**ARTICLE WRITTEN BY PROMINENT SCHOLAR ON CIVIL SOCIETY**

**Civil Society in Bengal: The Postcolonial Conundrum**

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Theoretical concepts often acquire universality by distancing themselves from history and then they are applied and tested in all kinds of societies which do not lead to serious re-fashioning of concepts and theories. The idea of civil society in the age of democracy has today become so universal that we are compelled to engage in the search for civil society all over the world as central to the task of doing social sciences. Or in a radical bid to reject Eurocentric social theory the importance and existence of such concepts are denied in the postcolonial world . The Indian subcontinent or south Asia as it is called today is a major area where the experience of colonialism and the engagement with it has been remarkably different from that of the four other continents, namely, the two Americas, Africa and Australia. Very broadly, these experiences were marked by genocide of continental proportions, slavery and settler colonialism. India’s engagement with colonialism was far more complex and nuanced; it had seen violence, mass deaths and even forms of slavery, but that was not the whole story. A long history of engaging with the outside world, facing conquest and defeat for several hundred years, perhaps geared India differently to deal with European colonialism. In this essay I will deal primarily with Bengal, the largest province of colonial India and the fountainhead of colonialism in south Asia. Calcutta was also the capital of the British empire in India till the early 20th century.

Under colonialism, an elite emerged in Bengal which engaged with colonialism and European Enlightenment in an extremely creative and critical manner. It imbibed western education in a major way and played a crucial role in the making of civil society, public institutions and a new nation . In fact, Bengal saw a flowering of new ideas in the arts, literature, social theory and philosophy and sciences and the 19th century, which in many ways lasted till the middle of the 20th century, is standardly described as the time of the Bengal Renaissance, where the European experience of renaissance, the Enlightenment and nationalist strivings, were telescoped in the span of a century or a little more. This Bengali elite or middle class has been called the bhadralok or gentlemen and it combined the cultural and intellectual virtues of the aristocracy as well as the modern bourgeoisie . The making of an extremely influential public sphere in Bengal was the product of this historical process. It reached its height in the establishment of a large number of public institutions, especially universities, which provided the intellectual foundations of the new civil society and the nation. The making of this public sphere founded on reason and critical debate along with civil society and the nation reinforced each other (Habermas, 1989). Thus my essay will deal with public institutions, as well as the nation and democracy, as critical factors in the making and unmaking of civil society.

This essay focuses on Bengal and is divided into four major parts. The first brings the question of imagining and forging the nation in the career of civil society under colonialism. This is contrary to discussions of civil society especially in the west, where the nation is largely absent in discussions on civil society and the latter is only counterposed to the state. In 1947 when India became independent Bengal was divided and the eastern part joined the Muslim majority state of Pakistan; the fate and history of the two Bengals became very different. East Bengal became East Pakistan and its civil society and public institutions were actively engaged in a protracted struggle with the more dominant western wing of Pakistan over regional autonomy and the status of the Bengali language. Ultimately, after a bloody civil war and genocide it seceded from Pakistan to become Bangladesh, identified with the Bengali language. From the second part onwards my essay concentrates only on civil society in West Bengal. The second part deals with the fate of civil society during the time of building the nation-state and democracy after decolonisation in India. Bengal had not only seen the flowering of modernity and nationalism under colonialism but also the unprecedented rise of communism, and a Stalinist communist party ruled the truncated state of West Bengal uninterruptedly for more than three decades. So in the third part the fate of civil society, public institutions and the nation under a communist regime would be scrutinised. Finally, by way of a conclusion the failure of the national imaginary and the crisis of civil society would be addressed by attempting to move beyond the imaginary of the nation . This, I believe, would free civil society from the stranglehold of the nation state and populism and give it a new lease of life.

**Civil society, public institutions and the public sphere**

Civil society in the west, in former soviet type societies, and increasingly in the emerging democracies of the nonwest is counterposed to the state. This assumption completely overlooks the fact that civil society in the west is embedded in nations and nation states and that in liberal political theory the nation has remained an unthought, existing powerfully in the couple called the nation-state, yet not forming any important plank of liberal political theory from Locke to Kant to Rawls. The existence of sovereign nation states, liberalism and democracy created the condition for civil society to find a home and flourish.

