

# Freedom and its Enemies: Politics of Transition in West Bengal, 1947-1949\*

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## I

The fiftieth anniversary of Indian independence became an occasion for the publication of a huge body of literature on post-colonial India. Understandably, the discussion of 1947 in this literature is largely focussed on Partition—its memories and its long-term effects on the nation.<sup>1</sup>

Earlier studies on Partition looked at the ‘event’ as a part of the grand narrative of the formation of two nation-states in the subcontinent; but in recent times the historians’ gaze has shifted to what Gyanendra Pandey has described as ‘a history of the lives and experiences of the people who lived through that time’.<sup>2</sup> So far as Bengal is concerned, such experiences have been analysed in two subsets, i.e., the experience of the borderland, and the experience of the refugees. As the surgical knife of Sir Cyril Radcliffe was hastily and erratically drawn across Bengal, it created an international boundary that was seriously flawed and which brutally disrupted the life and livelihood of hundreds of thousands of Bengalis, many of whom suddenly found themselves living in what they conceived of as ‘enemy’ territory. Even those who ended up on the ‘right’ side of the border, like the Hindus in Murshidabad and Nadia, were apprehensive that they might be sacrificed and exchanged for the Hindus in Khulna who were caught up on the wrong side and vehemently demanded to cross over. And of course, eventually, millions did migrate in a bid to find security among their co-religionists. By June 1948, there were about 1.1 million refugees in West Bengal. But almost all who lived on the borderlands, whether they fled or stayed, suffered dislocation of one sort or another—to family and kinship ties, jobs, trading connections—in other words, to almost every aspect of their everyday lives.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, U. Butalia, *The Other Side Of Silence; Voices from the partition Of India* (Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1998); Ritu Menon and Kamla.Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998); S. Kaul (ed.), *The Partitions Of Memory: The Afterlife Of the Division Of India* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001); and G. Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Gyanendra Pandey, ‘The Prose Of Otherness’, in D. Arnold and D. Hardiman (eds), *Subaltern Studies VIII: Essays in Honour Of Ranajit Guha* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.194.

<sup>3</sup> For more details on this see Joya Chatterji, ‘The Fashioning Of a Frontier: The Radcliffe Line and Bengal’s Border Landscape, 1947–52’, in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.33, no.1 (1999), pp.185–242; and Willem van Schedel, ‘Working Through Partition: Making a Living in the Bengal Borderlands’, in *International Review Of Social History*, Vol 46 (2001), pp.393–421.

The traumas of displacement, the bloodshed, the arduous journeys of the refugees to Calcutta's Sealdah Station, and from there to government camps or squatter colonies, the rapid politicisation of the displaced, and their emotional remembering of the villages they left behind, have all been chronicled with empathy in recent years.<sup>4</sup> Partition and its memories thus dominate the contemporary historiography of 1947 in West Bengal.

But in these memories of Partition another amnesia becomes very prominent. Partition came in the wake of freedom and in fact partition itself had rival connotations of freedom. While for Hindus in West Bengal the pains of Partition often overshadowed the joys of freedom, for many Muslims in the east, Partition itself was seen as a form of freedom—from Hindu 'oppression'.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, Partition was not the only source of angst and disquiet in post-1947 West Bengal. The nature of the 'freedom' inherited through the transfer of power from the British to the Congress Party also came in for serious questioning. Until now, apart from a few studies on the ceremonies and jubilant celebrations of the first few days of independence,<sup>6</sup> there have been very few systematic analyses of how different groups of Indians responded and adjusted themselves to the newly achieved 'swaraj', for which they had fought so courageously and so long. The fifteenth of August is celebrated in India every year as 'Independence Day', but we do not yet know much about what the people on the streets and the peasants in the fields thought of this notion of a transfer of sovereignty and the associated idea of citizenship. 'There are remarkably few [socially grounded]...studies of decolonization', laments Prasenjit Duara in his introduction to a recently-published collection of essays on the subject.<sup>7</sup>

This essay looks at the first three years of transitional politics in West Bengal, a new Indian 'state' (i.e. province) created as a result of Partition. As noted above, the historiography of Partition has raised important issues about belonging in regard to the refugees and the people on the borderlands.<sup>8</sup> This essay does not deny the importance of these issues—or for that matter of Partition—in the transitional politics of West Bengal. But it chooses to focus on other anxieties—not often directly related to Partition—which arose out of a contemporary tendency to look at the coming of 'freedom' through the prism of modernity. Did such a modern concept of freedom—encoded in words such as 'sovereignty' or 'citizenship'—mean anything to the vast rural population of West Bengal? Alternatively what did it mean specifically to elite individuals, social collectives and political parties in Bengal? Why, in their anxiety to embrace the realities of 'free India' did some of the latter begin to invent 'enemies' of this newly-acquired freedom? Finding the answers to these questions is the first task of this paper. The second is to investigate popular understandings of nationhood by looking at one part of post-colonial India in microcosm. I will

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<sup>4</sup> See for more details Prafulla K. Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men: The Refugees and the Political Syndrome in West Bengal* (Calcutta: Naya Udyog, 1999), p.1 and passim; Joya Chatterji, 'Right or Charity? The Debate over Relief and Rehabilitation in West Bengal, 1947–50', in Suvir Kaul (ed.), *The Partitions Of Memory: The Afterlife Of the Division Of India* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001); and Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Remembered Villages: Representations Of Hindu-Bengali Memories in the Aftermath Of the Partition, in *South Asia*, Vol. XVIII, Special Issue (1995), pp.109–29. Some personal stories and memories of Partition have been translated into English for a wider audience. See, for example, Debjani Sengupta (ed.), *Map Making: Partition Stories from 2 Bengals* (New Delhi: Srishti, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> This point has been briefly dealt with in Chakrabarty, 'Remembered Villages'.

<sup>6</sup> See J. Masselos, "'The Magic Touch Of Being Free": The Rituals Of Independence on 15 August', in J. Masselos (ed.), *India: Creating a Modern Nation* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1990), pp.37–53; and T.Y. Tan, and G. Kudaisya, *The Aftermath Of Partition in South Asia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp.38–43.

<sup>7</sup> Prasenjit Duara, 'Introduction: The Decolonization Of Asia and Africa in the Twentieth Century', in P. Duara (ed.), *Decolonization: Perspectives from Now and Then* (London: Routledge, 2004), p.1.

<sup>8</sup> See particularly Chatterji, 'Right or Charity?'; and van Schendel, 'Working Through Partition'.

show that, far from there being a dominant Indian political consensus on ‘freedom’ during the late 1940s in Bengal, popular anxieties were conceptualised and articulated differently on different social planes—in other words that, at least in Bengal, ‘nation’ was still in this period very much a subject of popular debate and contestation.

