastern India leading right through Burma into Siam, would not be very odd at all, given that Bengal was very much a trading centre for the Portuguese, and with the Arakanese, who occupy precisely the coastal region of Burma, which would have had a fair connection with Siam also. So I don't find it very surprising that there would be a cook of mixed Portuguese and East Asian descent who would still think of herself as Bengali while cooking in the kingdom of Siam.

The second remark, about the greater centrality of eastern over western Bengal — that may not be entirely true, because both the Palas and the Senas that you mentioned ruled from what would technically now be West Bengal, since Gauda, the capital, is in Malda. Of course, the Radh–Varendra line is a curious

one, and Malda could be considered eastern Bengal, so let's not take the eastern–western Bengal dichotomy too seriously. But historically the Palas and Senas primarily ruled from western Bengal — today's Malda district, clearly in West Bengal — and after the last of the Senas fled to the Bikrampur area to start a parallel empire, the western part of Bengal, Gauda, was conquered by Bakhtiyar Khilji's troops —

ARUP K. CHATTERJEE: Sorry to interrupt, Professor — but is that, in fact, when a major migration of Bengalis happens from Bengal towards present-day Uttar Pradesh, Haryana — there's actually a clan of Gaurs living in and around Haryana?

SAUGATA BHADURI: Yeah, certainly. And, if we take the term “Gaur” seriously, there are also the Gaur Saraswat Brahmins of Goa, since we mentioned Goa earlier — but let's drop that there and get back to what I was talking about. In the colonial era — starting from the late 15th century, but for Bengal really the early 16th century, 1505 or so — we find a parallel ascendancy of western and eastern Bengal ports. The Portuguese made Chittagong their “Porto Grande,” their great port, but they also had Hooghly-Satgaon, their “Porto Pequeno,” their small port. So it's not that eastern Bengal necessarily had ascendancy over western Bengal, either during the Pala–Sena periods or immediately after, during the early colonial era. There have been two nations, in a sense, and which was ascendant over the other varies over time — there's no historical constant of Dhaka being necessarily more important than Kolkata, or vice versa, except that Dhaka became the Mughal capital, and the Mughals and the British were, in a sense, contemporaries — the Mughals and the Portuguese, certainly, since the Portuguese came before the Mughals, Babur having arrived in 1526.

So, without mixing up the chronology — Kolkata became of any consequence only with the Portuguese and the Dutch, around the early 17th century, and was itself founded only in the late 17th century. Dhaka, by then, had already been the Mughal capital. So yes, by the late 16th, early 17th century, perhaps

because of Mughal expansion into Bengal, Dhaka becomes a little more important — but again, short-lived, because Murshidabad becomes the Mughal capital in Bengal by the early 18th century. Let's leave it at that.

But to return to your original question — from when do Bengalis think of themselves as Bengali? The term “Bongo,” or derivative words like “Bengal,” would have existed in textual sources for quite some time — even the recognition of a literary or linguistic style as “Gauda” exists in Sanskrit poetic treatises from at least the 7th century AD. But whether Bengal and Bengali linguistic-literary styles were constructs of an external vision, or whether Bengalis themselves thought of themselves as an ethnicity, is a different matter, and that self-recognition may not be quite that ancient. At the very least, from the rule of Shashanka — who ruled from Karnasuvarna, in today's Murshidabad, not from Gauda; Gauda is in Malda, Karnasuvarna is in Murshidabad — roughly the end of the 6th or early 7th century, we find some crystallization of a regional consciousness. From Shashanka's time we have a sense of Bengal as a kingdom, but whether Bengali as a language, and derivatively Bengalis as a people, retain any cultural memory from the 7th century is seriously doubtful, since literary texts written in Bengali don't have that antiquity.

That starts from the Charyapada onwards — late 11th, perhaps 10th century — and by the 13th–14th century we have a steady flow of verse composed in literary Bengali. It would be impossible for people to have built up such a rich literary storehouse without already having a fairly widespread linguistic and cultural identity. So the question of when Bengalis started thinking of themselves as Bengali must be connected to the Bengali language — and where the spoken antecedents of that are difficult to unravel or record. We must go by written records, and I would put it at the 11th–12th century onwards, by which point Bengalis would certainly have considered themselves a fairly homogeneous, literate, linguistic community.

