

Theorizing Communalism among Industrial Labour Class: Bengal 1905-1918

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Abstract: *The question of Communal integrity among the labour class has been an issue on which several historians, academicians, political theorists and alike spend countless hours. Yet, certain nooks and corners of this realm remain uncharted. In this paper, I have tried to shed some light on those uncharted territories, with the limited sources and perceptions I was able to get my hands on. Here, the question revolves around the communalism among the labour class from 1905-1918, and how that serves as a baseline upon which the question of communalism can be further enhanced.*

Keywords: Communalism, Class, Nationalism, Consciousness, Society, Prejudice, Labour.

“When God finished making the world,
he had a few stinking scraps of mud left over
and used it to make a yellow dog.
And when they hate any race or nation,
The name that race or nation
In place of the yellow dog,”

— Carl Sandburg, *The People Yes*

When David Kopf was discussing the problem of orientalist legacy on Brahmo samaj and its identity of universalism during the Bengal Renaissance, he used these lines to describe their failure of them in barring their exclusion from the larger Hindu community and the advent of brazen nationalism based on religious dogmatism¹. However, these lines, due to their artistic flexibility, are pertinent to any distortion in the different social, political or cultural structures of any particular country. For instance, the newly formed communalism after the first organised mass movement in Bengal in 1905 and afterwards created several ‘yellow dogs’ within its milieu. Communalism in Bengal or the broader realm of India seldom resulted in any significant or benevolent outcome, neither was it destined to. The riots of 1897, 1907, 1912, 1918, 1926 are standing tall in front of the ‘glorious march of history to remind us of our inglorious past. Although this paper is not meant to excavate

the failures of social structures and their connoted tensions in general, it attempts to unravel the communalism within an 'other' milieu of 'Pre-Capitalist' Bengal, i.e., the industrial working class.²

The question which I shall briefly discuss in this paper is how exactly communalism manifested within the labour class from separate geopolitical spheres, caste or in this case religion? What was the nature of this communalism? Whether this communalism have any positive impact on generating a stable 'class consciousness without classes'³ or was it just a particular case of community consciousness?⁴ To answer the first two questions, we must draw our attention to the basic features of the social structures, the rise of communalism in Bengal during the period of review and the nature of its working class. The third question requires an investigation of the labour movements and the 'community consciousness' reposing underneath it. Finally, the third question requires an overall discussion of the existing and new paradigms on the subject of communalism itself.

Social Perspective

Bengal, from 1872-1905, was standing in a juxtaposition of several social and religious structures. Both in her urban and rural variations, she experienced a Hindu revivalist movement, which, due to its chauvinist flair, contributed to some extent to sowing the first seeds of communalism at the turn of the century. Peter Heehs, demonstrated historically how the 1872 Native marriage bill cast the 'non-Hindu' emblem upon Keshav Chandra Sen's faction of Brahmo samaj, who ardently aligned themselves with universalism. The Hinduism garnered by Rajnarayan Basu, Bipin Chandra Pal, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Swami Vivekananda and Aurobindo Ghosh was the base of religious nationalism. Chattopadhyay's *Anandamath* was proved to be a pioneer in dispersing a cultural nationalism. Vivekananda, through his Hindu revivalist campaign, aimed to establish a religious nationalism. Both Pal and Ghosh were influenced by these predecessors but incorporated their ideas for indigenous political nationalism. Their politico-religious nationalism, along with its fair share of cultural nationalism, was considered self-sacrifice for the motherland and her independence as *dharma*.⁵ The religious nationalism harnessed by Pal and Ghosh, which in turn served as the building block of their political nationalism, had three major agendas, 1) The Hinduism was superior or universal, 2) It had the great responsibility to guide the world due to its spiritual paramountcy, and finally, 3) Its importance in guiding the downtrodden *Bangamata* towards independence. However, this notion of sacrifice and dharma was not to be achieved through mendicancy, but rather with a tight jolt. This phantasmagoria of *dharma*, I assert, resulted in extremist activities and the premature death of many young minds. In this regard, it had neither universalism nor the religious ahimsa, which, ironically was one of the basic tenets of Hindu preaching, which Pal and Ghosh both mentioned frequently in their speeches and writings.⁶ Moreover, they wanted to isolate

their religious beliefs from any deliberate or accidental interference from the other religious groups and intended not to interfere in the proceedings of their counterparts.⁷ However, Bakr-Id celebrations and the practice of *Kurbani* or cow slaughter created a rift in this truce.