## II

Let us begin with the celebrations. On the fifteenth of August 1947 Calcutta was in an extraordinary festive mood. At midnight the new governor, C. Rajagopalachari, took the oath of office, followed by Dr P.C. Ghosh, the Congress chief minister and other members of the first West Bengal cabinet. During the day, tricolour flags, along with wooden and iron poles to hang them, and white cotton Gandhi caps with ‘*Jai Hind*’ inscribed on them—the new icons of a free nation—were sold in thousands on the pavements of Calcutta. The main flag-hoisting ceremony of the day was scheduled to be held at the Governor House. Thousands gathered at the gates in the morning. For a while the policemen tried to block them, but soon the locks gave way and the crowd rushed onto the lawn where the governor was giving a speech. After he finished the crowd followed him back to the Raj Bhavan and entered the building. For next few hours thousands of ordinary Calcuttans, many of them from working-class background, roamed its corridors freely and helped themselves to souvenirs in the shape of pieces of furniture and colonial bric-a-brac.<sup>9</sup> According to unofficial sources, about 200,000 people invaded Government House that day.<sup>10</sup> And the breaking of barriers continued. After Raj Bhavan, the crowd’s next target was the adjacent Assembly House where, once again, police tried—and failed—to block their entry. Once again the governor was interrupted in the middle of a speech—this time with loud cries of ‘*Jai Hind*’.<sup>11</sup> Symbolically, the crowd was reclaiming its right to participate in the running of the country. Similar popular outbursts of exuberance were seen in other places too. In Bombay, the focus was the Secretariat Building. Writing about this incident, Jim Masselos argues that it signified that no official space was sacrosanct any more, as such spaces had been during the days of the Raj.<sup>12</sup>

Along with these symbolic acts of reclamation, Calcutta and other cities also witnessed many spontaneous popular celebrations in which national flags were hoisted, patriotic songs sung and fiery speeches delivered.<sup>13</sup> In Calcutta, particularly, this had the unforeseen but welcome effect of muting the communal tension that had plagued the city and adjacent industrial areas of Howrah during the previous months. Gandhi, who had come to Calcutta to try to halt the bloodshed, fasted on the fifteenth August as a mark of penance<sup>14</sup>—but before the day was out, all tension had disappeared. A relieved superintendent of police in Howrah informed his superior two days later:

On the 15th August the whole town looked very festive and gay. National flag was hoisted in all the Government buildings as well as at all public places and in almost all the important localities. Trams and buses were very much crowded with people who went on shouting ‘*Jai Hind*’. People greeted one another both Hindus and

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<sup>9</sup> *Anandabazar Patrika* (17 Aug. 1947).

<sup>10</sup> *The Statesman* (18 Aug. 1947).

<sup>11</sup> *Anandabazar Patrika* (17 Aug. 1947).

<sup>12</sup> Masselos, “‘The Magic Touch of Being Free’”, p.44.

<sup>13</sup> *Anandabazar Patrika* (17 Aug. 1947).

<sup>14</sup> For more on this see Tan and Kudaisya, *The Aftermath Of Partition in South Asia*, pp.38–43.

Muslims. As if by a magic, all the differences of the people were composed overnight, and they all looked happy and cheerful.<sup>15</sup>

That was also the impression of Howrah judicial magistrate Annada Sankar Roy, who has left a vivid memoir of the period.<sup>16</sup> And in Calcutta, too, there was not a single incident of communal violence between 15 and 30 August. Instead Hindus and Muslims clutching national flags in their hands hugged each other warmly. Unhappily, the peace proved temporary. Trouble broke out again on the 31st, forcing Gandhi to resume his fast on 1 September, this time in company with Hasan Suhrawardy, the man widely believed to have been the moving spirit behind the terrible riots of August 1946. The riots abated and Gandhi broke his fast with a glass of fruit juice from the hands of Suhrawardy in an overt gesture of reconciliation.<sup>17</sup>

The August atmosphere of jubilation and celebrations incorporated distinct elements of ambivalence however, which was not lost on the Bengali middle class. Birendra Krishna Bhadra, writing under the pseudonym 'Birupaksha', produced around this time a series of hilarious but pungent social commentaries which have been compiled under the title *Birupaksher Bisham Bipad (The Serious Crisis of Birupaksha)*. *Swaraj*, Birupaksha writes, means that you can do anything you like (even ransack the Governor House if you happen to find the gates open). In British times, people were restrained by their fear of the sahibs' anger. Now the British have gone home, reason and restraint have vanished. What was once fixed and reliable has become like *ghee* (clarified butter). No one is listened to anymore. The younger generation do not listen to their elders, the subordinate staff do not obey their superiors, students do not obey their teachers, wives do not do the bidding of their husbands. Freedom, Birupaksha concludes, has opened the door to chaos and anarchy. 'If this happens at the very introduction, then I shudder to think what will happen to this country when freedom will be running at full force'.<sup>18</sup> The popularity of his All India Radio programmes, and the fact that his book went into second print within a short time, show that his concerns were shared by a wide section of the elite urban population.

Another anxiety of middle-class Bengalis stemmed from the high hopes generated by independence. As Annada Sankar Roy writes in his memoirs: 'That wonderful day seemed divine. Everything was possible. Freedom was the land of plenty. The people of this country could get whatever they wanted'. This optimism came from an extension of the concept of freedom, from its political manifestation to its social and economic expectations, from its narrower connotation of political sovereignty to its wider meaning of citizenship that entailed an equal right to enjoy prosperity and happiness. The presence of Gandhi, Roy further writes, reminded the Bengalis that what they wanted was not just political freedom, but also social and economic freedom, which they could now strive to attain.<sup>19</sup> In the same vein, Leftist intellectual Gopal Haldar warned his contemporaries in a 1947 essay that the meaning of the term 'freedom' had profoundly changed during the years of the independence struggle—and was no longer just a synonym for 'Home Rule' by Indians. Rather it now conjured up empowerment and revolutionary social and economic change.<sup>20</sup> And similar thoughts could be found in the statements of the Gandhiite Ajoy

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<sup>15</sup> B. Chatterji, S'intendant of Police, Howrah, to AIG, Bengal, 17 Oct. 1947, Government of Bengal, Home (Poll), Confidential File no. 212/47, West Bengal State Archives, Calcutta [hereafter WBSA].

<sup>16</sup> Annada Sankar Roy, *Jukta Banger Smriti* (Calcutta: Mitra & Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1990), p.118.

<sup>17</sup> *Anandabazar Patrika* (7 Sept. 1947).