ARUP K. CHATTERJEE: Thank you for an extremely meticulous response, Professor. Just to contextualize it — even Britain did not have a consciousness of being British, or of writing in English, till the 11th or 12th century; it's only with Chaucer, or maybe a few hundred years before him, that most people would recognize there to be a "British literature." But that's not to draw any parallel between Britain and Bengal in any sense of the word. I want to move on, Professor — and since we're also mindful of the time, I'll club two questions together. First: is there such a thing as Bengali exceptionalism? I don't mean this only as a historicist question, but also in terms of how we've experienced Bengal and its changing social, commercial, and political realities over the last hundred years. Is there something called Bengali exceptionalism — and should we, as Indians, look at Goa, Kashmir, Kerala, Andhra, Uttar Pradesh and Bengal each through different lenses, Bengal through the lens of that phrase? And, related — you've already touched on this — what has been Bengal's relationship with religion and culture? You mentioned the Buddhists, the Palas, the Senas — were the Senas, by the way, from Andhra?

SAUGATA BHADURI: Yeah, they're from southern India, to pinpoint it.

ARUP K. CHATTERJEE: Were they also the ones to introduce things like astrology and the occult? These are just questions, speculations. But — quickly, my questions are: what is Bengali exceptionalism, does it have any bearing on how we understand Bengal today, its politics and culture, and what has been Bengal's relationship with religion and culture?

SAUGATA BHADURI: I'm not a big fan of Bengali exceptionalism at all, because it's precisely these self-ideas that bog us down and make us complacent, self-congratulatory, or make us think of ourselves as better than others. But historically, Bengal may have had three moments of exceptionalism. The first, as I've mentioned, is when Bengal was thought of, in the 3rd–4th century BC, by Greek or Roman scholars, as an exceptional territory that could not be conquered — this obscure object of desire, so exceptional, unlike the rest of the Gangetic plain or the Punjab, that "we cannot

ever go there.” So there was an exceptionalism ascribed to Bengal in terms of its unconquerability.

The second comes probably during the more Brahmanical construction of Indianness in the northern part of India — the exceptional construction of Bengal as this curious place of either matriarchs, or of flesh-and-meat-eating characters not to be touched with a bargepole, or as the land of black magic, of *kalajadu*-knowing women who would turn your menfolk into sheep. So Bengal was ascribed a negative kind of exceptionalism, as a mystical land that should not be come into contact with, for fear of contamination.

And the third moment of exceptionalism — purely coincidental with the British conquering significant tracts of the Indian subcontinent — is really a footnote: if Siraj-ud-Daulah had not attacked Kolkata in 1756, the British would have had no reason to expand inland, and would have continued exactly as the French, the Portuguese and the Dutch did — happy to hold small coastal enclaves, the way the English were happy with Hong Kong in China. The whole idea of the English conquering inland India, rather than holding little coastal enclaves like the other European powers, was contingent on that particular accident. Siraj attacked Kolkata, and Kolkata had to fight back — otherwise Kolkata would have remained just another port town, like Pondicherry, like the ports of Goa. That third exceptionalism comes only because the English chose to expand inward and ended up conquering the whole subcontinent, and somehow Kolkata became the capital, and therefore the epicentre of print activity, of a certain enlightenment leading to what’s generally called the Bengal Renaissance — projecting Bengalis as the comprador of the burgeoning British rule, the enlightened elite who would thereafter be thought of as exceptionally modern.

So, apart from these three moments of exceptionalism, we seem to have inherited them and internalized them to such an extent that, even with Kolkata not having been the capital for more than a hundred years now, with the British having left seventy-five years ago, and being no longer negatively exceptional,

and certainly not exceptional militarily or in terms of resources, we continue to think of ourselves as exceptional — a handover of this modernity, this idea of us as forerunners of colonial modernity. We presumed that certain things that might happen elsewhere in the subcontinent — religious fundamentalism, communalism, obscurantism — would never touch us, that we would always stand above it, that we would always be great. That illusion has probably been shattered by a few recent electoral outcomes, and so the whole idea of exceptionalism is being questioned. I've honestly never been a fan of this exceptionalism, and the sooner we shed this idea of an inherited exceptionalism — that we ought to be exceptional simply because we are Bengali, because we were the forerunners of the Renaissance, the torchbearers of modernity, and that therefore no obscurantism can ever touch us — the better. This kind of complacent, internalized exceptionalism isn't something we should give much value to. Exceptionalism, if it's to mean anything, is something to work for and aspire to, not presume.

