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## CITIES IN BENGAL

### SPACE FOR NATIONALISTIC EMOTIONS<sup>1</sup>

#### ABSTRACT

The European concept of nationalism became a useful instrument in creating new identities of peoples of South Asia. In Bengal, traditional identities were given political dimensions, and a number of emotion building symbols, narrations, invented traditions and characteristics of the land, were employed to attract the people to the idea of a particular nationalism. The role of cities in creating the nationalisms of Bengal is discussed in the present paper. The examples of Dhaka, Kolkata and Murshidabad are considered on the one hand, whereas on the other there is an attempt of a comparison between the role of these three cities and the influence of the countryside and the rural landscape of Bengal in appealing to the sentiments of Bengalis in their nationalistic discourse. Conclusions are submitted for further considerations.

**Keywords:** Bengal, nationalism, city, rural landscape

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<sup>1</sup> A note from the author: This voice from Poland about Bengal may be considered as an attempt to open discussion on subjects that seem relevant to the questions of nationalism and nation. Alternative opinions may be presented from Bangladesh and indeed they are welcome.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A city is not just a human settlement bigger than a village. This description should rather be reserved for a town. "City" originally was a term to describe a town in England which had a cathedral and the bishop's residence. Far from this meaning, the present understanding of a city is that of a central quarter of administration and business buildings surrounding it.

Making a conjunction of nationalism and city against the background of Bengal does not imply that both categories were new to the region. While nationalism as presented later in this text may indeed be seen as a concept applied to the environment of Bengal externally and as late as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the same cannot be said of a city in the sense of a uniquely characterized capital town.

Kautilya<sup>2</sup> in his *Arthashastra* gives detailed instructions how to build "the capital city." The schematic plan contains indications for constructing facilities for various services and trades in order to obtain the best serving center for the royal residence and the temple.<sup>3</sup> In the pre-colonial India neither cities nor in fact kingdoms were subjects of reference in identity building. No one heard of "Maghadians" or "Pataliputrans." Identities were constructed rather along the varna division lines.

The question of identity comes up in times of change or confronting the "others." Being usually the areas of interactions with the newcomers, cities were the places where the question of identity was posed in the first place. In the course of time the "notion of nation"<sup>4</sup> became an imported concept that in India (including Bengal) was not only found useful in constructing answers on subjects of new identities, but also when colored with nationalistic emotions aimed at convincing people of validity and in fact indispensability of having an independent state.

## 2. NATIONALISM

Nationalism was the European invention offering a new formula of identity to the peoples of the continent uprooted by waves of socio-political revolutions supported by the techno-economical continuity of changes projected as progress. The number of definitions and attempted explanations of nationalism is high and gives such a variety of choices that verges on making an impression that the term is often applied at will to describe various emancipation movements.

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<sup>2</sup> Kautilya was a historical figure and a hero of many legends. It is generally understood he worked in Pataliputra during the reign of Chandragupta Maurya although scholars place him in the period between 100B.C. to 150A.D.

<sup>3</sup> Kautilya, *The Arthashastra*, ed. rearranged, trans. and introduced by L.N. Rangarajan, New Delhi 1987, pp. 184-194.

<sup>4</sup> G. Aloysius, *Nationalism without a Nation in India*, New Delhi 2008, p. 15.

Jawaharlal Nehru once wrote: *The Hindu nationalism started its existence during the reign of Aurangzeb, and its creator was Shivaji, but the nationalism of that time was colored with feudalism, local sentiments and sectarian emotions.*<sup>5</sup> This quotation may be an example of a free usage of “nationalism” to describe phenomena distant from what only long-after Shivaji and Aurangzeb was to appear as nationalism.

Nationality is often seen as an intensely poetical and dramatic affair and activities of peoples or activities undertaken in their name are the sources of that historical initiative. All national movements are trying to cover the parochial and temporary character of processes in which their nation was shaped in the historical imagination.<sup>6</sup>

In my *Źródła nacjonalizmu bengalskiego i bangladeskiego* [Sources of Bengali and Bangladeshi nationalisms]<sup>7</sup> while elaborating on nationalism in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Bengal (both during the Raj and after 1947) I worked on a presumption that demanding a sovereign state is an indispensable element for an emancipation movement of any kind to be included within the term “nationalistic.” In other words, in the case of Bengal the phenomenon of the Bengali Renaissance in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and even the Bhadrakol identity or the Language Movement of East Bengal of Pakistan, cannot be labeled as representing “nationalism.” In none of the cases independent statehood was claimed.<sup>8</sup>

In Bengal such discourse was enforced upon the inhabitants of East Pakistan who were seeking autonomy and emancipation. When they failed to achieve them, they got their statehood after a bloody civil war and an international conflict. Never have the Bengalis of the Western part of Bengal claimed separate statehood on the basis of their Bengalness.

There is no need to state, as some authors do, that the European concept of nationalism “was corrupted” in Asia.<sup>9</sup> Although being new and in fact strange in South Asia (including Bengal) as an answer to the question of who I am, the concept of nation and nationalism was found a useful tool not only by the elite, but also by groups mostly united on foundations different than in Europe. So describing nationalism in Asia as “corrupted” is not justified. It became an effective instrument mainly of South Asian elites to pursue their goals and ambitions.