<sup>18</sup> Birendra Krishna Bhadra, *Birupaksher Bisham Bipad* (Calcutta: The Bihar Sahitya Bhavan Ltd., 1357 BS, rpr. 1361 BS), pp.6–7, 10, 12, 14–15, 130–35.

<sup>19</sup> Roy, *Jukta Banger Smriti*, p.123.

<sup>20</sup> Gopal Haldar, 'Bhumika', in Anadinath Pal, *Bharater Muktisangram* (Calcutta: Pustakalaya, n.d. [1947]), pp.iii–iv.

Mukherjee, the hero of the Midnapur national government of 1942. Midnapur warned his countrymen on the eve of independence that real *swaraj* would come only when the Gandhian ideal of '*Krishak-praja-mazdur raj*' (rule of the peasants, tenants and workers) was realised in the country<sup>21</sup>—and this would not be an easy task. The real implications of freedom would be clear in a few days, historian Jadunath Sarkar reminded his countrymen in a radio speech, because the British had left them with a bankrupt *zamindari* estate.<sup>22</sup> Thus, behind the celebration and jubilation there was a lurching anxiety about the difficult task that lay ahead of fulfilling the expectations of the people and cleaning up the 'mess' left behind by the previous colonial power.

We do not know much about how the villages celebrated the coming of freedom. A social novel, *Hey More Durbhaga Desh (Oh My Unfortunate Country)* published in 1947 describes one such rural celebration organised by the village headman and a local businessman, who had recently made money in the wartime bonanza and harboured political aspirations. They invited influential guests from Calcutta to add respectability to their celebrations. However while the peasants participated in the festivities and came away with a sense of having witnessed something important—'Oh yes, we observed a great tamasha—their thoughts kept straying to the grim realities of their economic situation: the harvest had been bad that year, for want of rain. Indeed rural life in Bengal had generally been on the skids since the early 1940s—as the novels of Tarasankar Banerjee testify. 'People did not have enough to satisfy even their minimum needs', he observed in *Ganadevata*, did not have enough 'to provide themselves with two sets of clothes a year and two handfuls of rice a day'. Yet this did not stop their local *zamindars*, or their agents, men who often had close connections with the Congress Party and the bureaucracy, from periodically jacking up their rents.<sup>23</sup> Since it was this elite which continued to reign in the countryside after independence, it is likely that freedom carried a less ontological meaning for West Bengal's peasant society. And this is certainly how Leftist journalist Subhas Mukhopadhyay saw it. His reports on rural Bengal shortly after independence are filled with grim pictures of apathetic village communities reeling under abject poverty.<sup>24</sup> But things would shortly grow worse, as we shall see. All in all, the Bengal peasantry's understanding of freedom was quite different from that of the urban middle class and their politician friends.

### III

In the event, the realities of freedom began to impact on all of them very quickly. The most important reality was the spiralling inflation rate, which did not come down after independence as was widely expected. If newspaper reports are to be believed, by 1947 the rationing system put in place in Calcutta and its adjacent industrial areas during the Second World War had almost completely broken down. Comments from officials, lamenting the difficulties of procurement owing to the high black market price of rice, confirm this assessment.<sup>25</sup> According to one estimate, average prices rose 86.8 percent between June 1947 and June 1948.<sup>26</sup> Another—the provincial Labour Department inquiry of 1948—claimed that the cost of living for the working classes in Calcutta and Howrah had risen three times since 1938 and food prices four times, and were now eating up 52.5 percent of working-class family budgets.<sup>27</sup> But the government was

<sup>21</sup> *Anandabazar Patrika* (3 Aug. 1947).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* (20 Aug. 1947).

<sup>23</sup> Tarasankar Banerjee, *Ganadevata: The Temple Pavilion* (trans. Lila Roy) (Bombay: Kutub-Popular, 1969), p.247.

<sup>24</sup> See Subhas Mukhopadhyay, *Gadya Samgraha* (Calcutta: Dey's Publishing, 1994).

<sup>25</sup> *Anandabazar Patrika* (28 Sept. 1947); and Dep. High Commissioner [hereafter Dep. HC] to High Commissioner [hereafter HC] for UK in India, Calcutta, 17 Feb. 1948, India Office Records [hereafter IOR], L/P&J/5/316.

<sup>26</sup> Acting Dep. HC to HC for UK in India, Calcutta, 3 Aug. 1948, IOR, L/P&J/5/317.

<sup>27</sup> Acting Dep. HC to HC for UK in India, Calcutta, 15 June 1948, IOR, L/P&J/5/316.

itself partly responsible. In January 1948 it relaxed restrictions on the marketing of cloth. A huge smuggling trade involving East Pakistan eventuated, pushing cloth prices in West Bengal up by 200 percent.<sup>28</sup> And it waited too long to revive the rationing system. By the time rationing was put in place in February 1948, the damage had been done—scarcity had become an entrenched feature of Bengali life. Birupaksha writes, tongue-in-cheek, that one could only touch, not buy. There was a scarcity of almost everything—of cloth, coal, kerosene, sugar, public transport, rented houses, jobs and places in colleges. Even the middle class was having to queue for hours, he adds, to get what they needed.<sup>29</sup> In fact, inflation and scarcity had been a regular feature of Bengali public life since the outbreak of the Second World War.<sup>30</sup> What seems to have made a qualitative difference after 1947 was the jarring realisation that freedom was not going to fix the situation.

But scarcity was not the only problem. Between 3 January and 8 May 1948, 1326 people died of cholera and 4861 died of smallpox. While the smallpox epidemic was soon contained,<sup>31</sup> the cholera outbreak continued until the early months of 1950.<sup>32</sup> Apart from these, plague was reported in April 1948 and again in the summer of 1949.<sup>33</sup> Although it did not become as serious a health problem as the other two, it caused panic.<sup>34</sup> The taste of freedom was becoming bitter, and that unwelcome aftertaste initiated a search for enemies.

Meanwhile, though, the unsettled conditions brought social unrest. Incidents of crime figures in the city of Calcutta rose from 12,300 in 1946 to 14,300 in 1947.<sup>35</sup> In January 1948 there was a 75 percent rise in the number of 'dacoities'.<sup>36</sup> In the urban industrial areas of Calcutta and Howrah retrenchments of workers sparked industrial strife, which continued well into 1949. There were 376 industrial disputes involving 412,432 workers in 1947, causing the loss of 5,884,742 man-days. This came down to 197 disputes involving 220,862 workers and a loss of 2,319,782 man-days in 1948, but that figure has to be seen in the context of Partition, which had reduced the labour force of Bengal by some six percent. Worst affected were the jute mills, followed by the engineering sector and tea plantations, and the cotton industry,<sup>37</sup> and within these sectors concerns owned by Europeans, such as Imperial Chemical, Britannia Engineering, Jessop & Company, Martin Burn, Lipton, Jenson & Nicholson and others, were particularly hard hit. But teachers, bank employees and government employees also struck during this period for better pay and working conditions. To be sure, Bengal had always been industrially volatile; but the industrial unrest of this period was different in several respects from that of colonial times. One new feature was that in a number of cases European engineers and supervisors became targets of

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<sup>28</sup> Dep. HC to HC for UK in India, Calcutta, 20 Apr. 1948, IOR, L/P&J/5/316.