Political Perspective

In the political sphere, this extremist political nationalism showed its rather pungent variety shortly after the anti-partition movement collapsed. The Muslims, who, before 1905, had fairly limited participation in politics and lived mostly in rural sectors of Eastern Bengal, started appearing in the political arena. Their western-educated political leaders met the viceroy and appealed to him for a separate electoral representation in exchange for their support for the partition, which proved to be a boon to them. The existing social relations between the Hindu zamindars and Muslim peasants of the eastern division and the south western division already showed signs of cleavages within the social structures. Their political participation escalated the situation to a critical phase. Leaders like Pal and Ghosh, albeit showing their sincere contrafibularities in response to this Muslim endeavour in Bengal's political domain, were not in favour of this rather disconcerting situation. The result was the catastrophic riots of 1907 in Mymensingh, which Suranjan Das eloquently brought forth and can be treated as one of the reasons for communal hatred.⁸

The result of this nationalism was not confined to the agrarian social structures, as the industrial workers of Calcutta were not seemingly in a comfortable state. Although, it must be kept in mind that the majority of industrial labours in the Anglo-Scottish run Jute mills on the banks of river Hoogly, irrespective of their gender and cast, were largely migrated from the neighbouring provinces of Bihar, Odisha and Eastern United Provinces (with a minute proportion of them belonging to the Bengali ethnic-social group) and had an agrarian background. Their religious beliefs, religious prejudices and communal solidarity also migrated with them to the city of smog. If we consider a newly evolved racial discrimination theory propounded by Merton's prejudice and discrimination paradigm, both communities showed signs of being 'all-weather bigots' (i.e., they were both prejudiced and discriminated against each other).⁹ The cow slaughter riots and the Hindu response to pig slaughter, which resulted in about in Gouripur Jute Mill in 1896, prove this point.¹⁰ However, it must also be remembered that, even though they remained largely aloof from the nationalist movement, in some pockets, leaders like Aswini Kumar Banerjee and Premtosh Bose were able to congregate a significant proportion of labour force against the mill owners and largely the government. They convinced them that the success of this movement would result in better wages, working conditions and strict conviction against the misdoings of their mill owners.¹¹ The involvement of labour class in this movement, within skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled

groups, became a testament of their might against the rival group if organised properly and gave way to oncoming movements later. However, the nationalist leaders were largely concerned with the economic and material proliferation of the workers and the case of social strains between several groups remained isolated. This also reinforces certain criticisms of the top echelons of leaders of this movement as 'opportunists' by certain schools of scholars.¹² In this context, religion showed a large impact on developing the community consciousness among the religiously united working groups. Leaders like Haji N.M. Zakaria was able to unite the Muslim masses against their Hindu counterparts. The Muslims, on the other hand, sought support from the politically active – Muslim reform groups like C.M.L.S., C.N.M.A. and Muhammadan Reform Association.¹³

Class, Community and Society

Community consciousness, in this broad dimension called Labour class movement, seems quite appropriate in a country, which never had the chance of becoming a nation-state due to its diversity. However, Marxist scholars, along with the scholars armed with the European sense of Secularism, seldom criticised this take in a polemic fashion.¹⁴ Although, it can be argued that the question of class consciousness cannot be incorporated into this context primarily because of two important factors. Firstly, as mentioned by E.P. Thompson and later used by Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, 'The weakness of capitalist development in India and its associated characteristics – the persistence of traditional loyalties of caste, kinship and religion – made the notion of a working-class, let alone the prospect of class consciousness, unthinkable'.¹⁵ Secondly, as mentioned momentarily, the consciousness of class cannot be incorporated as there is or was not a class within the social structures of Bengal, or for that matter the entire sub-continent, based on caste, religion, language and faith. Here, the 'class struggle without class', seems much more appropriate than the concrete Marxist idea of class consciousness 'in the full sense'.¹⁶

However, this issue is not something for which community consciousness is the only plausible way to conceptualise it. The question of intersectionality and social consciousness can be added with its embedded limitations. In this way, a third alternative path can be paved in analysing the question of consciousness among the labour class. As Parimal Ghosh asserted, if community consciousness was important, none of the workers from different religions would have shared the same work floor. In this case, a social consciousness can be brought forth.¹⁷ Although, this social consciousness had a dualism. These workers had a significant social life within their bustees and residential quarters, where alcoholism and another tedious mode of entertainment united them under one platform. Their living and working experiences, their grievances and angst towards the mill authorities united both the religious factions under one banner. On the other hand, they had

certain social responsibilities as a part of their respective social communities. Due to these responsibilities, they mustered up when certain demeaning actions were taken by their peers. As mentioned by the pioneers of the intersectionality model, the social conditions and the cobweb of its variables (class, caste, religion, gender etc.) at the same time became the reason for empowerment and unity as well as discrimination and discomfort. Moreover, the insecurity complex of the minority groups among the working class proved to be fatal for the others.

