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Chancellor Mr Gopal Krishna Gandhi, Mr Vice-chancellor, Members of the Senate and Syndicate, ladies and gentlemen, I thank you all for the great honour you have done me in inviting me to deliver the Convocation address of the Calcutta University . As an alumnus of this university, I approach this task in a spirit of deep humility. These hallowed premises played a central role in shaping the minds and hearts of the Bengali intelligentsia over many generations and one cannot but feel insignificant in the presence of that great tradition.

For the last three decades, it has been my main intellectual and academic concern to try and understand one central feature of that great tradition – the mental world of the Bengali intelligentsia and the larger middle class during the colonial era. Our radical historians and social scientists have justly questioned our arrogance in describing the limited achievements of our nineteenth century forebears as a Renaissance comparable to what happened in Florence in the quattrocento. It is not my intention to invoke that unhappy controversy. I speak instead to a different theme. Earlier in this decade I published my memories of life in this state over some eight decades. This period of Bengal's history is outside the boundaries of my research interest, but it constitutes the background to my own life experience. In speaking of it, both consciously and unconsciously, I have used the tools of historical analysis and hence my otherwise insignificant memories may be of some value as data to future generations of historians probing the Bengali past. My excuse for spending a substantial part of my intellectual life on trying to understand that past is its deep human interest. The Bengali middle class was the first group of educated Asians, beside the Parsees, to respond creatively, if often unexpectedly, to the encounter with the West. They neither simply imitated nor absorbed uncritically cultural artefacts of that unfamiliar civilization. The

originality of that response has proved to be of interest to modern man in many parts of the world when told as fiction or in films even though the Bengali intelligentsia have little share in the power games of the world or in its expanding wealth in the age of globalisation. I shall speak to a phase in their past of which I have had personal experience. In a brief talk I can of course speak only to some aspects of the subject and ignore the variations in the mental world of various groups within the wider social space. I shall focus only on what was modal or dominant and leave untouched fascinating themes like the changes in the emotional affects,-in family relationships, love, friendship and our attitude to death.

Let us first explore what the middle class Bengali in the first quarter of the twentieth century wished or expected from life? One defining and limiting fact was the colonial reality which restricted the possibilities within a narrow range. To start with an extreme example, there could be no expectations of military glory or political power based on victories in battle , no emulation of Pratapaditya or his fellow bhuiyas some of whom had dared challenge the power of the Great Mughals themselves. Nor could any Bengali mahanavika like Briddhagupta sail out across the open sea and celebrate their nautical triumph by establishing viharas in distant lands named after their home base, in his case Raktamrittika or Rangamati. Buddhist monks and Hindu priests no longer crossed the Himavat mountains nor sailed the seas to preach the doctrines of the Blessed One or spread the Puranic tales in distant Asian lands. The heroic age in Bengal's history with its possibilities of grand adventure was firmly in the past. In all possibility the majority of the bhadralok lived in villages and small towns even as late as the first half of the twentieth century with an influential minority located in the metropolitan city of Calcutta. The narrow horizons of life experience defined the outer limits of expectation and

aspiration. The metropolis might expose one's life to a wider and more exciting range of possibilities, but these too were capped by the realities of the colonial regime . The continuities between the patterns of life in the villages and those in urban and metropolitan areas were more significant than the departures.

Nirad C. Chaudhuri in a beautiful passage in his remarkable book, *Bangali Jibane Ramani*, has summed up the essential character of life in our villages: the river of passing time had, as it were, come to stagnate in a pool undisturbed by any ripples. This is a world I have known in my childhood, a world where nothing happened and which retained its undistrurbed surface of peace even in the face of great calamities. Of course, that was a surface reality. The impoverished and decadent agriculture of Bengal with the blessings of the British legal system generated endless law suits and frequent recourse to physical violence .The highly illiberal and inequitable social system was ever anxious to discover 'faults'(dosha) in one's conduct, faults which could push one downwards in the caste ladder or even beyond the limits of one's caste, especially if one happened to be a woman. These horrors are described in cruel detail in the fiction of Saratchandra and Bibhutibhushan. And the same fiction make clear the extreme importance of caste in Bengali rural society generating anxieties which would sound very unreal to us to-day. Yet, the general tenor of life for the rural middle classes was not conflict-ridden. One treated the gods, both visible and invisible, with the regard that they claimed as their due and was generally left in peace. Placidity was the hall mark of rural life. There was undoubted poverty and multi-faceted deprivation, but serious disturbance was the exception that proved the rule. 'Daladali', faction fights, were more an urban, especially metropolitan phenomenon. It was a marginal threat to the placid tenor of rural life.