<sup>29</sup> Bhadra, *Birupaksher Bisham Bipad*, pp.11, 13, 21, 37, 47, 65, 81–2, 91, 97–8, 119, 127, 131, 149–53.

<sup>30</sup> *Anandabazar Patrika* (5 Sept. 1948).

<sup>31</sup> Dep. HC to HC for UK in India, Calcutta, 10 Feb. 1948, IOR, L/P&J/5/316.

<sup>32</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (6 July 1949); and Fortnightly Report No.9 for the Period Ending 9 May 1950, IOR, L/P&J/5/320. Smallpox, it seems, reappeared in 1950.

<sup>33</sup> *The Statesman* (2 June 1949).

<sup>34</sup> *Anandabazar Patrika* (3 Apr. 1949).

<sup>35</sup> Dep. HC to HC for UK in India, Calcutta, 13 Jan. 1948, IOR, L/P&J/5/316.

<sup>36</sup> Dep. HC to HC for UK in India, Calcutta, 9 Mar. 1948, IOR, L/P&J/5/316. Official records show that such 'crimes against property' as a whole were starting to decrease by 1948. See Extract from Fortnightly Report on the Political Situation in West Bengal for the first half of January, 1948, Government of Bengal, Intelligence Branch Records [hereafter GB IB], Serial No. 195/1930, File No. 451/30, WBSA.

<sup>37</sup> Government of West Bengal, Labour Dept., *Report on the Activities Of the Labour Department, Government Of West Bengal*, Vol.II (May–Dec. 1948) (Alipore: Superintendent of Bengal Government Press, 1950), pp.24, 26, 65.

physical assault.<sup>38</sup> In the worst case involving an attack organised by the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI) on Jessop Steel in February 1949, where three foreign nationals were thrown into a blast furnace.<sup>39</sup> It seems that the European body was not anymore inviolate. Certainly this was the conclusion drawn by the British deputy high commissioner when news reached him that several European and Anglo-Indian women had been doused with coloured water during the 1948 *holi*—something that had never happened during the days of the Raj.<sup>40</sup>

If freedom for India's employers meant that they 'with one voice claimed the inherent right of retrenching workers', as a Government of West Bengal Labour Department Report had it,<sup>41</sup> for the workers it meant a gutsy refusal to accept any retrenchments, even when there were reasonable financial grounds for such action. For example, when the Grand Hotel in Calcutta fired some of its table serving staff because of it being 'off-season', there was an instant strike by the kitchen staff, which continued until their colleagues were reinstated.<sup>42</sup> But other workers were not so lucky. Many employers, with the tacit support of the West Bengal government, hit back with lockouts and dismissals. For example in November 1948, when the banking workers' union failed to implement an agreement, Lloyds Bank dismissed 550 of its 650 staff and recruited new ones who were given police protection.<sup>43</sup> This covert support for the employers made the government increasingly unpopular, and some of the Left-wing papers began to characterise it as an enemy of the workers' freedom. When, in April 1948, the central government employees in Calcutta struck (against the advice of the prime minister, Nehru) one of their posters announced:

We have had enough of bullying and threats from Imperialist rulers. It was from Panditji that we learnt how to react to it. Panditji may change but his lessons are still clear and inspiring. We will rise a thousand times stronger against your threats Panditji! Till you meet our legitimate demands and let us live honourably in free India.<sup>44</sup>

Bengal's workers were extending the meaning of freedom from a nationalist preoccupation with sovereignty to a concern for subjective liberty—the right 'to live honourably in free India'—and were beginning to see Congress as a new enemy, endangering that freedom.

However if the city workers were reeling under pressure, the peasants were no better off. Demonstrations by peasants demanding food became a regular occurrence.<sup>45</sup> In November 1947 a major peasant rally and march in Calcutta organised by the Kisan Sabha was met near Curzon Park with a police *lathi*-charge and the release of teargas. And the chief minister refused to address the rally, although previously he had promised to do so.<sup>46</sup> Disease, too, hunted them. In the early months of 1948 cholera and smallpox raced through the villages of 24-Parganas, killing

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<sup>38</sup> Dep. HC to HC for UK in India, Calcutta, 8 Apr. 1949; Dep. HC to HC for UK in India, Calcutta, 22 Apr. 1949, IOR, L/P&J/5/320; also see From Commissioner, Burdwan Division to District Magistrate, Burdwan, 8 June 1949, GB IB Records, Serial No. 9/1926, File No. 35/26, Part XI, WBSA.

<sup>39</sup> Saroj Chakrabarty, *With Dr. B.C. Roy and Other Chief Ministers* (Calcutta: Benson's, 1974), p.115. For details of this incident see *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (27 & 28 Feb. 1949).

<sup>40</sup> Acting Dep. HC to HC for UK in India, Calcutta, 30 Mar. 1948, IOR, L/P&J/5/316.

<sup>41</sup> Government of West Bengal, Labour Dept., *Report on the Activities Of the Labour Department, Government of West Bengal*, p.2.

<sup>42</sup> Acting Dep. HC to HC for UK in India, Calcutta, 25 May 1948, IOR, L/P&J/5/316.

<sup>43</sup> Dep. HC to HC for UK in India, Calcutta, 5 Nov. 1948, IOR, L/P&J/5/317.

<sup>44</sup> Acting Dep. HC to HC for UK in India, Calcutta, 6 Apr. 1948, IOR, L/P&J/5/316.

<sup>45</sup> *Anandabazar Patrika* (1 Oct. 1947).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* (23 Nov. 1947).

on average '100/150 people per day', according to the local MLA.<sup>47</sup> As rural conditions deteriorated, a wave of violent *jaqueries* under Communist leadership erupted in the districts of Burdwan, Birbhum, Bankura, Hooghly and Midnapur,<sup>48</sup> reaching a peak in the second half of 1949 when, according to police intelligence, no less than 131 separate incidents disturbed the West Bengal countryside.<sup>49</sup> Observing affairs from the capital, the Congress government of West Bengal felt they had discovered the real 'enemy of freedom'.