Nationalisms often take their key symbols and material for creation of myths and ideologically useful narrations not from the urban context but from the countryside.<sup>10</sup> Originating from concepts rooted in emotions rather than in ideologies which offer explanations to a wider range of subjects, nationalism – in spite of its pursuers’ claims

<sup>5</sup> P. Parashkar, *Nationalism, Its Theories and Principles in India*, New Delhi 1996, p. 135.

<sup>6</sup> S. Kaviraj, *The Imaginary Institution of India*, Ranikhet 2010, p. 88.

<sup>7</sup> M. Moron, *Źródła nacjonalizmu bengalskiego i bangladeskiego*, Kraków 2013.

<sup>8</sup> It is a different case of defining nationalism with reference to peoples who already have their state. This is not the case with all the Bengalis.

<sup>9</sup> E. Kedouri, *Nationalism in Asia and Africa*, London 1960, *passim*.

<sup>10</sup> J. Hearn, ‘Big City: Civic Symbolism and Scottish Nationalism’, *Scottish Affairs*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (2003), pp. 57–58, at <http://dx.doi.org/10.3366/scot.2003.0005>.

to a deep and sublime nature of the phenomenon – do not have the volume of thought and ideology that could emerge into some kind of “nationology.”

Sometimes nationalism is even denied the status of an ideology<sup>11</sup> as it does not present any comprehensive concept of the world. It may not be easy to mention any philosophers of nationalism. The depth of nationalism lies in emotions and its calculated use for political purposes rather than in rational arguments.

The concept of nation and nationalism should rather be perceived as yet another proposal to give a satisfactory option of identity to groups which in the process of expansion organize themselves upon foundations of various criteria. The fact that such concept was formed in Europe does not make it useless in other lands nor should its adaptation to a particular environment, for example Bengal, be considered as corruption. Yet while it is true that in Europe the role of medieval heroes, stories of defending the land, and narrations based on myths were significant, the same cannot be said of successful nationalisms in Bengal and in the whole of South Asia. By a successful nationalism I mean one which attained the objective of its nation state. There was only one exception: the Hindu nationalism in its discourse referred to the “golden days” of the past and its heroes. That phenomenon of Hindu nationalism originated from defending culture and glorious past of the Hindu faithful who became a political force demanding the Hindu *rashtra*, yet never attained this statehood objective.

The discussed features of nation and nationalism as promoters of modernity which create a new order and distance if do not cut itself all together from the Pre-Industrial and Pre-Revolutionary Era (pre-18<sup>th</sup> century Europe) may raise a question whether the Hindu nationalism should in fact be considered as such.

Rabindranath Tagore, whose poems are the lyrics of national anthems of India and Bangladesh, wrote about nationalism:

*Nationalism is the training of a whole people for a narrow ideal and when it gets hold of their minds it is sure to lead them to moral degeneracy and intellectual blindness. We cannot but hold firm the faith that this Age of Nationalism, of gigantic vanity and selfishness, is only a passing phase in civilization and those who are making permanent arrangements for accommodating this temporary mood of history will be unable to fit themselves for the coming age when the true spirit of freedom will have sway.*<sup>12</sup>

And the following words show his opinion about the very concept of nation: *We have no word for nation in our language. When we borrow the word from other people it never fits.*<sup>13</sup>

Having these opinions in mind we may explore the stories of nationalism in Bengal while trying to avoid unilateral Eurocentric judgments in the sense of presenting nationalism with its claims to an independent state (known from our European expe-

<sup>11</sup> A. Meller, ‘Czy nacjonalizm jest ideologią?’, *Dialogi Polityczne*, No. 10 (2008), *passim*.

<sup>12</sup> *Great Works of Rabindranath Tagore*, Delhi 2004, pp. 538-539.

<sup>13</sup> *The Calcutta Municipal Gazette*, Vol. 75, No. 21 (1961), Supplement Issue: R. Bhattacharya (ed.), *Tagore Birth Centenary 1861-1961* in L.A. Gordon, *Bengal. The Nationalist Movement*, New Delhi 1979, p. 156.

rience) as a sole option of presenting the story of Bengal and its people. Therefore, describing the role of cities in the nationalist narratives in Bengal must not be an artificial structure of selective fragments of history clustered together to prove some *a priori* set idea of the cities being of great importance or of little relevance to the nationalism as it has appeared and may still appear in Bengal.

Nationalism occurred in Bengal – not as a refuge for the uprooted people but as an useful instruments of consolidating power to the new elite in its bid for taking leadership of the people. In that sense it was indeed the Tagorian “mood of history” that opened the way to a political career for identities which were not primordial in their nature and which had the sense of an artificial construction. The constructions within which the Bengalis somehow at a certain moment of history decided to live were the state of Pakistan born of the Islamic DNA and the state of India as a modern concept referring to citizenship as the only criterion of participation in such state project.

### 3. CENTRAL QUESTION OF THE PAPER

The subject presented for discussion in this paper is if, and possibly to what extent, cities of Bengal were (and are) part of constructing emotions of the nationalist narration of history of the region. The aim of such construction of nationalist discourse is to offer an answer to the question of identity and is based on politicizing characteristics by “painting” them with emotions drawn from historical or invented components. These components may be heroes of the past, graphic symbols, historical events, myths, legends, glorification of landscape etc.