The flip side of this placidity was the fact of extremely limited material expectations. A very large section of the rural middle class had intermediary rights in land which gave them a meagre income, generally adequate to cover their basic physical needs. In pathetic attempts to enhance status, the holders of intermediary tenure who survived on a few rupees received from their peasant-tenants rejoiced in the title of zemindar, talukdar etc or more vaguely, bhuswami, lords of the land and sought to manipulate their caste ranking upwards: the latter effort often proved successful if one could supplement one's income from urban sources for a generation or two. The rural professional, vaidyas, school teachers, pundits also had a modest 'adequacy' of income. One somehow got by and had little or no expectations beyond their very limited consumer needs. This was decades before the age of television and supermarkets. Sophisticated consumption was no part of rural consciousness and hence aspiration. One learns from Bibhtibhushan that cinema, accessible in the district towns, was a remote and rare entertainment for the vast majority of the rural/semi-rural population. Only a small proportion of villagers had experience of it. The occasional jatra, the Pujas and amateur theatricals were the ultimate in entertainment. I do not recall any one ever complaining of boredom in my boyhood years. Frequent gaps in one's daily schedule were filled adequately by long sessions of adda, - by the pool side or the chandimandap for men, in the bathing ghat, the kitchen or one's bed room for the women. In urban homes, relatively affluent men had their baithakkhanas, rooms where the gentry gathered with their friends for prolonged and laid back gossip sessions. In that world of limited possibilities, one was content to live the way one's forefathers had done. Rising prices caused some anxiety. A small proportion of men sought employment/occupation outside the village. Even fewer, just a handful of them, had aspirations to levels of achievement which made them visible to a

wider world. In my district, village boys like Suren Sen, Suren Dasgupta, Ramesh Majumdar etc achieved fame as scholars at the international level and were objects of pride to their fellow villagers. The middle ranking Bengali bureaucrats, the munsiffs and the deputy magistrates, once considered the height of material success did often have rural roots. Only, they were no longer believed to be the grandees of the empire. The middle class villager, following Bankim ,had by now experience of the Bengalis' powerlessness and lack of status in the wider world : he no longer considered the Deputy magistrate or police sub-inspector the lords of the universe. Some village boys had made it to the ICS. One Bengali, whose name was on every lip, had even won the Nobel prize. So the possibilities, however unlikely, had gone sky-high. One probably demented person who used to hover around the teachers' room in the Ashutosh Building kept trying for the Nobel Prize with his horrendous English poems year after year. But such efforts were unlikely in the extreme and if one's son got a clerical job at the district collectorate, his pay supplementing the meagre rural income of the family, the demands of the second object of Hindu aspiration, artha, material things were more than met.

Though the fate of the urban, especially metropolitan Bengali, was not significantly different, his horizon, and hence aspirations, were often somewhat wider. The professions, ranging from school teaching to law, offered possibilities of status enhancement. The middle and even lower ranking Bengali boxwallas did very well in material terms and their vanity could be the envy of the British royalty itself. Some professionals, especially doctors and lawyers, earned incredibly huge incomes generating tales of high consumption like sending one's weekly washing to Paris to be laundered. Such men were few but they were evidence to the fact that the limits of aspiration and possibilities had indeed expanded.

The ambitious young man dreamed of education abroad, preferably in the holy land known as 'bilet'. That was the gate to higher things, though the phenomenon of briefless barristers was a warning that glitter was no guarantee of the genuineness of the metal in question. USA was not yet on the scene, though a few like Binay Sarkar had made it to the land of dollars and sky-scrapers. And fame in many spheres earned in the city of Calcutta had become an object of legitimate aspiration. There were famous lawyers, doctors, scholars, poets,writers and wealthy men, the object of both pride and envy to fellow Bengalis. And if the son and heir returned from his first prize giving ceremony at school with a suitable reward, the parental heart dreamt of his future as a member of the top elite, perhaps even a member of the ICS. As the rural-urban social links were still very live , such expectations did not leave the consciousness of the village gentry entirely untouched.