The Congress government had become the main target of public criticism for not fulfilling the promises of freedom. Faced with civil unrest, it chose to follow the familiar and well-trodden path of its predecessor, i.e., disciplining those who were creating the unrest. Initially it resorted to an ordinance issued by the previous Muslim League government. Under this provision, between June and December 1947 1,486 people were arrested.<sup>50</sup> But it went one better. In a notification of November 1947 it banned all 'sit-in' strikes or the practice of *satyagraha*. And then in December the government enacted what became notorious as the West Bengal Security Bill, proposing detention without trial for up to six months. Ironically the Gandhiite chief minister P.C. Ghosh introduced and defended the Bill and it was left to a Communist, Jyoti Basu, to oppose it clause by clause. When Basu reminded the chief minister that the Bill went against 'the proclaimed policy of the Congress for last 40 years', his cryptic reply was that the point was 'irrelevant here', meaning, presumably, in free India.<sup>51</sup> Outside the Assembly, the resistance was led by former Congressman Sarat Bose, who had formed his own Socialist Republican Party. Bose's civil libertarian rhetoric was perhaps not as principled as it sounded—given his grudges against the Congress government.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless his largely student supporters turned out in force, and there were violent protests against the Bill in front of the Assembly on 8 December and then again on the 10th, when police opened fire killing one person and injuring thirty others.<sup>53</sup> In response, the Assembly was adjourned till January. Meanwhile, the Congress launched a vigorous campaign of its own in support of the Bill. Nehru held a press conference at the West Bengal Governor's House on 17 December and Sardar Patel addressed a mass rally at Calcutta Maidan on 3 January. The best argument they could muster, however, was that the Bill was milder than similar ones proposed for other provinces. Then, on 17 December, Suresh Banerjee, the deputy leader of the Congress in West Bengal, claimed that Gandhi had given his blessing to the Bill.<sup>54</sup> It is difficult to verify the truth of this claim; but if true, it casts the author of *satyagraha* and one-time campaigner against the Rowlatt Bill in a very poor light indeed—a point which Sarat Bose laboured at a public meeting at Desbandhu Park on 20 December.<sup>55</sup> Yet despite all that, the Assembly voted the Bill into law on 15 January with just one amendment—a reduction of the period of detention without trial from six to three months.<sup>56</sup> Significantly, on the same day P.C. Ghosh resigned the chief ministership, which was taken up shortly afterwards by B.C. Roy.

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<sup>47</sup> *West Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings* [hereafter *WBLAP*], Vol.2, no.1, 25 Feb. 1948, pp.173–4.

<sup>48</sup> For more details see Abani Lahiri, *Postwar Revolt Of the Rural Poor in Bengal: Memoirs Of a Communist Activist* (Calcutta: Seagull, 2001), pp.109–11.

<sup>49</sup> 'Annual Administration Report, 1949—Section VIII', GB IB, Serial no. 206/1928, File no. 32/28 (1949), KW Folder, WBSA.

<sup>50</sup> Dep. HC to HC for UK in India, Calcutta, 30 Dec. 1947, IOR, L/P&J/5/315.

<sup>51</sup> *WBLAP*, Vol.1, 8 Dec. 1947, p.69.

<sup>52</sup> *Anandabazar Patrika* (6 & 9 Dec. 1947).

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* (12 Dec. 1947).

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* (17 & 19 Dec. 1947, 5 Jan. 1948).

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* (22 Dec. 1947).

<sup>56</sup> Government of West Bengal, Judicial and Legislative (Legislative) Department, *The West Bengal Security Act 1948* (Alipore: West Bengal Government Press, 1948).



What emerges from the debate over the Security Bill is that the Congress leaders and the press that supported them were trying to initiate a discourse of freedom in which there was a conflation of the party, nation and the state. In essence, the proposition was that Congress as the inheritor of the legacy of the nationalist movement was 'free' to do as it liked, and that whoever opposed the party was an enemy of both nation and state. As a Congress speaker at a public meeting at Maddox Square in Calcutta in December 1947 put it, the interests of the people and the interests of the government were now the same;<sup>57</sup> while the *Anandabazar Patrika*, which remained staunchly pro-Congress throughout this period, editorialised that attacks on the government could endanger the country's hard-earned freedom.<sup>58</sup> The enemies of the Congress Party had become, by definition, the enemies of freedom, i.e., of the sovereignty of the newly-born nation-state.

Interestingly this determination to deal with opposition with a heavy hand came precisely at a time when the Congress in Bengal was internally very weak because of bitter faction fighting. There were three main contending groups, the Khadi or the Gandhian group, the Jugantar group, and the Hooghly group,<sup>59</sup> and each group accused the others of corruption and malpractice. Even P.C. Ghosh was accused of succumbing to pressure from black marketeers and 'big business',<sup>60</sup> a charge he denied but indirectly substantiated by resigning from office (allegedly because he refused to include Gajanan Khaitan, a Marwari businessman, in his cabinet).<sup>61</sup> Referring to the change of government in a private conversation with the British deputy high commissioner in Calcutta, Sir B.L. Mitter of the Calcutta High Court offered a wry but apt summary of the situation: 'The relatively honest but inefficient group are being replaced by a relatively efficient but dishonest group'.<sup>62</sup>

So who were the enemies of freedom that Congress was so concerned about? By early 1948 Congress no longer faced any formidable organised opposition on the Right. Following Gandhi's assassination on 30 January, the Hindu Mahasabha faced public wrath. An irate crowd threw stones and brickbats at Shyama Prasad Mukherjee's Calcutta residence and in view of this public backlash the party decided to withdraw from all political activities and focus henceforth only on philanthropic programmes.<sup>63</sup> Sarat Bose's Socialist Republican Party was yet to take off properly. And in March the Bengal Muslim League, Congress' main opposition of the colonial era, wound itself up.<sup>64</sup> This left the Communists, who had been steadily mobilising the peasantry in the Bengal countryside since 1946, and were now making significant inroads into the trade union sector and among students. In a dramatic move on 25 March 1948, the West Bengal Government banned the provincial Communist Party against the express wishes of the prime minister.<sup>65</sup> Immediately afterwards, the police arrested the major Communist Party of India (CPI) leaders and pre-censorship orders were passed against its organ *Swadhinata*. In a statement to justify the ban, the home minister Kiran Shankar Ray announced in the Assembly that the government had evidence that the CPI's 'object' was 'to create a state of chaos and to take advantage of that

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<sup>57</sup> *Anandabazar Patrika* (23 Dec. 1947).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* (28 Nov. 1947).

