

# MODERN BENGAL

## *In Search of Tradition and Discourses of Margins*

CHANDAN BASU  
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**Netaji Subhas Open University**

**School of Social Sciences**

In the last few decades or so, a number of important researches have been made on the history of traditions and margins in colonial and post-colonial India, and modern Bengal is no exception of it. The present book is a continuation of this theme on discourses of tradition and margin in the historical trajectory of modern Bengal. This Edited Volume titled Modern Bengal: In Search of Tradition and Discourses of Margins deals with the contemporary debates, dialog and the ground reality along with their relationships with the controversy of tradition and margins in modern Bengal. The volume created an open space for that kind of intellectual exercise. To serve the objective of the editors, the young scholars are given a free space to interact and to debate on the issues related to the above-mentioned theme in this volume. The scholars have explored the theme in multiple ways with fresh mind and intellectual capabilities. This volume provided impetus to create thought process as well as space to raise new questions and to develop critical analysis about the tradition and margins in modern Bengal.



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Price: ₹ 500.00



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In Search of Tradition and Discourses of Margins

## **Editors**

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Manoj Kumar Haldar



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First Published: **June, 2019**

Published by:

**The Registrar,**

Netaji Subhas Open University,

DD – 26, Sector I, Salt Lake, Sector I,

Kolkata – 700064

Website: **www.wbnsou.ac.in**

**ISBN: 978-93-82112-68-6**

Price: ₹ **500.00**

Cover Design: **Sharanyo Basu**

Printed by:

**Semaphore Technologies PVT. LTD.**

3, Gokul Baral Street, 1st Floor,

Kolkata – 700012.

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## Message from Vice-Chancellor

I am very glad to see that the School of Social Sciences, NSOU has taken sustained initiative to publish edited volumes, research monographs and annual lectures in a relentless way. The School has already published the works like *Rajniti o Bharat Bhavna: Bibidha Prasanga* (2015), *Contemporary India: State Formation and Political Process* (2015), *Gender, Culture, Politics: Bengal in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (2016), *Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Memorial Lectures Series- Volume I* (2017), *Caste, Gender and Media: Significant Sociological Trends in India* (2017), *Teaching Social Sciences through Open and Distance Learning: A Twenty-First Century Perspective* (2017), *Autobiographies and Women Activists* (2018) on behalf of the University. The present volume titled *Modern Bengal: In Search of Tradition and Discourses of Margins* is a continuation of this effort. It is interesting to note that the majority of the publications of the School is concerned with the history, culture and politics of Bengal, especially the modern Bengal. Focusing on a particular area of research will be - I believe - a key aspect of epistemological and theoretical breaking point in near future. It will help to develop precision and rigor in interpreting the historical evolution of modern Bengal.

Modern Bengal is a contested geo-political region in colonial and post-colonial era. Even the pre-colonial phase of history of Bengal witnessed the advent of agrarian society and urban settlement, the proliferation of caste identity, the role of Islam and the political transition in 18<sup>th</sup> century. The penetration of colonial rule and ideology, the rise of English educated middle class and the development of class, gender and caste politics apart from growth of communal politics were the other aspects of colonial Bengal. The post-colonial Bengal witnessed the articulation of parliamentary democracy, the crisis of economy and society in late 1960s and early 1970s, the rise and fall of the left politics apart from specific issues of gender, caste and sub-regional identity formation. Besides the history of political development, modern Bengal saw significant progress of literary activism. The cultural development of modern Bengal is one of the major aspects of her history. The present volume has addressed these issues from two angles: tradition and discourses of margins. The modernity or the colonial modernity had to come to terms with both tradition and margins of the society. The history of Bengal in her modern period underwent changes through these contested elements. The contributors of the present volume have made efforts to interrogate these issues of conflict, contradiction and even assimilation of various social and cultural elements.

**I hope the School of Social Sciences, NSOU will take similar initiative in future.**



**Professor Subha Sankar Sarkar**

Vice Chancellor

NSOU





## Introduction

### I

The present Edited Volume titled *Modern Bengal: In Search of Tradition and Discourses of Margins* aims to explore the interaction between tradition and modernity in the context of modern Bengal in general and the discourses of margins in particular. Both the conventional and radical/revisionist historiographical approaches consider the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries Bengal as a fertile ground of interaction and contest, debates and discussion, conversation and silence of two basic social and cultural forces: the tradition and modernity. It is difficult to deny that despite the onslaught of modernity with the penetration of the colonial rule in Bengal, the tradition was able to persist. The break with the past was important in the history of modern Bengal; however, the period under review also witnessed the continuation of pre-modern ideas in many forms even in 20<sup>th</sup> century. It might upset the protagonists of the modernism in colonial and post-colonial modern Bengal; simultaneously, it could be a boost to those who put forward objection to any radical departure with the pre-colonial pre-modern era in the context of Bengal's historical evolution. Here two contending thoughts emerge in the arena of historical scholarships on the question of tradition (and modernity). The modernist project out of their self-glorifying thought process equates tradition with 'conservatism', that is, the backward looking mentality opposing any change. On the contrary, modernity is a reflection of progress, development and societal advancement, that is, forward looking mentality supporting any change. This viewpoint (the modernist project) is so dominant in the historical discourses that all the other issues or questions related to margins and periphery of the social formations do not have any appearance in the analytical framework of academics.