Under colonialism in the absence of these enabling conditions how did civil society emerge or function. And what has been its fate after decolonisation. This is the postcolonial challenge of doing social sciences . It might appear that a civil society based on modern associational life was emerging in colonial Bengal in quite a significant sense . Yet, on closer examination, we find something extraordinary was happening where civil society was centrally engaged with the task of imagining a new nation, forging it and laying down its intellectual foundations by setting up public institutions. This was joined with the larger struggle to achieve an independent and sovereign nation state. As a result, it might be more appropriate to call this the birth of a new public sphere where the boundaries between civil society, public institutions and the nation were blurred. The modern rational atomic ahistorical and asocial self was not central to this emerging civil society, but of course, it was not the old self encased in caste and community. It was also the project of the making of a new self. This project involved a deep engagement with history for it was part of the present from which elements had to be found for laying the foundation of the nation of the future, otherwise people would not be able to identify themselves with it. The most difficult part of this engagement with history was over the relation between the imagined nation and religion; and on this issue a common imaginary of the nation failed to emerge leading to the partition of India in 1947 and the creation of Pakistan on religious lines.

It is only recently that civil society has been a subject of inquiry for historians and two of the most prominent historians of Bengal, Partha Chatterjee (1999) and Dipesh Chakrabarty have addressed this issue. Both, however, have expressly discounted the role of civil society in the making of Bengali modernity. To Chakrabarty, the place of the home and the goddess of that home or grihalakshmi , along with literary and cultural activities, were both valorised over civil society because that was the only place free of colonial domination (Chakrabarty, 2001, p217). Chatterjee sees it as a division between the outer world of the material, where the west is superior and an inner world of the spiritual where Indians are both sovereign and where Indians seek to build a modern national culture that is not western (Chatterjee, 1999, p II:6).

I would argue that the most important strand of Bengali modernity, namely, providing the intellectual and cultural foundations of the project of creating a modern nation state by setting up autonomous public institutions is completely overlooked in this interpretation (Mukherjee, 2012, ch13). Civil society is generally seen as the domain of modern associational life by rational individuals, like setting up literary societies or even sports clubs. However, in a colonial context the establishment of public institutions play a crucial role in both the strengthening and expansion of civil society as well as the nation. Public institutions are ideally autonomous of both the market and the state; it is a space of critical reason and debate and universities and research institutions are its best examples. Such institutions earlier were created by the church or the state and later by capitalists and through a protracted struggle some have become autonomous. Something remarkable happened in Bengal in the 19th and 20th centuries; major universities and research institutions were established as public institutions and largely through public funding. Their project was to provide the intellectual foundations of modernity and nationalism in Bengal and India. They were far from spiritual-cultural quests or the unconquered site of a glorified national domesticity.

Though the University of Calcutta was established by the British in 1857, till the early 20th century it did not have any teacher, student or even a full-time vice chancellor for it was merely an examining and certifying body . It was only in the wake of the Swadeshi movement against the partition of Bengal in 1905 that the spirit of nationalism led to a national education movement. It led to the boycott of colonial institutions and the setting up of a large number of national schools and colleges. It was in this spirit that Calcutta University was wrested from British control and through enormous public funding a proper teaching and research university was created . It became a constant site of battle between the colonial state and the effort to maintain its autonomy and national character. Calcutta University was so dear to the national imagination that even ordinary middle class people would leave their entire savings or houses to the university. The richer sections, of course, gave huge grants and land and as a result it has property strewn over many parts of the country. The university saw a rich outpouring of research of the highest standard.

At about the same time the Nobel laureate, Rabindranath Tagore established another university in Santiniketan in the district of Birbhum (Mukherjee,2012) . Visva Bharati , as it was named, was a more imaginative and creative venture and focussed initially on the humanities and the fine arts. It grew out of an ashram and school which Tagore had established earlier. This was also the time of setting up ashrams in different parts of the country, the most famous were the ones Gandhi had later founded. These ashrams were part of the larger project of creating a civil society in colonial India, which has best been described as the quest for building a swadeshi samaj or an autonomous patriotic civil society (Tagore,1332 BE). Santiniketan was not merely a university, but it was a new town built around this university which was more a utopian project of creating a new way of an autonomous life built on the ideals of the confluence of truth, beauty and the cosmos engaging with the local community and open to global ideas and influences. The motto of Visva-Bharati describes it as the space where “the world makes a home in a single nest.” Tagore’s ideal was more cosmopolitan, but a cosmopolitanism rooted in the history and culture of India.