<sup>59</sup> For details on Congress factionalism, see Prasanta Sen Gupta, *The Congress Party in West Bengal: A Study Of Factionalism 1947–86* (Calcutta: Minerva Associates, 1988), Ch.2.

<sup>60</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (5 July 1949); and Chakrabarty, *With Dr. B.C. Roy and Other Chief Ministers*, p.65.

<sup>61</sup> Sudeb Raychaudhury, *Banglar Rupakar Dr Bidhan Chandra Ray* (Calcutta: Samparka 1999), p.93.

<sup>62</sup> Dep. HC to HC for UK in India, Calcutta, 20 Jan. 1948, IOR, L/P&J/5/316.

<sup>63</sup> Dep. HC to HC for UK in India, Calcutta, 10 Feb. 1948; and Dep. HC to HC for UK in India, Calcutta, 17 Feb. 1948, IOR, L/P&J/5/316.

<sup>64</sup> *WBLAP*, Vol.2, no.2, 18 Mar. 1948, p.246.

<sup>65</sup> Chakrabarty, *With Dr. B.C. Roy and Other Chief Ministers*, pp.92–4.

situation in order ultimately to seize power by violent means'.<sup>66</sup> Thus began an era of state repression and anti-Communist witch-hunting.

#### IV

But why this visceral fear of the Communists? It was probably because the Communists, too, had found their enemies of freedom. The CPI at its Second Congress in Calcutta between 28 February and 6 March 1948 adopted a 'Political Thesis', which argued that the national government established on 15 August 1947 had become an enemy of the people and needed to be replaced.

Its [the Congress government's] establishment does not mean that the Indian people have won either freedom or independence, nor does it ensure that they will be moving in the direction of democracy and freedom for the people.

On the contrary, the government has already made a big move in the opposite direction—against the interests of the freedom of the people. It is linking itself with the Anglo-American bloc of imperialist powers—a bloc which seeks to crush all democratic revolutions and to create satellite states. It is manoeuvring to find an advantageous position for itself in the Anglo-American bloc.<sup>67</sup>

In a bid to rectify this situation the party decided to follow what popularly came to be known as the B.T. Randive line. It took the path of promoting in India a 'People's Democratic Revolution'. Specifically, it sought 'to bring about those fundamental changes in our political and social structure without which there can be no freedom and no prosperity for our people. The present state will be replaced by a people's democratic republic—a republic of workers, peasants and oppressed middle classes'.<sup>68</sup> In pursuance of this policy the local branch of the CPI began to mobilise the masses, both in villages and in the industrial areas, and organised terrorist attacks on various representations of the state, the major targets being the police and the public transport system. In Calcutta especially, public life was seriously disrupted by bomb throwing and recurrent public transport strikes. The government responded with repression of a sort not seen since the darkest days of the Raj, which culminated in April 1949 in the fatal shooting of seven demonstrators, including five women, by the police.<sup>69</sup> But this only stiffened the resolve of the agitators, who committed a further 57 'outrages' between May and December 1949.<sup>70</sup> The worst-affected rural areas were the western and central districts and the northern tea gardens, where CPI volunteers had had some success in mobilising the peasants into Kisan Samities around the goal of establishing a '*Mazdoor Kisan Raj*' and instigating them to commit acts of '*tebhaga*' (a sharecroppers' movement to demand three-fourths share of the produce).<sup>71</sup>

Generally the press supported the government's stiff anti-Communist measures, and this served to make the Congress complacent, and its chief minister arrogant. After Gosch's resignation, B.C. Roy tried to preserve himself in power by frequently reshuffling his cabinet. Nothing was done, however, to fix the anomalies of public life. Eventually even middle-class supporters grew disenchanted:

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<sup>66</sup> WBLAP, Vol.2, no.2, 8–30 Mar. 1948, p.346.

<sup>67</sup> *Documents Of the Communist Movement in India*, Vol.V (Calcutta: National Book Agency Ltd., 1997), pp.600–1.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p.643.

<sup>69</sup> *Anandabazar Patrika* (28 Apr. 1949).

<sup>70</sup> Details in GB IB, Serial no. 206/1928, File no. 32/28 (1949) KW Folder, WBSA.

<sup>71</sup> 'Monthly Review Of Communist Affairs in West Bengal Dated the 10th August 1948 (No.8)', GB IB, Serial no. 7/1926, File no. 35/26 (MF) Part XIII, WBSA.

The sweet memory of that memorable day in the history of India, viz., the 15th of August 1947 must still be fresh in the mind of the people. How proud were the people then of their National Government and how much they loved their national leaders and how ecstatic was their newly tasted joy of freedom and how colourful and enlivening was their dream of the future!

How is it that many people now feel disillusioned and sad? What is this due to?

There are several important factors, among others, contributing to the somewhat changed attitude of the people to their National Government, viz., (1) very high prices of foodstuff and cloth and other necessities of life and acute distress of the people, (2) popular belief, specially among the intelligentsia, that the civil liberties of the people are often interfered with by the authorities on rather flimsy grounds, (3) wide-spread corruption amongst government servants, high or low, (4) general dislike of the politically conscious people of the present day economic order of the society.<sup>72</sup>

The Congress ministry, however, remained in denial, refusing pleas from its Gandhiite backbenchers that the party was moving ever further from its published platform of '*Krishak-praja-mazdur raj*'. Pro-business finance minister, N.R. Sarkar, had other priorities.<sup>73</sup> However the firing incident of April 1949 unleashed a stream of protests, and this time not just from the Left-wing politicians whom the chief minister could conveniently dismiss as parts of a Communist conspiracy. Fatefully, Roy chose this moment to hold a long-overdue bye-election for the South Calcutta Assembly constituency.

To this point the popularity of the Congress government had not been directly tested. It had faced two bye-elections, but those were in the very early months of freedom when it could still cash in on the memories of the nationalist movement. In November 1947 the new chief minister, Dr Ghosh, won a resounding victory over a Hindu Mahasabha candidate in the Birbhum rural general constituency, polling 80 percent of the votes.<sup>74</sup> Then in September 1948, home minister Kiran Shankar Roy carried the Malda-cum-Dinajpur constituency though, this time, a large parcel of votes went to an unofficial Congress candidate who had been ignored in favour of Kiran Sankar Roy for nomination.<sup>75</sup> Perhaps understandably given their successes, the government remained confident that it could hold on to South Calcutta too. But in the event this proved a bridge too far.