A comparative analysis between the Indian and Russian labour classes can be added in this case to find some similarities or alterations within these two coequals, regarding this social consciousness. Certain scholars like Leopold Haimson stressed the revolutionary consciousness of the labour class, who migrated from the countryside to cities like St. Petersburg, Petrograd and Moscow before the Great War. Echoing the Menshevik caricature of labour class in this epoch, they propounded that the revolutionary mentality of the working class, due to the *tsarist* village organisational oppression, was their integral feature even before the invasion of Bolshevism.¹⁸ In the Indian case, we can find similar instances, as propounded by the subaltern scholars, where the oppression of *Zamindar* and the *Nilkuthi* owners contributed to some extent to their infuriating mentality against the control mechanisms. Similarly, the case of the monopoly of the skilled labour class in unionising the other strata of labour echelons (through guilds or *tsekhovschina*) in St. Petersburg and the stratification within the larger world of labour, as emphasised by Victoria Bonnell, can be observed in India too, where the earlier trade unions made by Telegraph, Printing Press, Postal operators and Sub-assistant Surgeons in 1907, which provided the sowing grounds of trade unionism in Calcutta.¹⁹ The stratification, in this case, must have contributed to the disintegration of semi-skilled and unskilled labour groups of the working class from the broader dimension, as during the anti-partition movement, the labour class as a whole never united. The Jute Mill Hands, in most cases, we're fighting on their own, where the Railway workers and aforementioned groups were absent.²⁰ However, it is important to note that such comparative studies between two labour classes are not pathbreaking scholarly initiatives for many reasons. Firstly, the degree of industrialisation, along with its nature, impact and history, was dissimilar in both *tsarist* Russian and colonial India. Secondly, the social structures in both Russian and Indian cases were completely different. Albeit in both cases, most of the labours migrated from rural sectors, with an agrarian background, their social structures in the rural areas and their experience within the cities were not similar at all. However, their work experiences were similar to some degree. Thirdly, the question of communalism or any religious dogmatism within the labour class is not present in the Russian experience. A noteworthy point is that, even though this comparison has its share of demerits, it is crucial to observe the events that were taking place in another distant part of the world.

Conclusion

The ambivalent attitude of the government deteriorated the tensions to the level of prompt critical. Their incompetence in suppressing the flare-ups seldom resulted in jousts from minor to gargantuan scale. In suppressing the communal tensions from 1896 to later sparks, they wanted to play safe by pretending to be tending to each faction's demands, which resulted in mixed responses. These mixed responses, in turn, led to severe misinterpretations and both parties accused each other of favouritism from the ruling class. This was seen during the prohibition of *Kurbani* practices in Hindu majority areas, as well as in the factories in Calcutta and its surroundings²¹. Moreover, the state mechanism of protecting the capitalist interests of their colony often resulted in sanctioning bills and Industry Acts that proved to be perilous for the working class, with no constraints over their recruitment agents (Sardars) and other work-related issues. During the interwar period till 1918, the English-controlled industries along with their Indian peers were in high demand of jute products due to wartime spike and thus initiated a vicious competition, in which the wrath was ultimately faced by the labour class. However, we must not forget that it was this great industrial machine and its cogs that gave them, and later, our things of impeccable and great importance. Although, if we take V. I. Lenin's famous quote over great things, then in conclusion, the questions which remain still at large are, what were those great things and were the costs paid for them enough?

Notes and References

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2. The term "Pre-Capitalist" and "Pre-Bourgeoise" were used by Chakraborty in his book *Rethinking Working Class History*. They were taken from Karl Marx's *Grundrisse*. See, Dipesh Chakraborty, 'Rethinking Working-Class History', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1991, Vol. 26, No. 17, pp. 1117-1119
3. Rajnarayan Chandravarkar, "The Making of the Working Class": E.P. Thompson and Indian History', *History Workshop Journal*, no. 43, 1997, pp. 177-196
4. The term Community Consciousness was widely described by Dipesh Chakraborty through a series of articles published in the monologue. See Dipesh Chakraborty and Ranajit Das Gupta, *Some Aspects of the Labour History of Bengal in the Nineteenth Century: Two Views*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2019; Dipesh Chakraborty, 'Riots, Religion and The Working Class Milieu: Bengal's Jute Mill Hands in the 1890s', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 1975

5. Where Bipin Chandra Pal and Aurobindo Ghosh considered self-sacrifice as dharma, Gandhi considered it as yajna. The dharma was not a continuous process, and thus was seen in the revolutionary sacrifices of Yugantarites and other revolutionary organisations. Yajna was a continuous process, in which self-sacrifice was to be repeated whenever the volunteer felt lack of self-control.
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11. Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal: 1903-1908*, New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1973, pp. 231-242
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14. The criticism came prominently from Marxist economic historians like Ranajit Das Gupta. However, Amiya Kumar Bagchi criticised his book 'Rethinking Working Class History' vehemently. See Ranajit Das Gupta, 'Indian Working Class and Some Recent Historiographic Issues', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1996, Vol. 31, No. 8, pp. 27-31. See also, Dipesh Chakraborty, 'Rethinking Working-Class History', *Op. Cit.*
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16. *Ibid*, p. 180
17. Parimal Ghosh, 'The Labouring Poor and Communal Riots in Bengal, 1896-1919: The Case Re-Examined', *The Calcutta Historical Journal*, July,

- 1987-June 1988, Vol. 12 No.1-2., p. 65-68
18. Leopold H. Haimson, 'Problems of the Social Stability in Urban Russia, 1905-1917', Part 1 and 2, *Slavic Review*, 1965, Vol. 23-24. pp. 619-642 (Vol. 23), pp. 1-22 (Vol. 24). He also mentioned the role of *Zamliak* (peasants or rural peasant organisation created for a specific purpose or purposes) in developing peasant solidarity.
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 21. WBSA, Judicial Police Progs. A. No. 119-124, November 1897. See, *Ibid*, pp. 65-66