Beside Calcutta University another major institution was set up at the same time in Jadavpur, called the National Council of Education which later became Jadavpur University. These three public institutions set up or transformed by Bengali civil society are still the three major universities of West Bengal. What today are two major research universities in Calcutta were also set up by public initiative, initially as research institutes, to provide the intellectual scientific foundations of the nation in the making, namely, The Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science and the Indian Statistical Institute (ISI). After independence, the ISI played a key role in providing both the statistical foundations of the new nation-state as well as laying down the architecture of the second Five-year Plan, which set out the blueprint for the new national economy. Another major scientific research institution was Bose Institute set up by the legendary scientist, Jagadish Chandra Bose. The above is not an exhaustive list, for all over Bengal innumerable schools, colleges, libraries, literary societies and associations of all kinds had a flourishing existence.

A key feature of all these civil society initiatives was giving shape to the national imagination, hence contrary to Chakrabarty and Chatterjee’s claims I would argue that it was not the home and the housewife, portrayed as a goddess, which provided a national space, but a new public sphere was emerging in a robust way. Chakrabarty argues that Tagore gave pre-eminence to this domestic space in his poetry (Chakrabarty, 2001, p214). In fact, Tagore made a transition from an early nationalist phase to a cosmopolitan sensibility and a common refrain in his lyrics and songs, which has been the most influential among all his literary and artistic works, has been the call of the outside to which we must respond by breaking the walled existence of our homes (Tagore,1380 BE). Central to Tagore`s philosophy has been a re-imagination of the self; a self which discovers itself by identifying with ever larger circles of the social and natural world, ultimately to be one with the universe . In a large number of essays, he advocated the setting up of life-worlds of the people autonomous of the colonial state; he claimed that this should be our primary national task. Tagore, of course, did not use the term civil society, but that is exactly his project and he calls it swadeshi samaj or national self-governing society, which is autonomous of the state. Its immediate aim was not the capture of state power but making the state redundant in crucial parts our social existence. His Santiniketan project was such an experiment and I see no glorification of the home or the housewife here. Actually, he distinguishes between the home and the world and celebrates the journey from one to the other as a pilgrimage in search of a home which is not a home, that is, making the path or the journey itself a home. In other words, he re-imagines the home, unlike western modernism which sees this transformation as the ‘unhoming’ of man and his alienation and suffering. Tagore, in his songs, often uses the metaphor of the boat and the boatman whom he asks to sail and leave the shore to describe this homeless or unbounded home.

**Civil society and the imaginaries of the nation**

Initial encounters with colonialism and modern education saw the birth of an early civil society and public institutions in Bengal. From the 1860s the emerging civil society and intellectuals articulated the idea of the nation in Bengal and they particularly flowered during the Swadeshi movement in the first decade of the 20th century (Ghosh, 2017, p28). It was also a time for the efflorescence of civil society, as we have seen earlier. Different imaginaries of the nation emerged, not so much as spiritual quests, but driven by real social and cultural differences. Intellectuals, public institutions and civil society associations played a major role in articulating these imaginaries of the nation to respond to the diverse nature of Bengali society. There were two crucial divisions in society; first, the divide between the majority Muslims and the Hindus and that between the elites and the lower caste , mainly peasant masses. This resulted in four strands of the nationalist imagination, namely Hindu and Muslim nationalism; assertions of a popular nationalism from below and a composite nationalism by bringing the two major communities to a common agreement to be part of a larger federal nation.