The first ominous sign was when Sarat Bose announced his candidature for the seat; the second was when all the Leftist parties agreed to support him. With the only other candidate a nonentity, these circumstances alone pointed to a Forward Bloc victory. What is more, letters intercepted by police intelligence suggest that Bose's candidacy was attracting voter support. Many people apparently saw Bose as someone who had the credentials to mount an effective challenge to the corrupt and autocratic Congress.<sup>76</sup> Still, it was not quite a sure thing. Bose was ill and out of the country, convalescing at a nursing home in Switzerland. (It is thought that Congress called the bye-election when it did precisely to take advantage of his absence). Moreover Congress, too, had

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<sup>72</sup> Letter to the Editor, *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* (7 Feb. 1949).

<sup>73</sup> *WBLAP*, Vol.2, no.1, 10 Feb.–5 Mar. 1948, pp.130–63; and Vol.5, no.1, 23 Feb.–16 Mar. 1949, pp.65–73.

<sup>74</sup> Lahiri, *Postwar Revolt*, p.93.

<sup>75</sup> So during the election campaign, even the president of the Malda district Congress committee was found preaching in favour of the rebel candidate Ramhari Roy. Secretary, Malda District Congress Organising Committee to Secretary, West Bengal Provincial Congress Committee, 5 Oct. 1948, AICC Papers, File no.PC-4/1947, Part I, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi [hereafter NMML].

<sup>76</sup> See GB IB, Serial no. 195/1930, File no. 451/30, WBSA.

a substantial candidate in the person of Suresh Chandra Das, the president of the South Calcutta District Congress Committee, and it pulled out all the stops on his behalf, Nehru and Patel issuing supporting statements invoking the past heroics of the party and reminding the electorate how much it had contributed to the achievement of freedom.<sup>77</sup> And Bose's campaign was to some extent derailed by the Leftists' tactics. Communists broke up a Congress election meeting at Deshapriya Park, alleging that disparaging remarks had been made about Netaji Subhas Bose (Sarat's deceased brother). They attacked Congress Party offices, manhandled Congressman Sucheta Kripalani, and burned a national flag.<sup>78</sup> The day before the election, 356 Communist security prisoners started a hunger strike to draw public attention to the absence of civil liberties in the province under the current regime.<sup>79</sup> Thus when Bose, still in his sickbed in Switzerland, was declared the victor by 19,030 votes to 5,780 for Das,<sup>80</sup> the Congress leadership could hardly believe it. Wasn't it said that even a lamppost could win an election on a Congress ticket? B.C. Roy tried to rationalise the debacle by blaming internal party;<sup>81</sup> but the real 'culprits' were the voters of South Calcutta. Bose had told them:

The very existence of West Bengal is at stake; her economy is in perilous condition. If West Bengal is to live, if we of and in West Bengal have to win freedom of speech, freedom of association and assembly, freedom from the galling restrictions on civil liberties, freedom from want, freedom to live cleaner, healthier and happier lives, freedom from the yoke of domestic factions and of capitalist and vested interests, if we are to build a New and Greater Bengal and a New and Greater India, the fight has to be carried on all fronts, including the legislative front.... I could leave my candidature and its success entirely in your hands in the fullest confidence that you would do all in your power to defeat the reactionary forces that might be arrayed against me in my absence, backed though they might be, by 'big business'.<sup>82</sup>

Many had believed him.

## V

Spurred into action by the South Calcutta result, the Congress high command sent 'wake-up' circulars to all provincial committees and the Working Committee launched a mass contact drive to recruit new members.<sup>83</sup> However, the problems of the West Bengal Provincial Congress were too deep-seated to be rooted out easily. The electoral debacle, indeed, in the short term exacerbated faction fighting within the West Bengal Congress. The party's executive committee was reconstituted on 14 June at the urging of 107 'rebel' members; supporters of the contending groups became embroiled in violent clashes on the streets;<sup>84</sup> and Roy's leadership was

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<sup>77</sup> *Anandabazar Patrika* was openly partisan in the South Calcutta bye-election in favour of the Congress candidate. It published all the various statements of Congress stalwarts in favour of Suresh Das's candidature and in the form of news items published reports overtly preaching why people should not vote for Sarat Bose. From 9 June onwards, it carried a daily front page notice—not a paid advertisement—urging voters to support Congress in order to stop indiscipline and destruction.

<sup>78</sup> *Anandabazar Patrika* (7, 8 & 10 June 1949); and *The Nation* (6 & 10 June 1949). According to *The Nation*, it was a Congress flag, rather than a national flag. *Anandabazar Patrika* also stated it was a Congress flag. However, Nehru insisted it was a national flag. See *The Statesman* (9 June 1949).

<sup>79</sup> *The Statesman* (16 June 1949).

<sup>80</sup> *Anandabazar Patrika* (16 June 1949).

<sup>81</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (5 July 1949).

<sup>82</sup> Election manifesto of Sarat Chandra Bose, quoted in Sarat Chandra Bose, *I Warned My Countrymen* (Calcutta: Netaji Research Bureau, 1996), p.242.

<sup>83</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (8 July 1949).

<sup>84</sup> *The Nation* (15 June 1949).

challenged,<sup>85</sup> the rival faction led by J.C. Gupta submitting to Nehru a list of charges of corruption and misuse of power by the premier. The latter Nehru dismissed as ‘vague charges’, but in a letter to the acting chief minister, Nalini Ranjan Sarkar, he expressed his concern at the fact that there was a ‘great deal of resentment against the West Bengal Government for a variety of reasons’.<sup>86</sup> Returning from eye surgery in Europe, Roy flatly denied the charges levelled against him and his government. He was summoned to New Delhi all the same. There was a patchy compromise, with the Congress Assembly Party reiterating its ‘confidence’ in Roy’s leadership. But no permanent formula to reconcile the rival factions emerged.<sup>87</sup>

Distracted by internal squabbles, the West Bengal Congress had very little energy left to attend to the manifest grievances of the people. The market remained volatile and a paradise for black marketeers. Large quantities of adulterated mustard oil were seized in Calcutta, but the authorities claimed they could do nothing about it, because of the absence of appropriate legislation (though as a letter to the editor of the *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* pointed out the West Bengal Security Act, which had been made even more draconian through an amendment in September 1948, could easily have been deployed against the black marketeers and adulterators).<sup>88</sup> Nor was much done to control prices. In June 1949 *The Statesman* published a price list of bazaar goods, which showed that there had been an overall price increase of 389 percent since 1941, i.e., the people in 1949 were paying nearly five times as much as they had in 1941 for meat, poultry, fish, vegetables, fruit and cereals.<sup>89</sup> When the government announced it was rationing sugar, the commodity vanished instantly from the market, to be sold later at exorbitantly high prices. There was a similar rumour about salt, and it disappeared too from the Calcutta markets, causing a mad rush to shops where people jostled to buy salt at double the usual price.<sup>90</sup> To be sure, these problems were not confined to Calcutta, or for that matter to Bengal—but Calcutta’s cost of living was fast becoming unaffordable for even the middle class. A report of August 1949 revealed that 75 percent of central government employees in Calcutta with incomes under RS500 were in debt, and were spending more than half of their family budget on food as against 40 percent in Delhi. And these were ‘the most advantageously situated segment of the middle class’, having a stable source of income.<sup>91</sup> For the working classes, things were harder still. As the *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* reported, ‘avenues of employment...are shrinking everyday, [and] the number of unemployed...is...growing daily’. To make matters worse, in July 1949 the Indian Jute Mills Association decided to close its mills for one week in four to cope with the current shortage of raw jute, causing the retrenchment of some 575 permanent staff and a reduction in wages for the rest.<sup>92</sup> The finance minister’s response to this situation was to point out huffily that ‘prosperity does not pour like the gentle rain from heaven in benign abundance’.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (30 July 1949).