As for religion — Bengal has been an exceptionally religious space. We talked about the Buddhists a little while back; artifacts we think of as Buddhist have been found dating from the 3rd–4th century BC onwards. Buddhism would have significantly spread over Bengal by the 7th century or so, as sites like Mahasthangarh suggest. But with the Senas comes Brahmanical Hinduism, including the Sena king bringing in Kanyakubja Brahmins, because Bengal, again exceptionally, perhaps did not have Brahmins, and after the Buddhist Palas, the Senas needed Brahmins to perform their Hindu rituals. And Islam comes in the 13th century — but the speed with which both Hinduism and Islam gain ground, despite being very late entrants into a primarily animist or largely Buddhist Bengal, is a curious turnover: Bengal suddenly becomes, almost overnight, 40% Hindu and 60% Muslim around the 13th century. And since then, one could suggest that the two, in spite of largely peaceful coexistence, have generally thought of each other as “the other,” and there's therefore been a slight undercurrent of “two-nation-ness” running throughout. The bottom line is that religion has always been a very strong force in Bengal's construction of its own nationalisms and its own Bengalianness — always tied to

religious identity — and a secular, composite Bengalianness is a very late, very recent invention.

ARUP K. CHATTERJEE: I think that would stir up a hornet's nest if someone heard each phrase very carefully. Professor, I'm extremely impressed, and I have a lot to digest personally. I agree with most of it. I might want to ask you, in a different podcast someday — what do we make of Kali, and why is the image of Kali and mother worship so specific to Bengal, though I know there are exceptions? Maybe that's for another day. My current question — my last today — I know this goes beyond our purview of expertise, but since you've said we can discuss almost everything that makes sense in a culture studies course, I think this should be within the realm of our discussion. What do we make of parliamentary democracy, and especially the Constitution? I've been reading the Constituent Assembly debates recently, and there's a lot of representation of things like "Bande Mataram" and Bengalianness — Sanskritized Bengalianness, non-Sanskritized Bengalianness, Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical forms of Bengalianness — and I've seen shared strands of Assamese, Bengali and Odia identities trying to form a solidarity, not necessarily against Hindi nationalism, but at least to assert their autonomy. So, simply — given everything you've laid out about Bengal's history, its self-determination and its exceptionalism — do you think parliamentary democracy, as we have it — state and national elections, the Constitution, federalism — suits the destiny of Bengal? And when I ask that, I also mean recent political debates about why a certain form of government, or a certain ideology, is never going to be suitable for Bengal. The Communists ruled Bengal for forty years, and some thought that was the only ideology suited to this state, while others thought it was the worst possible one. So — does the current form of parliamentary democracy and federalism go hand in hand with Bengali heritage and history?

SAUGATA BHADURI: A short answer first, though I'll lengthen it a bit, as you say I tend to. The short answer is that parliamentary democracy, by definition, is the rule of the numerical majority, and when it became the

common, de facto, universal mode of governance, there was a presumption that, in spite of being majority rule, there would be a significant, enlightened section within that majority who would not steamroll minorities into submission simply because the system allowed it. That presumption — that there would be an enlightened minority to guide the majority in ethical ways — held on for some time. But it clearly doesn't hold any more, as power has devolved away from those enlightened few who, in the name of majority rule, actually held the reins according to their own ethical views. Once democracy devolves into what it really is — the rule of the numerical majority — majoritarianism can never be endorsed as the rightful, ethical mode of governance.

ARUP K. CHATTERJEE: So the numerical majority is the rule — but is that the rule of law?

SAUGATA BHADURI: It's not the rule of law. So, indeed, parliamentary democracy per se cannot be the ideal mode of governance for any territory, let alone Bengal, which, as we've discussed, is already a mixture of numerous communities and races — because without some modicum of accounting for the ethical needs of other communities, how can majority rule prove itself the best way of governing? That said, let me come back to something — when I spoke of exceptionalism earlier, I meant that Bengal has not been automatically exceptional, and we shouldn't complacently mourn the loss of an exceptionalism we merely inherited. The fact is, exceptionalism has been a constructed thing, not a real one — but that doesn't mean it shouldn't be something to aspire to, something to work towards.