This hegemonic project of modernism and modernity, therefore, generates a very distinct type of interpretation of the past, which prefers only in the linear assessment ignoring the rich contribution of the so-called marginal groups in social and cultural formation. The modernist project indeed imposes its will on the historical thinking of the researchers and social scientists. Consequently, the historical discourses fell within the very structure of the modernist hegemony. It must also be kept in the mind that historical appreciations of the past could be even trapped by the ideology of the state also. The state, especially the modern state, always prefers a particular type of understanding of the past, which would

only serve the interest of the state. It made the historical discourses an integral part of the ideological apparatus of the state. One may ask the question that why the prescribed methodology of historical investigation based on objectivity fails to retain its 'sovereignty' in the face of the statist ideological expansion. One may also raise the question that whether it is a characteristic feature of liberalism itself or not. The most plausible explanation is that liberalism is also a part of the larger processes of the modern state. In other words, the liberal approach having a belief in the sovereignty of 'capital' and 'state' does not have the capability of raising new questions about the discourses of margins.

Therefore, modern, modernity and modernism produce only a specific type of discourses. The imposition of the term 'modern' on a period of history also ascribes certain types of hegemonic values on it. One must recall the entire philosophy of periodization of history: ancient, medieval and modern. All these happened in the history of Europe, and the rise of modern Europe means the achievement of 'progress' and 'advancement'. If it is true in case of Europe, the 'modern' history of Bengal or more precisely speaking 'modern Bengal' will be not an exception. Like the Modern Europe's history, the Bengal's history in its modern era witnessed progress, development, renaissance, religious reforms and finally rise of nation. One can even argue that the Bengal confirmed its modern form of time-space continuum in the broader histories of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. It was the imposition of modernity on the indigenous social forms of Bengal; it was imposition because it was not evolved in Bengal as an independent force. The English educated Bengalis imbibed 'modernism' through colonial filter. Therefore, it was not the European modernism developed in an independent country. It was a social and intellectual understanding imported from the master country and mutated in a dependent nation.

## II

An analysis of economy and education may be an intellectually intelligible starting point of the understanding of the limitations of modernity under the colonial condition. The colonial penetration did not transform the economy of Bengal in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century altogether. The variety of pre-modern economic linkages, bonds, practices, terms and condition, norms of investment were not all together disappeared. Sometimes this type of social formation has been described as dual economy where

the upper sector is highly organized from above and the lower sector is disorganized. The existence of dual economy along with backwardness weakened of the entire structure. These fundamental weaknesses were evident in the pattern of production, volume of production, the feudal or semi-feudal class relations, the limited option of market, the absence of proper demand and lack of even minimum income from the production process. All these contributed to the consolidation of backwardness in the economy of Bengal. It conclusively preserved the traditional mode of economy largely under the colonial setting. It does not imply that the modern market forces were absent in Bengal during the period under review. Market forces and the logic of commodity production were very much present in the economy of Bengal; but it did not erase the feudal or semi-feudal relationships of the socio-economic structure.

It is often argued that a completely new system of education was introduced in Bengal as a result of a collaboration between the British authority and the indigenous elites and the upper middle class. The traditional system of education was wiped out and a new form of education based on an equation between examination and degree was introduced. Another major development is that in the traditional system, monetary transaction between the students and the teachers was largely absent while the new 'modern' form of education was based on fees and charges on the one hand and assessment and certification on the other hand. It must be noted that the fees and charges for education was predetermined and prescribed in structured notification; the system of education was built in such a way that all the students were aware of the details of the examination: the pattern of questions, the syllabus, the language, the duration of examination, the schedule, the venue, the marks pattern and the examination fees. These were the features of modernity imposed on the people of Bengal. It produced the so-called English educated middle class, - the pioneer in the formation of new cultural pattern in Bengal. In fact, it is an interdependent process: the English education along with other changes gave birth to the middle class and the middle class in turn also promoted the importance of the English education in the social life of modern Bengal.