One of the saddest gifts of the British rule to middle class Bengalis was a highly unfortunate preoccupation with examinations. It is well to remember that the form in which we know and practice it is a typically British invention. Its purpose was to train people for the administrative and clerical services. It is unknown in the European continent. The examination linked to the American semester system is much more humane than the monstrous practice with which we are familiar here. Unlikely to find fulfilment in the field of honour or by aquiring great wealth, all Bengali middle class energy, especially the male one, was focused on passing examinations under the ever vigilant parental eyes. Doing well in these was the ultimate object of one's aspirations, the Bengali version of paramartha. Significantly, this obsession is less ubiqitous in other culture groups in India. Perhaps the fact that our forebears were the first clerical/bureaucratic servants of the Raj had something to do with it. Government jobs

were one's ultimate object of aspiration, and to reach that haven you had to pass examinations, though achievement in this field of enterprise did not guarantee jobs. Very probably, job seeking played a lesser role in the lives of other Indians and hence parents in those cultures did not spend sleeplessness nights praying that their children should pass and do well in exams. Many young lives were vitiated by this poisonous effort. Passing exams and doing well in them were necessary for one's survival. But by the 'thirties of the twentieth century, such achievement was no longer a guarantee of good employment and income. Since the Hindus had held some 90% of all available jobs in Bengal until the mid-thirties, the very legitimate policy of bringing the level of Muslim employment up to 50% meant that for years to come Hindu young men had little hope of getting jobs, especially with the government.

Independence and partition meant a tremendous expansion in job opportunities for the bhadralok, partly because the majority of Muslim employees left for Pakistan, and partly as a result of the enormous expansion in the tertiary sector. The impact of these changes in the attitudes and aspirations of job-dependent Bengalis is of some interest. In the first flush of independence, every ambitious parent wanted their children, initially the sons and later the daughters as well, to become bureaucrats in the central cadres. The young Bengali added one more exam to the four or five "passes", beginning with matriculation, which were his usual fate. It affected the quality of life; habitual hopelessness and depression lifted to some extent. Those who failed to make it to the central and provincial cadres, had modest hopes of employment in the fast increasing number of colleges and universities. Before long, the world of jobs included employments abroad and the private sector was no monopoly of sahibs any longer. In recent decades, these tendencies have become more powerful through globalisation,

outsourcing and the buoyancy of Indian enterprise. Interestingly, Bengali academic efforts have closely followed the curves defined by the expectations of employers or what the Bengali parents understood these to be. In the great days of state initiative in infrastructural investment and the production of mother machines, engineering was all the rage. As the Indian-owned corporate sector began to expand, it was commerce followed by business studies. Since highly paid employment is the ultimate object of existence, the intelligent young have discovered that academic achievement is not the only high road to a good life. One needs other qualities, like smartness, especially as evident in the ability to speak generally incorrect English at high speed. Hence the desperate anxiety to get one's children into English-medium schools which may end up costing one the bulk of one's monthly income. On the positive side, the middle class Bengali now inhabits a much wider world compared to earlier generations. The proportion of families who have one or more children working abroad is unexpectedly large. Foreign lands are no longer unfamiliar territory to their parents. There is a negative side to this world of expanding opportunities. Bengalis came to flourish in the expanding service sector. But there was no corresponding increase in participation in enterprise. Or if there was , the survival rate was abysmal. A monograph written some five decades ago, *Bangalakshmir Jhampi*, listed some seventy Bengali-owned industries. Not one of them survives to-day. There are only a couple of major exceptions to this rule.

Expectations regarding consumption have undergone a revolution in urban Bengal, even in small towns. Beauty saloons are to be found in virtually all urban areas. The pavement eateries offer a variety of food of foreign origin, American, Chinese, Italian. Hamburgers and hot dogs, Coca Cola and Pepsi Cola have become symbols of youthful smartness. New consumption patterns

representing cultural preferences are manifest in the changes in styles of dress. Trouser and shirt have become virtually the uniform of not only the urban youth but a significant section of the rural population as well, replacing dhoti/pyjama and kurta.. The aspiration towards ever rising standards of consumption supported by malls and TV ads have become the rule of the day.

The middle class Bengali obsession with examinations had a very positive side as well. We have honoured scholars probably since remote antiquity. The pundit as well as the maulvis and maulanas were honoured men in Bengali society, even if they were poor enough to live on tamarind leaves. Their dedication and indifference to material deprivation were subjects of proud tales. And there was also the other side of the coin - the rich money lender and successful bania occupied a low rung in the social ladder. The veneration of the new style Bengali scholar who had passed many exams was up to a point the expression of the same non-materialistic values as are evident in these attitudes.