The cities with their often central part in creating historical events and development of socio-political processes may well serve as components of building national emotions. There may be many examples of such phenomenon indicated in Europe. The adjective “heroic” is commonly added to the names of such European cities as Warsaw, Moscow or Stalingrad. Some, like Paris, Krakow, Rome or Vienna, are glorified for their unique beauty, history and other qualities which may raise emotions to be added to the nationalistic feelings. Songs and poems are not only composed about these cities, but these pieces of art are commonly known and are a natural part of emotional attachment of people brought up in a particular national environment.

With cities being present in the history of Bengal it may be interesting to open a discussion on their role in creating nationalist emotions among the people of Bengal. In other words, do the names of Bengali cities – and I am bringing forward Dhaka, Kolkata and Murshidabad – touch an emotional cord in the national identity of Bengalis or are there other subjects which have a greater role in shaping these emotions?

The central question of this paper is explored with the support of references, discussions the author had and also as a result of the author’s own experience of living four years in Dhaka and four years in Kolkata.

#### 4. CITIES IN BENGAL

A city among its other functions is the most common place of political activities, especially when it is a center of decision making on a larger scale than small towns and villages and a place where the society climaxes the highest degree of complexity.

I would like to consider the following cities in Bengal while looking into their role in the formation of nationalism: Dhaka, Kolkata, Murshidabad.

Was it the emerging nationalism or rather nationalisms that shaped the city/cities of Bengal or were the cities with their specific environment best fit to become the fertile soil for the nationalist ideas? Even though the rural parts of Bengal were affected in the greatest way by the new order with its economical and financial rules introduced by the British Raj, it was a city where representatives of the Raj – the British officials, merchants, soldiers, and their families – had a direct personal contact with the “locals.” Clearly, the results of the growing colonial power were not as visible to the inhabitants of the mofussil as they were in the cities or rather should we say in the capital city of the Raj in Bengal – Calcutta.

Thus in the cities, everyday life of the local population was disciplined by the regulations of office, cantonment and bungalow.<sup>14</sup> The power of “the stranger” directly affected the life of people, regulating all their activities including the daily routines which had to be adjusted to the working hours, habits, and schedules set by the colonial power. The intersections and interactions between the representatives of the Raj and the local population in the cities created the frames of the colonial discourse. In other words, the impressions that the British developed as a result of a direct and long-term coexistence and some kind of cohabitation in the cities and in particular in Calcutta, became accepted as evaluations and opinions about the people of the land. This clash of the daily routine enforced by the colonial power (in office, cantonment and bungalow) with the pre-colonial habits and routines resulted in establishing negative opinions of the colonized people, presenting them as unreliable, not understanding the meaning of time and punctuality, etc.<sup>15</sup>

This direct and long-term contacts between the locals and the foreign occupying power created an opportunity to present to the local elite what Europe could offer in terms of education, arts, intellectual thought etc. That offer was eagerly accepted by the elite of the Bengali Hindus in the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Big cities, and Calcutta in particular, where the venues of the processes enforced by the British and accommodating reactions of the Bengalis who tried to function and possibly gain from the presence of the British Raj, while not abandoning their own spiritual and cultural heritage. However, such attitude was foreign to the Bengali Muslims who, for a long time, distanced themselves from the British offers of education and

<sup>14</sup> R. Guha, ‘A Colonial City and Its Time(s)’ in idem, *The Small Voice of History. Collected Essays*, ed. P. Chatterjee, Ranikhet 2009, p. 409.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 411.

some kind of cohabitation resulting from working for the Raj, thus putting themselves beyond the processes of the Bengali Renaissance and possibility of acquiring European education.

It was a Bengali city where after more than five decades of “romance” with European arts, intellectual ideas etc. a significant part of the elite concluded that the British were the occupying force and in spite of numerous gains of material, technological and administrative nature they could not be the rulers of Bengal or the whole subcontinent.

The cities will be considered with regard to their role in the formation of nationalism in Bengal in the following aspects:

- as urban centers where the complex society was developing in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Bengal,
- the way they are referred to in the nationalist narration,
- their role in the nationalist scenarios for the 21<sup>st</sup> century Bengal.

None of the cities or towns in Bengal has been significantly engaged with its potential of history, symbolism or emotions to create nationalist narration.

For the sake of this elaboration three places are considered as cities in Bengal. The differentiation is set upon the notion of capital city.

Calcutta was the Presidency town,<sup>16</sup> Dhaka was the early Moghul and provincial capital (1905-1911) and Murshidabad was the Moghul capital of the pre-British and early colonial times. The Presidency town was not only the place of municipal administration but also a home to judicial authorities (Statute of George III, Act of 1856, 1863, the Consolidating Act of 1876, to mention just few sources of law). The elite of the Presidency town in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century should not be viewed as the representation of the avant-garde of the autonomy and independence movement which considered the British as enemies and parasites exploiting the riches of the city.

In his presidential address at the session of Indian National Congress in 1899 while talking about Calcutta R.C. Dutt said: *I have seen year after year the improvements effected, the sanitary reforms done, the wasteful expenditure cut down and every department of the office brought to order by the elected commissioners within the last twenty five years.*<sup>17</sup> Hardly a speech one would hear in The Writers Building in the last decades. In other words, the capital city of Bengal was the place of constructing the Europe-based model projects regarding various aspects of life and making these projects the vehicle for claiming control over them within a nation state. The nation state however was pursued within the terms of mass politics addressing identities which were most likely to raise emotions resulting in the expected action at the ballot box.