In this quest a key role was played by, among others, two important public insititutions – the Bangiya Sahitya Parishat or the Bengali Literary Council, formed in 1897 and the Bangiya Mussalman Sahitya Samiti of 1918, representing Muslim intellectuals (Ghosh 2017, p 12). C R Das, a highly respected nationalist leader and chief of the Swaraj Party, was instrumental in drawing up a Bengal Pact in 1923 to unite the Muslims and Hindus on the basis of a common agreement, which ensured the adequate protection of the rights and interests of both communities keeping their relative numbers in mind. Though it faced bitter criticism from both communities, the appeal of a united Bengal continued to linger for long (Ghosh 2017, p 142). Later, when the divide between Hindus and Muslims became deeper and partition became a possibility, new associations were formed, like the Purba Pakistan Renaissance Society in Calcutta and the Purba Pakistan Sahitya Samsad, gripped by the new imagination of Purba Pakistan or east Pakistan.

From the 1920s onwards, a new subaltern civil society and public sphere started to emerge among lower castes and classes of both Hindus and Muslims largely among peasants, artisans, lower middle classes and workers. They were fighting for equal rights, dignity, land and other socio-economic issues. Some were entirely non-upper caste based, like the Mahisya Samiti, Kshatriya Samiti, Purbabanga Vaisya Samiti or the Kolkata Subarnabanik Samiti (Ghosh, 2017, p149); others were political parties and movements based on peasants and workers or federations of oppressed castes and classes. All of them in their own ways tried to put their impressions on the emerging imaginaries of the nation.

**Civil society and democratic politics: the post-independence scenario**

A democratic national movement along with a civil society that encompassed influential public institutions and public intellectuals helped in drawing up the remarkable document that is the Indian Constitution. It is the longest surviving democratic constitution in the postcolonial world, based on firm liberal democratic foundations with powerful socialist and Gandhian influences. Democracy and the Constitution, supported by a fiercely independent Supreme Court, went a long way in the spread and strengthening of civil society and the public sphere in India. However, there were critical challenges as well that shaped the evolution of civil society in contemporary India. In fact, the Constitution itself laid down the rules and established independent public institutions, free of the government of the day as well as the rule of the market or the majority opinion. These played no mean part in defending civil society, democracy and individual rights. Some of these institutions are the Election Commission, the Comptroller and Auditor General and, of course, the judiciary.

The working and spread of democracy and civil society is all the more extraordinary because, unlike the west, it was built on a society marked by large-scale illiteracy and a hierarchy founded on caste and community and not the modern free individual. But democracy, the liberal principles of the constitution and its reformist agenda went a long way in a relatively peaceful and democratic transition of large parts of Indian society. But in the process some of the original liberal democratic assumptions based on western experience were radically redefined. Partha Chatterjee has been sceptical of this democratic transition and has described it as a process where the old communities seek to negotiate with the state to get benefits, concessions or exemptions for its quasi-legal means for surviving, especially in cities (Chatterjee, 2003). There is no denying that caste and community have survived, but they have changed in major ways under the impact of democracy, the liberal principles of the Constitution, spread of education, urbanisation and a powerful opposition. As a result, increasingly, the legitimacy of hierarchy, which is considered the cornerstone of caste, is fast declining and all castes are claiming equality and equal rights. The compulsion of democratic politics forces parties to build alliances across castes and one of the most interesting such alliance has been the coming together of the two poles of the caste hierarchy, namely, Brahmins and the untouchables in Uttar Pradesh under the leadership of a party led by former untouchables – the Bahujan Samaj Party led by a woman.

The second thing that has happened is that the individual within castes is demanding and increasingly practising equality and equal rights. This has produced a conceptual revolution within castes and communities; initially created on the principle of subordination of the individual to the moral authority of the community, castes and communities have been transformed into civil societies in the making. Again, the most powerful such civil society has emerged among the Dalits, the community of ex-untouchables (TISS,2016). Democracy and the Constitution have given birth to a new public and quite a vibrant public sphere. This spread of civil society and the public sphere went a long way to explain the robustness and longevity of Indian democracy, compared to the rest of the non-western world, but, of course, a civil society not exactly mirroring the west.