For the vast majority of middle class Bengalis the colonial era was an age of deprivations, hopelessness and humiliation. This is evident from the writings of proud intellectuals like Bankim and Bhudeb. The former declared that the Bengalis were but servants to the British. The latter wrote bitterly of how the young British officials lorded over senior and highly capable people like themselves. He who would have been a prime minister under native rule had to be satisfied with the post of an inspector of schools. This sense of humiliation and hopelessness had fed into the revolutionary ideology of the post- Bengal Partition years. It found poignant expression in Rabindranath's 'Premer Abhishek', the introductory part which he was induced to leave out at the request of his friend, Taraknath Palit . That passage records the extreme

bitternes in the heart of the Bengali clerk serving an English master who "did not know his language, nor had any empathy with his misery", ("mor bhasha nahi jane, mor duhkha nahi mane") but only barked out his heartless orders from on high. In that poem, the humiliated, miserable Bengali sought redemption in love.

But that quest for means to rise above the sorrows and insult of their damned state was manifold. Religion, both in its institutionalised form and its mystical modes, had been a central concern of Bengali intellectuals ever since the days of Raja Rammohan. There had been a prolonged quest for "the true Hindu faith", partly in response to western, especially missionary criticism. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the quest had taken the form of asserting Hindu superiority. The news of Vivekananda's triumphant religious/spiritual propaganda in the west had been received with ecstatic emotionalism. The Theosophical movement, the site of white men and women declaring their faith in the spiritual superiority of the Hindus and Max Muller's linguistic theories which were popularly interpreted as postulating a common racial origin of the Bengalis and the master race, the former being the "Aryan brothers" of the latter. But this new "Aryanism" acted as props for the very insecure ego of the educated Indians, the Bengalis in particular. The social world in which I grew up had largely outgrown these quests for ego-boosting props, though one heard echoes of these ludicrous beliefs in rural and small town society. But the concern with religion as an uplifting and redeeming activity was still very much alive. One highly intelligent young man wrote in his diaries in the 'twenties of the last century that he had duties to society. One way of doing these was to be active in the service of the Brahmo Samaj. The name of this young man was Susobhan Sarkar.

The Ramkrishna-Vivekananda movement had several nuanced implications , but at its centre was a revival of faith in the possibilities of religiosity in its mystical sense : the spectacular life of the master was witness to that fact. Men and women, unconcerned with what the sahibs thought or said about their religious beliefs, found in its practice a way to redemption, of rising above the daily miseries of a colonial existence. The neo-Vaishnavas, led by Sisir Ghosh and the Amrita Bazar group contributed powerfully to this development. This religiosity based on devotional faith was still a part of the social culture, a path to redemption in the decades when I was growing up. But it had lost the excited intensity of the late nineteenth century. As a quiet resort for souls seeking peace and a world of serenity unaffected by the deprivations, frustrations and insults one endured in one's daily life, the religious tradition was still very much alive. On the positive side, it had lost much of its angst derived from the insecurity of ego. Faith for the believer was a quiet haven of peace. On the negative side, unscrupulous individuals took advantage of this devotional mood to stand forth as babas and matajis promising deliverance from all ills. The superstitious faith in miracle-working individuals, in mantras and talisman flourished, helped by the developed print capitalism. That these highly superstitious trends in one's spiritual life still persists is proved beyond doubt by the advertisements in our dailies. Of late, not content with our rich supply of superstitious beliefs we have started importing them from the Far East. Babas and matajis of highly dubious character flourish as never before.

There was however a transformation of religiosity over the last eight decades or so. It was no longer a frantic obsession. Other activities were the more usual means sought by idealistic men and women in their quest for ways to rise above the frustrating tenor of

daily life in colonial Bengal. Pursuit of knowledge had great appeal in this context. One sought it, not merely in quest of earning degrees. Deep and extensive knowledge was much admired: it was a hall mark of status. The quest for knowledge was, however, not to be equated with a quest for career or status. The Sadler Commission assessing the work of this university in 1917, commented that the Bengali youth, hungry for knowledge, was not satisfied with knowing what was going on in the world of scholarship in India, but must know about the state of the arts in London, Paris and New York. I have known really poor school teachers and marginally better off mukteers spending the bulk of their income on buying books and learning foreign languages. No motive other than a love of knowledge inspired these men. But nothing in our lives is without its flip side. Since scholarship was admired, great scholarship was often the source of boastful self-aggrandisement and at times false claims. Flaunting false claims to scholarship was a part of our cultural sleekness. Some of our contemporaries went about with very fat and famous volumes under their arms. *Das Kapital* in its original German was among these. It is unlikely that they ever opened these celebrated titles. I find that the learned among our young no longer suffer from these hang ups. They know what they know and see no need to lay claims beyond their achievements. But let us remember that those pretensions too were a tribute to a worthwhile ideal. Hypocrisy, famously, is the tribute of vice to virtue.