For nationalism in Europe – and let me take Poland as an example – cities like old capitals, sites of battles, places of religious importance are very useful in constructing the nationalist narration. Kraków, the capital city until 1596, Częstochowa with the important Monastery of Jasna Góra, the places of battles won or lost – all are important elements of each nationalist narration proposed to Poles. There are particular buildings

<sup>16</sup> R.C. Majumdar (ed.), *British Paramountcy and Indian Renaissance*, Part 1, Mumbai 2002, p. 846.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 848.



in the cities such as castles, churches etc. which are used in the nationalist narrations. In Kraków, Wawel Castle and St. Mary's Basilica (even though erected by the German merchants) are, among others, the monuments considered as important elements of the Polish narration of the city's history. In Warsaw, this role is served by the Royal Castle, the rebuilt Old Town etc.

However, the urban aspects in the European nationalist discourse do not stand in contrast to the notion expressed by the quoted earlier Sudipta Kaviraj on the rural and often pre-modern imagery of nationalist discourses. Both rural and urban elements may appear in the nationalistic discourse with different intensity in varying historical circumstances.

The idea of a city is important for the nationalism in Poland, Scotland or France, just to give a few European examples. Yet it does not diminish the role of the idyllic rural life and the images associated with it of the pure, morally strong men or women, which are to be perceived as the example of true Scottish, Polish or French nationals.

### A. Dhaka

Archeological findings confirm that places near Dhaka such as Sabhar, Mahona or Dakuri were the sites of locations established by the Pala dynasty. Before the arrival of Islam there was also the rulers' residence in the nearby Sonargaon.

Dhaka became the capital of Moghul Bengal in 1608 A.D. (some sources mention 1610 A.D.).<sup>18</sup> Its name may originate from a Hindu temple Dhakeshwari, but the city and its landmarks are parts of the Muslim heritage of Bengal. Dhaka was the capital city of Bengal for almost a century, until 1704.

In other words, in the period of establishing the British rule in Bengal Dhaka lost its former importance as the Moghul "big city." With the British getting the Diwani Rights to collect taxes in Bengal in 1765 and their growing power which resulted in diminishing the role of nawab families, it was Calcutta, and not Dhaka, which rose to prominence.

One must remember the revolution which in fact sidelined the Nawab of Bengal as a ruler of the region and thus changed the whole distribution of power in Bengal. Until the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century Muslim princes had ruled Bengal for hundreds of years. That rule was never questioned nor was it the target of any revolutions or uprisings. The Hindus were a minority in Bengal not because the Muslim rulers wanted to destroy Hinduism with power and sword but because Islam, brought to Bengal mainly by the Sufis, spread quickly and became the creed of the land. In fact, the Muslim rulers of India never had any political agenda to eradicate Hinduism and convert all Hindus to Islam. The areas close to Delhi, the imperial Moghul capital, were always inhabited if not by a majority of Hindus, then at least by a significant percentage of them. Thus Bengal, a region on the eastern borders of the Muslim world in continental Asia in the past as well as now, became a Muslim majority land. In other words, there was a certain social and political balance during the Moghul rule.

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<sup>18</sup> C. Baxter, S. Rahman, *Historical Dictionary of Bangladesh*, New Delhi 2004, p. 80.



The context of the Muslim rulers and elites removed from the position of power and authority by the British within few decades (counting from the battle of Plassey in 1757) is the one in which we should view the unexpected positioning of Dhaka as the capital city of the eastern part of Bengal following the division of Bengal in 1905.

In 1905 there was no living memory of the Nawab's statehood in Bengal. Yet, we may say that the Bengali Muslims, though being late starters in comparison to the Bengali Hindus, started to create their activities in the political environment of the region based on European sociopolitical (and technical) inventions.

Dhaka stepped into the role of a capital city as a result of Lord G.N. Curzon's evaluation of the growing strength of the Congress Party with the Bengalis as the core and root of its political thought.

The idea of partition of Bengal was supported by the argument of size of Bengal, both in terms of territory and demography, allegedly making it ungovernable.

Yet pre-1905 Bengal was not divided along the borders of regions inhabited by Oriya-speaking people and Assamese population, but cut through, which made its eastern part the only directly ruled province of British India with a Muslim majority.

Dhaka was the capital city for almost 100 years during the Moghul period and the capital of the Muslim majority province during its existence between 1905 and 1911. It was also a place where the Muslim League was founded in 1906. Neither Dhaka nor any other city played any emotional or narrative role in creating or supporting the process of forming of Muslim nationalism.

Unusual as it may sound, religion, i.e. an element of an ancient order, pre-modern in its appearance, was the foundation upon which the concept, modern in its nature, of nationalism or one of the nationalisms developed in Bengal. The idea was that being a Muslim in the British India was sufficient to be part of a project claiming a sovereign state for them. Thus, if any city should be mentioned in terms of emotions in the construction of Muslim nationalism in the British India it would rather be Mecca than any other city in India including Bengal. This may sound in line with the ever-present British suspicions of the Indian Muslims loyalties placed outside India or indeed outside the whole British Empire. Apart from the short-lived Khilafat movement enjoying the almost pan-Indian support, it is not justified to attribute pan-Islamic loyalties or special political sentiments to the Holy Cities of Islam. As future will have shown, the Muslim nation theory (in fact the Two Nation Theory which should not be seen as a solely Islamic invention since the role of the Hindu nationalists may also be recalled in this instance) led to the misconception of the insufficiently prepared state of Pakistan which in its original form established in 1947 existed for merely 24 years.