The third major change, which has gone a long way in the transformation of old communities and castes into civil societies, is the new basis of the state and its legitimacy. The state is today based on the express consent of every member of society, high-status or the lowest untouchables of the caste order and it is formally ensured during elections, which again are routinely held and largely free and fair. This consent ensures the moral and political hegemony of the Indian state. Political parties, especially the Congress carrying the legacy of the national movement, renewed and reworked this hegemony of the Indian state. It was not a moral-cultural hegemony but primarily a political hegemony expressed democratically. Unfortunately, discussions on hegemony have centred exclusively around the bourgeoisie, and given its structural weakness, following Gramsci’s theory of passive revolution, Chatterjee has argued that the Indian capitalist class lacks hegemony over society. This has led him to fail to recognise the fundamentally different basis of hegemony and civil society in India. Chatterjee, however, agrees that since the 1990s the bourgeoisie has established its hegemony over the Indian middle classes and civil society, but a vast sector lies outside it, which he calls political society which has escaped the hegemony of the capitalist class (Chatterjee,2012, ch9) Further, I would concur that the capitalist class does lack moral-political hegemony of the western kind, but the hegemony of capitalism in India has been established along different lines; first by the state and secondly by the general acceptance of the imperative of economic development driven by private investment. Thus, capitalism has been legitimised and accepted, not through the moral-political hegemony of the bourgeoisie but by a democratic state and the flowering of civil society. Thus I would distinguish between moral-cultural hegemony and political hegemony.

**West Bengal**

When India became independent in 1947, Bengal was partitioned and only the western part became part of the new India I described above. The partition was accompanied by a holocaust and forced migration of millions. A truncated Bengal lost its economic supremacy at a time when it was facing the problem of rehabilitating millions who had crossed over. Given its immense problems and history, West Bengal was in many senses an exceptional state of the Indian Union. We had earlier seen that a vibrant public sphere emerged in Bengal and since the 1920s left and radical politics had become ascendant. In fact, after independence West Bengal was the only mainstream state where the political hegemony of the state and the ruling Congress party was challenged by a communist-led, mass-based movement. Three things happened to civil society and public institutions. First, they became radicalised under the impact of left intellectual-cultural interventions; secondly, the earlier nationalist character of civil society was questioned for being elitist and they sought to re-imagine the nation as the labouring people, consisting of workers, peasants, the lower middle classes and the poor generally. In fact, the idea of the people as against the earlier imaginary of the nation became so popular that a new Bengali word was coined, namely, janagan and a large number of new words became commonplace like ganasangeet or gana-andolon, meaning peoples’ music or peoples’ movements. There are a large number of such new words prefixed by gana. Standard Bengali dictionaries still do not have these entries. Thirdly, a new kind of subaltern civil society emerged from below, especially among the lower middle classes. To keep public institutions free of radical engulfment the state intervened in the running of universities and colleges, especially through financial control. Thus public institutions were losing their autonomy to quite some extent.

In the 1950s and the 1960s a robust and contentious public sphere took firm shape, but it was deeply political and had to continuously confront the state to keep it at bay. By the mid 1960s the political hegemony of the Congress party and to some extent that of the state itself had been deeply undermined. The Congress could never recover its hegemony in Bengal, though it ruled for a term which was marked by an extremely repressive state. The Left established its political hegemony and that extended to a moral cultural hegemony as well, especially over the middle classes and the organised working class. After brief stints in power the communist party-led left front ruled the state continuously for thirty-four years from 1977 to 2011.

By the late 1960s the vibrancy of civil society and public institutions was under considerable strain. They were subjected to attacks from different quarters for different reasons, but the long-term consequence was quite disastrous for this hitherto robust public sphere. Under the banner of democracy and democratisation the left attacked merit-based exclusivity, especially of universities and colleges. They argued that merit in a deeply class divided society is the product of privilege and has to be subverted. Even perceptive scholars like Partha Chatterjee writes of critics , that ‘It narrates the story of democratization as one of the decay of public institutions’ (Chatterjee,1997, p viii). Secondly, by the early 1970s the Indian state used its armed might to flush out radical elements from public institutions and from the public sphere causing a major loss of legitimacy and its essential discursive character . Thirdly, internal differences within the left pushed the state to a situation in cities towards the brink of gang warfare. By 1972 the Indian state unleashed a major armed counter attack on the left and it almost kept democracy and the entire public sphere in suspension for five years. All this deeply mauled civil society, from which, it could hardly recover its past glory.