It is wonderful to see that love of scholarship is still very much alive in Bengali life. A couple of years ago I read about a group of young Bengalis in one of our small towns who had formed a club to study Greek literature and philosophy in the original language. They had set up a small library from their own resources costing a lakh of rupees. The club was centred round a cycle repair shop. I

felt assured that what the Sadler Commission had noticed among Bengali youth was still a living reality. In terms of my personal values, few things could be more reassuring.

Ever since the early years of the twentieth century, nationalist politics had replaced religion as the central impersonal concern of Bengali life. There was a twilight period when the two converged in the impassioned preachings of Swami Vivekananda and the impact they had on the minds of the idealistic young in this culture . group. Dreams of independence and revolutionary effort to achieve them had become integral to the aspirations of young Bengalis inspired by the swami's sayings. The revolutionaries went to their gallows with the works of Swami Vivekananda and the Bhagavadgita in their hand. Here was the ultimate road to transcending the dishonour and misery of dependence.

The struggle for freedom gradually replaced intense religiosity as the vantage point of Bengali idealism. The revolutionary impulse in its more violent form had run its course by the early 'thirties of the twentieth century : its final and most spectacular expression was the Chittagong Armoury raid in which a group of young men and women captured the government armoury on Batali Hill after a stiff fight with a unit of the British Indian army. The pride in this action was pretty universal among the Bengali bhadralok. The faith in the efficacy or indeed usefulness of that line of action had faded to the point of non-existence by the mid-thirties. Mass action based on nonviolent nonco-operation, as projected by Gandhi had come to occupy the centre-stage in politics, especially after Deshbandhu Chittaranjan had been won over to its side. But the admiration for revolutionary violence stood in the way of complete acceptance of the Gandhian ideology. Besides, the Swarajya Party, led by C.R.Das in Bengal, questioned Gandhi's total rejection of participation in the constitutional process initiated by the Reforms of 1919. The

swarajist plea was, that like the Irish in Great Britain, they would show up the hollowness of reform by capturing the legislature and rendering the process of government virtually impossible. For a while, the tactics had worked, to the great joy of the patriotic bhadralok. But as usually happens in such situations, many of those who came to scoff stayed back to pray, as Gandhi had feared. The lure of ministerial chairs was difficult to resist. The old ideal of resistance to British rule receded to the background. Politics of electioneering and the related phenomenon of factionalism among the nationalists came to occupy centre stage. The Civil Disobedience Movement, though far more tenacious, attracted less support than its predecessor. With C.R.Das's death Bengal had no charismatic nationalist leader until the emergnce of Subhash Chandra Bose. Gandhi never won total acceptance among the Bengali bhadralok. There was a time when what Bengal thought to-day, the rest of India did indeed think to-morrow . That time belonged very much to the past. The transfer of the capital in 1911 started the process. The emergence of Gandhi and C.R.Das's death completed it. The bhadralok's complaint that Bengal was being treated unfairly by all concerned embodied the affects of the consequent trauma. Its more recent expression was summed up by one Bengali journalist: the Bengalis, he wrote, complained bitterly that the world was unfair to the Bose's, the Indian National Congress to Subhashchandra Bose, the central government of independent India to Jyoti Bose and the All india Cricket Board to Gopal Bose.