It was only in 1952 that Dhaka became the place where important events took place having the potential to create a new quality of nationalism among the Bengalis living in East Pakistan, as that part of Pakistan has been called since 1955. It may appear strange to talk about the new quality of nationalism with respect to the people who barely five years earlier succeeded to materialize their emotions and ideas of a Muslim nation state. Yet, this is exactly how matters developed in the scenario where primordial identity components were somehow taken for granted and not seen as politically promising for

building a nation. I mean here first of all the language. It is necessary to state also that somehow the new state of Pakistan never considered it indispensable to address the obvious and justified claims of Bengalis of East Pakistan, asking to accommodate them in their role as equal citizens and hosts of the new state.

The Bengalis of Pakistan did not demand independence from Pakistan in 1952, not even in the last days before the announcement of the murderous Pakistani "Operation Torchlight," but Dhaka became a site of demonstrations demanding the emancipation of Bengali language. In February 1952, these justified aspirations of considering Bengali at par with Urdu as the official state languages brought clashes which in turn resulted in many casualties. The emancipation movement has its martyrs, all of whom were students of the Dhaka University. The emancipation movement, which begun practically just after Pakistan had become the "two wings state," indicated the weakness of the idea of building the notion of nation and nationalism based on religion. That weakness eventually brought the idea to collapse in 1971, when the state of Bangladesh was declared and founded. It is a different question what nation inhabits Bangladesh and what nationalism we are to discuss in its case. The answer is not easy. As there were no demands for independence from the east wing of Pakistan, we cannot speak of nationalist emotions and claims to a nation state coming from the Bengalis of that land.

Dhaka was a place where the Bengali language emancipation movement started. It was always the centre of the Bengali intelligentsia of the eastern part of Bengal, but somehow it continued to be less prominent than Calcutta. Therefore, it is justified to say that the degrees and levels of importance of the cities in Bengal in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were established by means of decisions made by the British.

It was not Dhaka but Calcutta that was considered the best possible location for establishing the militarily protected business center of the East India Company.

Dhaka was a city where important events concerning discourses of Islamic nationalism and nationalism in Bangladesh took place. Yet Dhaka does not stand for any symbolic or emotional characteristics of nationalisms created there. For the people of Bangladesh it is of course their capital, a place honouring their heroes with monuments, however while visiting Dhaka one somehow cannot escape an impression that the attitude towards this city, apparently filled with warmth and emotions, is yet to be felt and expressed much deeper than only through perfunctory sentiments.

## B. Murshidabad

Murshidabad was the capital city of the undivided Bengal during the Moghul times since 1704 until the beginning of the British rule in 1757, and continued to be a judicial and revenue administration center until 1790. By then Calcutta had already become a central location of British interests in Bengal that were growing for 100 years. This city may be seen as having a potential to be referred to when constructing the nationalist narration in Bengal.

Apart from serving as a capital city at least until 1757, the city has many architectural monuments like palaces, mosques, cemeteries etc., mostly dating back to the 18<sup>th</sup>

and 19<sup>th</sup> century. Murshidabad remained in India after the partition in 1947, which may explain why the city is practically absent from the list of tourist attractions of West Bengal although tourism is high on the promotion agenda of both the West Bengal and central government. These monuments stand as a testament to the Muslim Nawab rule in Bengal. Secular India always finds it a little difficult to accept that the most famous and thus most visited places present in the general imagination of Indian historical heritage were built during the reign of Muslim rulers. The monuments such as the Red Fort (in Delhi and Agra), the Taj Mahal, Fatehpur Sikri, and Qutb Minar are obligatory not only on the tourist agenda but also in the programs of official visits to India. Promoting other places to that role, e.g. Murshidabad, does not appear to be the line to be followed.

Murshidabad is a non-entity city in Bengal in terms of a worldwide awareness of its existence in comparison to such cities in West Bengal as Kolkata, Darjeeling, or even Durgapur and Burdwan. At least some of the monuments of Murshidabad heritage are described by visitors as being in a dilapidated state. One may attempt to imagine what would have been the position of Murshidabad had it been part of East Pakistan and later Bangladesh. It could not be excluded that when during the British Raj the first partition of Bengal took place in 1905, Murshidabad was considered a venue bearing much of the past glories of the Nawabs' rule, so it would not serve the purpose of being an instrument in elevating the Muslim majority's territory of Bengal to the level of province; on the contrary, it was done without using symbols or historical references that might revitalize the events of 1765 and the following decades.

At least a part of the Bengali Muslims' intelligentsia say Murshidabad carries emotional weight and value for them.<sup>19</sup> It is remembered by many as the last outpost of the Muslim power before the era of the British Raj.