In 1977 the communist party-led left front came to power and stayed on for more than three decades. Though it was a Stalinist party it worked within the parliamentary frame and promised to restore democracy and revive civil society and public institutions. Given its belief in orthodox Marxist ideology, the left’s understanding of democracy was essentially painted in anti-elitist terms, where merit is equated with elitism, and secondly their democracy was primarily defined in terms of majorities and not equal rights for every individual. Consequently, public institutions, chiefly, universities and colleges, were democratised, that is, run by elected representatives and the majority principle ruled over academic and meritocratic matters. Thus, the essence of the public sphere, namely informed and critical debates, was sapped. Further, the communists believed that public institutions were ideological extensions of the state and the dominant classes and hence they have to be captured by the ‘people’. So in the name of the people and democracy civil society and public institutions were subverted. Where the left could not muster a majority they resorted to strong-arm trade union tactics to browbeat these institutions, as happened with Calcutta University in the mid-1980s. A veritable partyarchy was established in West Bengal in this period (Mukherjee,2007). Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya has described it as the establishment of a ‘party society’ and it extended to the last unit of society (Bhattacharyya,2016).

In spite of constitutional safeguards of individual rights and the autonomy of public institutions we are seeing the compulsion of democratic politics, based on winning a majority, leading to various forms of populism, both of the left and the right. This raises two questions, one the importance of education in a democracy and secondly the question of responsibility of citizens. In the absence of education and all-round development, populism is a quick option which enables parties to win elections. But a more far-reaching change has come about among the Bengali educated middle classes and intellectuals. They played a crucial role in the making of the Bengal renaissance and its radicalisation, but increasingly, starting with the state repression the left faced in the early 1970s and later the global deradicalization and defeat of the left under globalisation, the intellectuals in Bengal too have turned professional, looking for global careers. Public intellectuals after a long journey seem to be exhausted. In the absence of a strong deliberative tradition of democracy and public intellectuals civil society and public institutions cannot thrive. Though the left was defeated in 2011, a different kind of populism competed with the left and ultimately replaced it. It is a non-ideological populism from below led by the fiery leader, Mamata Banerjee.

**Is there a future for civil society and public institutions in postcolonial democracies?**

Democracies, along with civil society, have been particularly fragile in most postcolonial societies; India, however, has been an exception. Perhaps, cautiously, we might ask ourselves: for how long? The rise of populism has been a global phenomenon and, it seems, has come to stay in India. How does populism come to impact civil society and the public sphere? Some types of populism based on fear, hate and vacuous promises, have serious fascistic tendencies. Let us conclude by turning our attention to West Bengal and reflect on the state of civil society and the public sphere in the time of an emerging populism.

I would contend that populism in Bengal has arisen because of the unresolved dialectic between the imaginaries and actualisation of the nation and the people . Because of the absence of a moral-cultural hegemony of the bourgeoisie the people could not become part of the national imaginary and of the new society and economy the Indian nation-state had created, particularly in Bengal, where the left created a counter political hegemony of the people. The problem with the left imaginary of the people was that it was a tactical bloc of workers, peasants and the middle classes to be led by the workers and the communist party, since capitalism has not been able to fully realise its anti-feudal project. The communists allied with the peasants merely to complete the anti-feudal tasks of the bourgeois transformation. The outcome of this blocked dialectic is particularly crucial in democracies where the state has to be legitimised by a majority through regular elections. The left was the champion of the people against the nation led by the dominant classes, but it failed to create a new democracy or a development model for the people; it initially compromised with the nation-state and capitalism and towards the end abjectly surrendered to capitalism to usher in development. Given the ideology of the left, any new development model beyond capitalism can only be realised after the revolution and as long as it does not happen they have to keep the capitalists in good humour. There was a mass upsurge from below when the left government forcibly acquired land from peasants in Singur in the mid-2000s to hand it over to the industrial house of Tatas to set up an automobile factory. In the next elections held in 2011 the communists were decimated and have since slid rapidly in all subsequent elections.