It raises one pertinent question: where shall we locate the 'tradition' and 'discourses of margins' in the history of Bengal in its modern age? The tradition was imbricated in the layers of the society. It implies

that the incomplete transition of Bengal in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries towards capitalism and modernity provided the necessary conditions for safeguarding of tradition in various layers or strata of society. Tradition existed in society in multiple forms and multiple ways. There was no fixed rule by which the existence of tradition was maintained. It developed its own suitable strategy and tactics of survival. Now the question is what was the strategy? The element of tradition did not vehemently oppose the advancement of modernity. Rather, it assessed the strength of modernity in a subtle way and judiciously. The modernity never historically assessed the strength of tradition, however. On the basis of the assessment, the tradition only paid attention to those areas which belonged to the inner domain or self. It made all possible efforts to protect the values of the core or the inner domain or self of the culture and civilization of nation. It asserted its rights over its core values and at the same time created obstacles before the modernist project from insertion and invasion. Tradition, therefore, could not be interpreted as a static one; rather, it was a dynamic one. It adjusted over the changing time and space, assessed its strength and weakness, developed suitable strategy and tactics to counter the force of modernity. The conventional understanding of historical change having a belief in changelessness of the Indian past and dynamism introduced by colonialism completely ignores this aspect of tradition.

The new or revisionist interpretation of historical change emerges from two basic theoretical standpoints: the first theoretical standpoint interrogates the dynamic interaction between the pre-colonial structure and the colonial penetration. It is noted that the experience of colonialism was not simply one of straightforward imposition. Rather, colonialism in India had an indigenous root. It was the collaboration between the colonial rulers and a sizable section of the Indians constituted the core of colonial ideology and practices. All these developments point to the making of colonial mind in Bengal. In the revisionist historiography, larger account has also been made explaining the role of rulers, townsmen and bazars in the expansive political economy of north India in late 18<sup>th</sup> and early and mid-19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Bengal's society and economy also underwent transformation during the same period. The indigenous elites (chiefly Hindus) of Bengal in late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century withdrew their support from the nawababi rule and extended their support to the emerging British rule. The expansion of the British rule was made possible because of the support provided by the

Indians elites. The direct consequence of this process was the consolidation of the British rule. However, there was an indirect consequence of the entire process. It emanated from the fact that the British rule penetrated in the indigenous society through a kind of adjustment without overthrowing it. So, all the elements of tradition were either survived or transmuted, and not destroyed or annihilated. Therefore, tradition continued to play important role even under the 'modern' colonial regime. The second theoretical standpoint discovers not simply the existence of tradition in the age of modernity, but also traces the articulation of the texts, message, signs and symbols of resistance in the name of tradition. These subversive discourses in totality challenged the very authority of both of the foreign and indigenous elites. It was the subaltern resistance to the dominance of the elites. The chief characteristic feature of the subaltern resistance is that it was embedded with the tradition. This genre of interpretation discovers rebel consciousness in the explosion of traditional mode of resistance programme. The rebel subalterns tried to establish its hegemony over the elites through the use tradition. In other words, tradition becomes a weapon, possibly ideological, in the hands of the rebels.

It is now clear that tradition is also equally important like modern. In the Bengal's society, while modernity is exposed, the traditional is layered. So, it is the task of the students of history to rediscover the traditions in the layers of society. It must be noted that tradition is present in the continuity as well as in the change of societal perspectives. It is truly about the lineage of past in the context of the present. Now the question arises, how could we explain the importance of tradition within the fabric of modernity? Is it only for the fact that there was incomplete transition towards capitalism? Or there were more serious areas of research and investigation which could explain this question. The most plausible answer is that the tradition continued to exist or survive as discourses of resistance. The discourses of resistance emerged from the margins of the society. The marginal sections of the society preserved their traditional identities as a way of living as well as mode of resistance. The development of discourses of margins implies the empowerment or more precisely speaking it was the cultural expansion of empowerment of the deprived and exploited sections of the society. It questioned the authority, power and status of the dominance: this challenge was essentially political and cultural. It was a continuous process with which the dominant social

groups had to interact with. It by all means destabilized and disturbed the status of the elites. The continuous tussle between the elitist domination and margin's opposition generated both the discourses of dominance and resistance. The central concern of this book is to understand the role of tradition in the history of modern Bengal on the one hand and to contextualize the discourses of the margins on the other hand.