While Bengal is just another province in this vast subcontinent, driven — like its eastern and western neighbours, and like India itself, for decades now — by majoritarian and religious-fanatical drives, we should still aspire to exceptionalism. Parliamentary democracy is probably here to stay; it is indeed the rule of the numerical majority, and therefore not necessarily the best or most ethical way of governing. But within, or in spite of, that, we must try to

sew in an ethical exceptionalism — where, in spite of being a majority, there is still an ethical concern for diversity, plurality, and minorities. Unless parliamentary democracy is well tempered with that kind of ethical exceptionalism, we don't have much chance of good governance. Bengal, fortunately, has historical precedents for exactly this.

The first would be the Bengal Pact of 1923, by Chittaranjan Das — unfortunately he died just a couple of years later, and the pact never came to fruition. Recognizing the numerical majority of Muslims, and yet the cultural capital and government-job holdings of the Hindu minority, he proposed reserving a significant percentage — I forget the exact figure, maybe 70% — of government jobs for Muslims. That pact never took off. Similarly, on the eve of Partition, two proposals were put to a vote — and a lot of noise has been made about Syama Prasad Mookerjee's role in Bengal's partition, though he really had just one vote, an insignificant small fry in that sense, but let's not get into that. A third resolution, which was never put to vote, was forwarded by Sarat Chandra Bose — Subhas Chandra Bose's elder brother — together with Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, proposing a unified, independent Bengal, which Nehru opposed for fear of Balkanization. That would have been a “confessionalist” form of government — an interesting model, followed also in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where premiership rotates among different communities. The Sarat Bose–Suhrawardy formula for a confessionalist government of a unified, sovereign Bengal was never put to a vote; what was voted on was only whether all of Bengal should go to Pakistan, or be partitioned, with West Bengal in India and East Bengal in Pakistan.

In short, both the Bengal Pact and the confessionalist formula tried to work with the numerical basis of democracy while looking, with an enlightened eye, to also benefit minorities — which “reservation,” in lay terms, might attempt to do. So, yes, I do believe parliamentary democracy cannot, in its basics, be the ideal mode of governance for any territory, Bengal included — but we're stuck with it, and doomed to be governed by the numerical majority. What do we do? We need to reindulcate within ourselves the things that aren't automatic —

secularism, modernity, enlightenedness, ethical care for the other — which need to be worked towards, so that we can temper the brute majority rule that parliamentary democracy is, with the kind of ethical sheen that would make it the rule of law for the benefit of everyone who would like to call themselves Bengali, and identify with this land — itself so divided by more than one international border. That kind of enlightened tempering, of a worked-out exceptionalism alongside parliamentary democracy, is perhaps what we should work towards.

ARUP K. CHATTERJEE: Thank you so much, that's extremely enlightening, Professor. Since you brought up Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee — Barrister Mookerjee, who was also Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University — recently there have been many identities attached to him, good, bad, and otherwise. I've read his speeches in the Assembly as well, and although he hadn't served a prison sentence like the others — Nehru was in prison for nine years or more, and one understands where that's coming from — I think the exceptionalism that he and others were trying to chalk out for Bengal was exactly along the lines you're suggesting today. They weren't inheriting or celebrating some automatic exceptionalism, but, as you've rightly pointed out, trying to cultivate exceptional values in a state with a Muslim majority. We forget that Pakistan was a “moth-eaten” territory that Muhammad Ali Jinnah didn't want — he wanted Kolkata as his capital. So Kolkata and Bengal were Muslim-majority sites, and that's why the interests of minorities were so close to the hearts of the constitutionalists back in the 1940s. So thank you for reminding us of this widely forgotten fact, Professor, and thank you for all your other very wonderful, layered, and knowledgeable remarks. I very much look forward to having you back on my show whenever your time and inclination permit. Ladies and gentlemen, this is the end of our conversation today, but I hope to be back with you with a new and exciting conversation very shortly. Thank you for tuning in — please like, share, and subscribe to *The Unofficial Seminar*. And to Professor Bhaduri — thank you so much, once again.

SAUGATA BHADURI: Thank you — it was a pleasure being on your show, albeit it couldn't be much of a “show,” since my video camera didn't work. So it's more tell than show, but nevertheless —

ARUP K. CHATTERJEE: Thank you so much, Professor — as witty and as deep as always. Dear audience, thank you for joining. Until next time, thanks!