This argument tries to bring out two things, first, the closure of the mind of left intellectuals to think beyond the ideological frame of orthodox Marxism to imagine the people with all its diversities and conflicts, including those of caste, religion, class and community, and secondly the failure of public intellectuals and civil society and institutions to think beyond the existing imaginary of the nation. The existing imaginary of the Indian nation principally rests on the idea of what it calls ‘unity in diversity’. Like most ideas of the nation it is based on an essence of the nation; an unchanging and timeless essence which is prior and pervades all differences. Hence, unity is prior to diversity and within all diversity there runs the essence of unity, sometimes latent, but always with the potential to express itself and submit the diversity to the essence. The essence of the nation in India, like all essences, is inexhaustible and always already present. But in different historical moments it has been expressed variously. During the national movement, there was a broad consensus to trace this essence to India’s ancient civilisation and philosophy and culture. There was some conflict between an elite Brahminical description of this essence and a powerful non-Brahminical dissident tendency, starting from Buddha to the Bhakti movement to its expression in Gandhi, Tagore and Ambedkar. However, nationalists tried their best to weave these strands into a common unity against the empire. This endeavour was expressed in the phrase, unity in diversity, and enabled the Congress to retain its political hegemony for a long time. In fact, this idea of diversity was extended to include Muslims and Dalits or the ex-untouchables. The Congress credo of secularism went a long way in forging this concept of the nation.

The fundamental problem of the secular national imaginary was that it could not offer economic, social and political justice to the people as promised in the Constitution. Over the years, it became increasing clear that the capitalist economy could benefit only a small enclave and the rest of the population were out of its ambit, but under the compulsion of democracy and for legitimising the nation-state the state had to resort to a series of welfare measures for the poor (Sanyal, 2007). But it was not a substitute for any modicum of justice. This generated anger and protest and the rise of populism was the easy way of channelizing peoples’ anger into a popular mandate for the intelligent party . A large number of such diverse regional populisms emerged, but none at the national level.

Since the 1990s a serious effort to reimagine the nation to accommodate the rising anger of the people emerged and moved beyond two key strands of the earlier nationalist imaginary. First, it underplayed the classical, largely Brahminical traditions of Indian civilisation and culture, and secondly, it defined the essence of the Indian nation in exclusively Hindu and populist terms. This populism seeks to bridge the divide between the bourgeois nation and the people by creating a new idea of the Hindu nation. Very soon, this paid dividends to the Bharatiya Janata Party which after a long time has been able to get an absloute majority in parliament. The undermining of the established classical traditions fuels the deeply anti-intellectual stance of this kind of right wing populism. This has particularly led to a vicious attack on key public institutions like universities. Civil society too is being engulfed by Hindu majoritarianism.

I make this detour in an essay that is primarily about Bengal because Hindu populist nationalism is also rapidly rising there in the wake of the failure of the existing populism of the left and the lower middle classes and the poor generally. And Bengal provides a particularly fertile ground for such religion-based authoritarian populism. Bengal, as we have seen, can be called a failed national project because it could not imagine and persuade the people to accept a common idea of the nation that included both Hindus and Muslims. That led to the partition of Bengal in 1947, which left deep scars in the collective memory. Secondly, the left dream of justice and revolution has failed and there seems to be no other hope on offer. Right wing populism is reopening those scars and creating a fear of Muslims infiltrating from neighbouring countries to once again reduce Hindus to a minority and perhaps be faced with another partition. Civil society and public intellectuals have till now failed to face this deluge of affect-based anti-intellectual populism.

The anxiety around unity can be traced to the original imaginary of the nation, namely, unity in diversity and the challenges it has been facing. Thus, the question of reimagining the nation comes back, because as we had seen civil society emerged in India by creating an imaginary of the nation to confront colonialism. That imaginary seems to have reached its limit, thus posing a new challenge for our civil society and public intellectuals. Maybe, the future can be imagined by thinking of the people and the nation not as a unity in diversity but as a new union of diversities; a fair, just, free and equal union of diversities. This imaginary has to move beyond the search for an essence to keep the nation united. It’s the quest for a new social contract for democracy, justice and peace for all these three are under severe strain and have no future under any kind of populism. The challenge of civil society is to confront the revival of the ugly memories of the partition with the history of the Bengal renaissance and its subsequent radicalisation of the Bengali mind.

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