Some of the Muslim princes settled in Calcutta and new Muslim neighborhoods developed in that city. No one went to settle in Murshidabad and it became another "mofussil"<sup>20</sup> town, although lineage traced to Murshidabad is still regarded as a sign of pedigree. It would be interesting to explore that subject with wider research of differences in emotional meaning of Murshidabad to different generations of Bengali Muslims in Bangladesh and in West Bengal.

Since the complete discourse of the Bengali nationalism is one which has not yet happened, the treasures and monuments of Murshidabad may be seen as the elements waiting for the time when that Bengali nationalism will surface.

I consider "the Bengali nationalism" as a term that may be applied to emotions and concepts of establishing the state of all people living in Bengal, speaking Bengali language, sharing common past and elements of culture though not necessarily religion. When religion becomes less attractive as a tool of political activity, the Muslim heritage

<sup>19</sup> Private correspondence with Dr Perween Hasan – Department of Islamic History and Culture, The Dhaka University; among others author of *Sultans and Mosques. The Early Muslim Architecture of Bangladesh*, London 2007.

<sup>20</sup> Part of a country outside the urban center, at <<http://en.wiktionary.org/wik/mofussil>>, 10 August 2011.

of Murshidabad will probably not be characterized as such, but will be perceived as an important component of the Bengali historical mosaic.

### C. Kolkata

The biggest city in Bengal is Kolkata, until recently called Calcutta. Calcutta is commonly known to have been established in 1690 by Job Charnock. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century there was a location named Kalikata between the villages of Suttanutte and Govindpur. That seems to be the basis of the claims of the Bengali communists turned nationalists that Calcutta had existed before Job Charnock founded the city on 24 August 1690. The claims are based on the fact that in 1608 Sabarno Roy Chowdhuri family got the ownership of the three places mentioned above. Kalikata was also mentioned in a document from 1596.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, when Job Charnock arrived, Kolikata had already existed and the question of honoring him with the title of the city founder should not arise. Consequently, the Judges of the Kolkata High Court decreed on 17 May 2003 that Job Charnock was not the city founder.

The very fact that the question of who was the founder of Kolkata was a valid political issue at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century leads us to a conclusion that the subject was important to some groups to the extent of being pushed to the court which resulted in a decision altering the established historical facts.

It may be noted that the renaming of Indian cities including Calcutta was promoted by the generation of politicians who had no part in the sacrifices of the freedom fighters.<sup>22</sup> They attempted to present themselves as heirs to the freedom struggle in a way that all of the founding fathers of India or Pakistan thought too petty and irrelevant. Nevertheless, it appeals to the Bengali politicians of last decade or so, to use the name of the biggest Bengali city in order to revitalize the spirit of local pride. However, it is done in a way that impresses few and is not in any way a building material for any pan-Bengali feelings.

Calcutta was the very epitome of British power in the East. It was claimed by the British as "ours" not just in a sense of a colonized place, but as a place where the spirit of the city with its buildings, streets, entertainment etc. bore witness to the European styles transplanted and adapted in Bengal. It was a difficult task in 1947 to fill such a city with new spirit and new scopes of pride. The character of the city in the case of Calcutta did not change in any revolutionary way when India attained independence.

Having in mind what has been said about the British spirit or character of Calcutta as the British perceived it, one has to emphasize the role of Calcutta as the nest of a kind of self-proclaimed new and unique group. In the narration of the Bengali nationalist discourses cities were the venues where interactions with Europe resulted in bringing European concepts to Bengal, first by the British and later by the Bengalis who were educated in Europe. The prime role in these processes has to be attributed to the city of

<sup>21</sup> T.R. Barrett, *Calcutta. Strange Memoirs, Foreign Perceptions*, Kolkata 2004, pp. 10-11.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Calcutta. Although founded by the British, it was important not only for the colonizers, but also became the birthplace of a new and influential group of the Hindu Bengalis – the Bhadraklok.

Cultural issues were the most important scope of reference and identity construction of the Bhadraklok. The group consisted of Bengali Hindus: lawyers, medical doctors, zamindars, westernized intelligentsia, and administration clerks of a medium rank, who may be considered as the new elite or the elite which rose to prominence mainly as a result of various types of interactions with Europe. Yet the Bhadraklok members came also from the old elite who acquired their status and “varnian” position at birth. The Bhadraklok emphasized their education and manners (bhadrata), which they considered as unique elements giving them status and prestige and placing them high above others. The Bhadraklok thought themselves to be the only group conscious of their identity and at the same time capable of leading India to independence. They did not attribute their values to the birth status, but to the acquired mental and cultural qualities. Yet the essence of the Bhadraklok views was a precise distribution of social responsibilities according to each individual’s varna or caste. Hinduism was at the core of the Bhadraklok ideas, yet they were far away from the militancy of Hindu nationalist organizations such as RSS. At the same time, this strong group could not find a space for their aspirations. The Bhadraklok considered themselves the bearers of qualities of mind and heart which allowed attaining a higher position in the society and predestined them to become the natural leaders of nation. Being Bengali what other nation could they lead?

With all the characteristics mentioned above which Calcuttan Bhadraklok represented mostly, if not entirely, it has to be stated that they perceived the Bengali Muslims as a community incapable of any national feelings and thus unable to develop emotions and desires attributed to nationalism with its claim for a nation state. Saratchandra Chattopadhyay wrote in his essay “The Current Hindu-Muslim Problems”<sup>23</sup> that Hindus and Muslims are not only different, but basically unequal, with Muslims being inferior to Hindus. When Bengal was governed by the Muslim parties, i.e. 1937-1947, the Bhadraklok became the great promoters of separation from the Muslims.