The sense of marginalisation contributed to a complex pattern of political sentiment which affected the core of bhadralok concerns. As there were very few things in bhadralok concerns unaffected by those sentiments, it is necessary to stop and analyse their nature at this point. New influences, often of a purely

theoretical nature, had entered political concerns both in Bengal and at the all-India level. Marxism had become a powerful theoretical influence and all who came under the said influence did not see things the same way. A socialist party had grown up within the National Congress. Parties who did not accept its brand of scientific socialism set up their own organisations. The Communists who represented a minority, yet powerfully organised, political interest openly questioned the validity of Gandhian policies. The War complicated matters. With the Nazi invasion of the USSR, they decided to support the war effort with which the Congress had decided not to co-operate. M.N.Roy's Radical Humanists had a great appeal to a section of Bengali intellectuals and Roy was in favour of full scale co-operation. The Quit India movement initiated by Gandhi had substantial support, but only in a number of Bengal districts. Subhash Chandra, who was dissatisfied with Gandhi's initial policy of watch and wait during the war and only token resistance, had opposed him and been expelled from the Congress causing great resentment among a large section of Bengali nationalists. At the end of the war, the Bengali bhadralok came to hear about Netaji and the INA. Many Indian nationalists had long dreamt of an unlikely armed resistance to the colonial ruler. That a Bengali leader had realised this dream came to be a matter of great pride to the bhadralok. In the penultimate years of British rule the Bengali students expressed their defiance on the issue of trial of the INA generals, leading to bloody confrontation with the police and the army. Evidently, a new spirit was abroad, one which led Attlee to state in parliament that the British could no longer rely on the co-operation of the Indians for the continuation of their rule. This denial of acquiescence was certainly true of the Bengali bhadralok.

In short, 1930s onwards, politics in Bengal had assumed very complex shapes and this complexity was reflected in the psyche of the bhadralok. It was no longer a question of anti-British vs pro-British or pro-Gandhi and anti-Gandhi sentiments. Politics and the affects which went with them had become nuanced to an extreme degree, starting the tradition of numerous parties. The Bengali inclination towards forming small groups or cliques, in a way an expression of movement towards extreme individualism, in another an extension of rural inter-caste and intra-caste intrigues, had become manifest in our political life. The intellectual culture manifest in the intense discussions in Calcutta's coffee houses and schools and colleges in the muffassil embodied the new tendency. The road to 14 leftist parties lay open. How far the bhadralok had travelled since the last decade of the 19th century should be evident from one fact. A favourite topic of discussion among school and college students in the former age was whether God had any form or not. Such debates had ceased to be the concern of the young or old among the bhadralok by the thirties of the last century. They are extremely unlikely to be heard in the coffee houses to-day.

There was something dysfunctional about the new focus on subtle theoretical issues in politics. The more the bhadralok discussed the theoretical nuances of their politics, more they seemed to lose sight of ways to solve the many problems which beset our lives. Our social/political culture became increasingly one of more words and less action. Cities like Calcutta began, like Mohenjodaro, *to sink in their own garbage. No one seemed to be bothered.*

One basic discontinuity between activism in the colonial and post-colonial period lay in the outlook and expectation of the activists. Under colonial rulers, the activist, be he/she a follower of Gandhi or a communist, had little or no expectation of material advancement. In the Congress dominated provinces this pattern

had changed for a while after the election victories of 1937, but not in Bengal. The Congress party worker and the communist whole-timer alike had no income other than the meagre monthly allowances their party provided, usually on an irregular basis. They lived lives of extreme deprivation and took a certain pride in their misery. Since even saints are human and not without ego, the ideologically committed political worker at times vaunted one feature of their lives, "suffering", which was their badge of honour. Expectedly, we have come a long way from that, though there are some exceptions to the new pattern. The ascetic ideal of political activism is not yet entirely dead, as is appropriate in a country where some three hundred million live in a state of semi-starvation. Another feature of Bengali political sentiments was the centrality of egalitarian values, a concern for the condition of the dispossessed, even if the laudable sentiments did not always find expression in appropriate action. This concern goes back to our nineteenth century culture. Lal Behari Dey, Bankim, Harish Mukherji, Swami Vivekananda all were deeply concerned with the condition of the poor peasant. Bankim did not republish his *Samya*, but *Krishaker Katha* was reprinted again and again and he refused to sing the praises of British rule so long as there was no amelioration in the condition of the rural masses. Vivekananda declared in unequivocal terms that the earth was the legitimate inheritance of the toiling masses. This concern is something new, a significant response to the western contact, one of the several results of the introspection it induced. Incidentally, egalitarian values were far from central to western culture in the nineteenth or early twentieth century, but struggling hard to find acceptance in the face of dominant elitism. That the Bengali intelligentsia should choose this element from the repertory of western culture underlines a special historical situation and the unexpected nature of the

region's cultural response. Whatever the reality, concern for the condition of the dispossessed became and remains central to Bengal's social-political values at least at the level of sentiment and theory, if not practice.