### III

In the historical discourses, the margins are always a matter of debates and interpretations. In the dominant elitist discourses, the expressions of margins are generally a least significant affair. The so-called elitist approach does only recognize the voices of the dominant social groups. It finds no reason to pay attention to the question of marginal voices as they are purely the objects of history. The Marxist class approach though incorporates class voices in its discourses is not very interested to legitimately analyze the voices of other marginal sections of the society. For example, the Marxist scholars are less concerned about the women question, gender question, caste question and all these questions that could not be integrated with the class question. It is difficult to deny that the Marxists are less comfortable with these types of questions or debates. The subaltern interpretation of history of south Asia makes effort to rectify the incompleteness of the Marxist approach. This school of thought emphasizes much on the question of traditional strategy of resistance of the margins of the society and the primordial identities of the subaltern groups. The identities and community consciousness of the marginal sections of the society were the ideological sources of resistance to the dominance. We must note that the form of resistance could not be a singular one. It could be a violent opposition towards oppression. However, it could also be an everyday forms of resistance in a silent manner. It is easy to understand the violent expression of mob; but, it is not very easy to collect data on everyday resistance which is actually non-event. The standard historical method would not work properly in analyzing such cases. Here the students of social sciences need the new approaches and fresh tools, which could be found in the sociology, social anthropology, cultural studies, media and film studies, gender studies, the study of folklore etc. The result is that with the incorporation of new approaches and research tools, the boundary of social sciences has been expanded.

The newly expanded boundary of social sciences faced a critical problem in interpreting the discourses of margins. The problem is that the

social scientists identified discourses of margins only when they offered resistance or they revolted against the oppression or dominance. To be more precise, the ruling authority kept records of revolts, and it is the only way getting firsthand information about it. It implies that when there is no revolt, there is no option of having any information about the oppressed sections of the society. The general assumption is that the subaltern could not speak of its own. Therefore, the official records are the only available source of interpreting the rebels' programme and consciousness. The everyday life of the subaltern classes is beyond the jurisdiction of the official records. It makes the task of social scientists extremely difficult. It is comparatively easy to describe the incidence of revolt. But it is not at all easy to describe the everyday life process of the subalterns. Here we need to broaden the scope of understanding of both past and present of the society. The social scientists must begin the discussion with the help of sociology and literature apart from history and political science. Even the use of unconventional sources like oral tradition may be of help in interpreting the margins of society. On the one hand new sources are required to be cultivated; on the other hand, interpretative assessment based on the idea of recognition of margins in social continuity as well as transformation of the society are to be developed simultaneously. In this sense, the discourses of margins are the most meaningful area of investigation, where texts and contexts interact with each other and set the conditions for opening up of new types of discourses. The advantage of this outlook is that it does not deprive any of the element of society from being transformed or mutated. It recognizes not only the oppressed voices but also the creativity of the marginal sections. Here we cross the limits of the subaltern studies. The subaltern historiography is concerned only with story of revolt. The discourses of margins, on the contrary, involves the aspects of life of the marginal people in a bigger meaningful way in its analysis. We must note that this shift from subaltern studies to discourses of margins is inevitable. It is inevitable because the subaltern studies do not consider the transition of consciousness in its model of investigation. The consciousness is considered to be static in this postmodern interpretation of history. In the present discussion, which is essentially based on analysis of tradition and discourses of margins, dynamism is the key aspect of consciousness. Therefore, the articulation of consciousness is the most contested site of the present analysis.

#### IV

The present volume makes efforts to understand the question of consciousness from multiple angles of history, comparative sociology, political theory, and cultural studies. The contributors are generally young. Their fresh approach and capability of analysis based on concrete data are a matter of appreciation. All the writings in this volume is concerned with the material ground of discourses of margins in the context of interaction between tradition and modernity. The contributors point out the evolution of identity and consciousness of the margins of the society in the social-historical background of modern Bengal. The topics discussed in the volume are wide-ranging: Dhorai Charit Manas and the subaltern identity, the sufi mystic order, inclusive society and the context of LGBT, Marichjhapi and the refugee question, the identity movement of the Koch Rajbansis, socio-economic change in rural West Bengal, health care infrastructure in a Bengal's district, race, caste, nationhood and the census in colonial era, the cinema of Mrinal Sen and the history of Kartabhaja sect. These themes clearly indicate the fact that the present volume is a multiple and inter-textual representation of the question of tradition and margins in the broader context of colonialism and post-colonialism. All the contributors have taken the discourses of tradition and margins not from the simple viewpoint of modernity, but as something which challenged the modernity and its ideological justifications.

However, one basic point we must note in this context: the value of tradition and the margins of the marginal are always fluid. It constantly changes its contours, programme, strategy of survival and resistance, plans, language of revolt and limits of the margins. Therefore, the boundaries are not fixed. These were the areas where domination and resistance compete with each other. The present volume makes sincere efforts to understand the nature of this contested zone. We take this opportunity to express our sincere gratitude to all the contributors: without their support and assistance, the present volume would not have been possible. We are also indebted to all the faculty members of the School of Social Sciences in this regard.

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