Thus when in 1905 Bengal was divided for the first time, the Calcuttan Hindu elites were at the forefront of a struggle for one Bengal. When the notion of partition of British India, including the partition of Bengal started to gain ground, the Bhadraklok, who by then became a strong group with equally strong aspirations, were the most fervent supporters of the idea as they did not want any statehood joint venture with the Bengali Muslims.

I have devoted this fragment to Bhadraklok because all these processes took place mainly in Calcutta.

<sup>23</sup> S.C. Chattopadhyay (1876-1938) – Bengali writer and essayist. Presented a paper ‘Bartaman Hindu Musلمان Samasya,’ on the Bengal Provincial Conference 1926. See also K.N. Pannikar, *Presidential Speech at Indian History Congress*, Kannur, 28-30 December 2009, see at <[http://www.hindu.com.2009/01/27\\_stories](http://www.hindu.com.2009/01/27_stories)>, 6 November 2010; <<http://ddkusambi.blogspot.com/.../culture-as-site-of-struggle>>, 15 March 2016.

## 5. CITIES AND NATIONALISMS IN BENGAL

No particular city or place held any significant position in the nationalist discourses in Bengal. Dhaka was the capital of Bengal from 1608 until 1704. The Muslim League was founded there in 1906, yet none of the creators of the idea which resulted in the state of Pakistan presented Dhaka as a link between the present (1947) success of Muslim statehood and the times when Dhaka played an important role in a state ruled by Muslim Nawabs and Kings. Neither was Murshidabad referred to in any emotional constructs promoting Muslim nationalism among Bengalis.

Even though nationalism in South Asia is often seen as an instrument of the elite, it may as well be stated that had the masses not considered widely nationalist slogans as adequately responding to their grievances, the nationalist concepts would not have played a role in the mass politics which was the way politics started to function in the subcontinent in the 1920s. It was the mass politics that created the environment for the question of which identity contains greater potential for a success at the ballot box. Although the mass politics started as a European concept planted into the environment of Bengali urban elite, it could only play a meaningful role when interacting with the masses. If Dhaka and perhaps Murshidabad could be called the city of Bengali Muslims, the same cannot be said about Calcutta. Calcutta was a city to a large extent claimed by the Bengali Hindus, though certainly this description would not reflect the character of that city.

This is another aspect of the position of cities of Bengal in the building of nationalist discourse in that region. To what extent the three Bengali cities mentioned above were “nationalized”? The question may sound strange, because the obvious answer is that all of them are cities of the Bengalis. Yet “Bengalness” was never a strong enough foundation for Bengali nationalism, which is the nationalism of all the Bengalis. With the rather recent wave of changing the names of the cities as a way of demonstrating Indian patriotism there are also voices in favour of calling the state not West Bengal, but Bangla.<sup>24</sup> After all, Bangla is the name of the language and literally the land of the Bengalis can only naturally be called Bangladesh had it not been for the already existing application of that name.

T.R. Barrett quotes a person commenting on the possibility of changing Bengal into Bangla: *For the Bengal Club, that elitist of elite clubs, the transformation to Bangla Club would be tragic. Bangla Club suggests a dingy little backstreet pub in which local hooch is sold out of tin drums.*<sup>25</sup> This opinion seems to be close to my views of the relation between Bengalness or Banglaness and the cities.

Out of the cities of Bengal, Calcutta, or Kolkata as its present name is, is an unquestioned metropolis considered as such also in Dhaka, not to mention the other cities of Bengal. Yet, this does not give it any specific emotional feature to be praised in songs or poetry etc.

<sup>24</sup> T.R. Barrett, *Calcutta...*, p. 11.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.



The cities of Bengal in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century were either the venues of development of ideas emerging out of interactions with the European thought, including the concept of nationalism, or the venues of events where historical monuments achieved the potential of playing their role in the future nationalism discourse. Calcutta in much stronger sense was the cradle of Indian Jacobinian nationalism, than it was of the Bengali nationalism. It was the center of emergence of the Bhadrakalok culture which in itself did not represent a political force that could be associated with the Hindu nationalism as pursued by its promoters like V.D. Savarkar or K.B. Hedgevar.

In my opinion, there was no Bengali nationalism as a political phenomenon, except for few events or incidents of rather declarative and symbolic nature.<sup>26</sup> We may, however, look into the role of cities in Bengal in the creation and development of nationalisms which lead to the creation of the nation state. As it was said earlier, there were two such nationalisms in the context of Bengal: the Indian nationalism and the Muslim nationalism. Whereas nationalism is an accepted element of the historical and political discourse of Bengal, we may only try to describe the components of that discourse remembering that it is still considered the concept attributed to the elite without sufficiently presented role of the subaltern.

The capital cities of Bengal played a role in the development of nationalist discourses in Bengal as venues of main historical events as we have experienced it within our Eurocentric discourse. Before the notion of nationalism became a valid political subject at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we may say that Bengal as a political term was inseparably connected with Calcutta. In other words, when saying Bengal we think Calcutta and when saying Calcutta we think Bengal. It is true, but only in the British perception, which naturally was the dominant view creating also our Central European image of this relation. As was quoted earlier, the word “Bangla” cannot replace the word “Bengal” with reference to whatever belonged to the British Raj and whatever belonged to Bhadrakalok, I would dare to add. No city has any particular emotional connection with “Bangla.” The imagined 21<sup>st</sup> century idea of Bengal will not be built, if at all, on any of its cities playing a role in the nationalist discourse.