One central theme in the political history of Bengal, and in fact of India, is the relationship between Hindus and Muslims. The associated affects have indeed been a dominant feature of Bengali mentality and the consequent developments contributed powerfully to shaping the framework of their material life, political, social and economic, often in disastrous ways. In my school days I witnessed the emergence of the strongly negative tendencies which were to lead to the partition of the province and the exodus of vast numbers, especially from East Pakistan to West Bengal. Despite very infrequent riots, nothing truly large scale in the sphere of inter-community conflicts, happened in Bengal until 1918 and then the spectacular killings of 1946. The relationship between the two communities was marked by co-existence, inevitable co-operation in matters economic and cultural and a certain degree of mutual assimilation in matters of religious practice and belief alongside an element of hostility. The rural Bengali, Hindu and Muslim, were subject to the same threats from the material environment and many of the folk religious practices reflected a shared sense of fear. The worship of the disease deities and the Hindu veneration of the pirs are evidence of this fact. The mystical cults like bauls and the marfati songs of popular Bengali muslim mysticism express shared a body of transcendental aspirations. Despite the taboos regarding commensality, there was no serious barrier to social intercourse between Hindus and Muslims. The code which guided that contact was well understood. Yet, there was an element of mutual distrust, negative images about one another in the awareness of the two communities. Political and economic competition sharpened the

edges of that distrust. As a powerful middle class, aided by the flourishing international market for jute, began to emerge among the Muslims, the resentment against Hindu taboos began to interpret these as expressions of social contempt, not entirely without reason. Political separatism and non-co-operation with Hindus found a fertile ground in these grievances. Hindu bhadralok, losing their advantage in the job market, developed a sense of deep grievance against the rival community. Communalism, in its most disastrous form, became an integral part of not only Bengal politics but their mentality as well.

Yet inter-community relation remains one of the most complex issues in the history of the Bengali people and our understanding of it is still rather limited. At the level of overt action there are mutually contradictory trends. The Premier of Bengal after the 1937 elections, Fazlul Huq moved the Pakistan resolution but his attitude towards the issue was highly ambivalent. The party he led was not an exclusively Muslim party and it did not support the demand for Pakistan. He repeatedly wanted to form an alliance with Hindu-dominated parties like the Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha. Shyamaprasad Mukherji declared that as a minister in his cabinet he had experienced no problem. The person often held responsible for the horrendous riots of 1946, Shahid Suhrwardy, had been a follower of C.R.Das and in effect was a highly westernised and sophisticated secularist. The Bengali bhadralok, contrary to popular belief, did participate in the great Calcutta killing. But the denial of this fact indicates a sense of shame about it. The strange exhibition of fraternal feelings on 15 August, 1947 , after one whole year of low grade rioting projects a world of political emotions which is difficult to explain. In East Pakistan, the state-sponsored riots of 1950 had educated Bengali participants. The Bengali

Muslims' primary emphasis on the Muslim identity suffered a shock from the experience of west Pakistani colonial outlook. A new concern with the Bengaliness of their identity produced the language movement and, eventually, the mukti yuddha. Yet the liberation from fundamentalist and communal outlook had its ambivalences. And the question as to what came first, Islam or Bengali identity, still remains an unsolved question though the last election was won by a party more inclined to secularist ideology. But the steady exodus of Hindus did not stop after the establishment of Bangladesh. On this side of the frontier, while the Hindutvabadis have not had any electoral triumphs, the attitude of a substantial section of the Hindu bhadralok resonates with admiration for Narendra Modi and what his politics represents. Hatred of Muslims has become a part of their mental world. In a recent meeting of a respectable cultural organisation, a statement comparing Gandhi with the Buddha provoked loud laughters of ridicule. As a large section of the affluent bhadralok believe, that rather dishonest politician was unduly soft on the Muslims. Yet, be it said to the credit of the Bengalis, Narendra Modi's party has made little progress electorally in this state.

In this brief lecture, I have focussed mainly on those dimensions of the bhadralok mentality which have implications for our public life. I have not touched upon the vast changes in our private world – in family relations, friendship, love, our sense of moral excellence. I shall conclude this talk with reference to only one fact. When we were fortunate enough to have co-eds sixty years ago, we addressed them with the reverential 'apni'. The contemporary form of address is 'tui'. I hope this change has brought an increase level of happiness. I am not entirely sure.