Bangla is about the countryside and its people. This countryside and its inhabitants are the foundation of a possible bangle or Bengali nationalism as it may appear in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## 6. CITIES OF BENGAL – THEIR ROLE IN NARRATIONS AND SONGS OF NATIONALIST EMOTIONS

Nationalist narrations often use myths and stories. Such stories and myths are aimed at building emotions culminating in strengthening the conviction about uniqueness of one's nation, about special characteristics which make it different and better than oth-

<sup>26</sup> Two of such events were the Pact for Bengal in 1923 and the United and Sovereign Bengal in 1947.



ers. In such stories and myths, references are made to heroes from historical times, real or invented (and even if real, their curriculum is more than often reinvented to suit the nationalist promoters), and places that may appeal to people believing in a special destiny of their nation, like battle sites, cities of importance, places of special religious meaning – if religion is a part of nationalistic narration, which should theoretically be unnatural for nationalism.

Songs, tales, and poems are written about such heroes and places. The content of such pieces of art does not have to be a straightforward nationalist promotion. There is a song about Cairo – *Take me back to Cairo* – which does not appeal to patriotism or any other emotions which may be directly connected to nationalism. Yet, when sung to an Egyptian, it moves him or her, and appeals to his best feelings for his land, not just Cairo.

The Russians have many songs about the beauty of their capital Moscow, just to mention *Evenings of Moscow suburbs*. I even think it would be possible to make a case for considering *New York, New York* as a song very much in line with the banal, yet not so banal nationalism.<sup>27</sup> In Poland there are many songs about Warsaw, its claimed beauty, heroic history etc. The list can be continued with such commonly known titles like *Under the Bridges of Paris*, *Farewell Rome* and so on. Cities may serve in the nationalist discourse creation as references to national history, emotional connotations, their beauty being “our” national beauty etc.

There is no such phenomenon in the story of nationalisms in Bengal. It may again be stated that the Bengali nationalism is the process yet to happen. The cities of Bengal are not used for nationalist purposes or for any other goals connected with positive emotions. Kolkata is called the “city without a soul” in a movie song from the 1950s, but it has no political connotations.

There is always a cultural program in the celebrations of the Bengali New Year organized by the not so small Bengali diaspora in Poland (both from West Bengal and Bangladesh), in which I have participated for several years. These events are organized by the Honorary Consulate of Bangladesh in Poland, whose very positive role in promoting Bangladesh would require a large, separate description. While there is never a word about Dhaka, Kolkata, or Murshidabad, it is the countryside which is praised and its descriptions are moving the Bengalis whether they are from the state of West Bengal or from Bangladesh. Songs and poems describe in rich detail the paddy fields, the work of farmers and fishermen in the beautiful countryside, the seasons of the year changing the character of landscapes etc. They appeal to the Bengalis and may be considered as a factor in building the Bengali (or pan-Bengali) nationalism. The events are organized, so to say, under the national flag of Bangladesh but that never stops Indian Bengali from active participation in these events.

The presence or rather absence of Bengali cities in patriotic poems and songs has been the subject of my conversation with many colleagues representing academia, business and NGOs of Bangladesh and West Bengal. We all agreed that there was no such

<sup>27</sup> M. Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, London 1995, *passim*.

phenomenon like the creation of an emotional concept of the city in terms of the national, patriotic upbringing among the Bengalis. The heroes of the Language Movement in 1952 are not named the Martyrs of Dhaka. Murshidabad is not projected as the place where our old kings and Nawabs ruled in the “old golden times.” Being the scene of many events, some of them dramatic and tragic like the “Direct Action Day” of 16 August 1946, Kolkata is never called by the Hindus the place of Hindu martyrs. Neither do the Muslims remember and speak of Kolkata as the capital city from which they “ruled” Bengal from 1937 until 1947. Such narrations do not exist at all.

## 7. CONCLUSION

To conclude, we may say that cities of Bengal were the venues of processes and events which produced nationalisms, yet at the same time they were not part of myths, legends, and emotion building narrations of nationalisms. They were the venues where nationalist processes were formed, but they were not included in any nationalist narration as an object of patriotic admiration, emotions, sites of heroic events, and homes of heroes one should cherish if one wants to share the particular nationalism. At the same time, the role of emotional awakening, and building as well as employing them in the nationalist discourse constructing in Bengal has always been performed by the countryside, villages, views of paddy fields, rivers and how they look like in different seasons.

The central aim of this paper was to find out if and possibly to what extend cities of Bengal were part of constructing emotions of the nationalist narration of the history of the region.

I present for further discussion my conclusion that it is not the city of Bengal, but the rural landscape and emotions created through emphasizing its beauty, its being part of people's life and work, that appeal to the sense of belonging and identifying oneself within the nationalist discourse.

The potential of cities of Bengal as sources of myths, legends, and emotions does exist. However, as said above, the city does not appeal to the Bengalis with such warmth and strength as the Bengal countryside does.

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