<sup>86</sup> From Jawaharlal Nehru to N.R. Sarkar, 1 July 1949; and ‘Confidential—Not for Publication: Allegations Against the West Bengal Ministry’, Nalini Ranjan Sarkar Papers, Correspondence with Jawaharlal Nehru, NMML.

<sup>87</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (4, 8, 11, 12 & 13 Sept. 1949).

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.* (29 Jan. 1950).

<sup>89</sup> *The Statesman* (2 June 1949). Also see Dep. HC to HC for UK in India, Calcutta, 17 June 1949, IOR, L/P&J/5/320.

<sup>90</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (7 Oct. 1949); and Dep. HC to HC for UK in India, Calcutta, 21 Oct. 1949, IOR, L/P&J/5/320.

<sup>91</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (4 Aug. 1949).

<sup>92</sup> Dep. HC to HC for UK in India, Calcutta, 8 July 1949, IOR, L/P&J/5/320. For more on the problems of the jute industry, see *The Statesman* (8 Mar. 1948, & 19 Feb. 1949).

<sup>93</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (17 Feb. 1950).

By this time even the pro-government *Amrita Bazar Patrika* was losing patience. A ‘regrettable political tendency’ was afoot, the paper observed: ‘the people of West Bengal are apparently losing faith in the Congress’. Why? Because local Congressmen were ‘not doing their duty to the people’.<sup>94</sup> This was privately the view of some party members too. Suresh Chandra Das, the defeated Congress candidate for South Calcutta, urged Nehru to initiate ‘an inquiry into the misdeeds and corruption of the administration’. ‘We are not so much frightened of the Communist goondaism, arson and loot’, he told the prime minister, ‘as Government’s omissions and commissions, which create a greater gulf day by day between the Congress and the people’.<sup>95</sup> Outside of the ministry, there was a growing realisation that the party had lost touch, that it badly needed an injection of ‘fresh blood’.<sup>96</sup>

Yet what ultimately saved the Congress Party from itself was not self-criticism but the failure of the Left alternative, which had seemed to be a distinct possibility in June 1949, to eventuate. For years Sarat Bose had dreamed of creating a common Left front in Bengal, and in late 1947 he canvassed the idea in talks with the leaders of the CPI, the RCPI, the Bolshevik Party of India, the Bolshevik Leninist Party (Trotskyite group), the Forward Bloc, the RSP and the Bengal Volunteer Group, though without success.<sup>97</sup> Following his victory in the South Calcutta bye-election, Bose returned to this project<sup>98</sup> and in July 1949 he persuaded representatives from the Forward Bloc, the Peasants and Workers Party and the Kisan Sabha<sup>99</sup> to join a Leftist Co-Ordination Council under his chairmanship. The Council’s first initiative—a conference of progressive forces at Nagpur in September—had to be cancelled when Bose’s health suffered a relapse. But the second conference resulted, on 30 October, in the foundation of the United Socialist Organisation of India (USOI) with Bose as president. Although a broad umbrella, it did not include the Communists whom Bose distrusted, or the Socialists under the leadership of Jai Prakash Narain who declined to join,<sup>100</sup> sparking public speculation about a possible personality clash between the two former Congress stalwarts. However the Socialists replied that they were holding out for the creation of a genuine new party composed of all democratic forces with a single programme, in preference to the loose federation proposed by Bose.<sup>101</sup>

And another problem was that there were many contenders for leadership. At a meeting on 3 May 1949 in Sehra Bazaar, Burdwan with Swami Sahajananda of the Kisan Sabha in the chair, and attended by leaders from the RSP, Forward Bloc, Workers and Peasants Party, Socialist Unity Centre and the Bolshevik Party, set up a rival umbrella body to Sarat Bose’s, the United Leftist Front (ULF). It soon foundered, and Sahajananda later joined hands with Bose and became the vice president of the USOI. In the interim the ULF provided a platform for dissidents such as Soumyendranath Tagore of the RCPI to attack Bose’s reputation. Bose vigorously rebutted the charges.<sup>102</sup> However the war of words was still raging when Sarat Bose died of a heart attack on 20 February 1950. With his demise died all possibilities of Left unity—at least for the short term.

Meanwhile, as mentioned already, Communist activities mushroomed. On the labour front the CPI continued to mobilise workers in the tea gardens and factories and incite them to attack

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<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.* (12 July 1949).

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* (20 July 1949).

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.* (23 July 1949).

<sup>97</sup> Extract from Fortnightly Report on the Political Situation in West Bengal for the Second Half of December 1947, GB IB, Serial no. 195/1930, File no. 451/30, WBSA.

<sup>98</sup> See intercepted letters in GB IB, Serial no. 205/1930, File no. 451/30(1), Part VI, WBSA.

<sup>99</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (25 July 1949).

<sup>100</sup> Intercepted letters from Sarat Chandra Bose, GB IB, Serial no. 195/1930, File no. 451/30, WBSA.

<sup>101</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (20 Aug. 1949).

<sup>102</sup> See intercepted letters in GB IB, Serial no. 195/1930, File no. 451/30, WBSA.

against European planters and even police officers. A worried DIG of Police ordered his men to crack down hard on the agitators before there was a 'repetition of the Jessop incident'.<sup>103</sup> Notwithstanding the increased police vigilance, in Midnapur several Congress volunteers were killed; a number of *zamindars*' and *jotedars*' granaries were looted; and prisoners were rescued from police escort parties by armed peasant mobs demanding 'abolition of Zamindari system and land to the tillers of the soil'.<sup>104</sup> Likewise in Bankura, the Santhal peasants mobilised around the *tebhaga* demand, fought pitched battles with the police and pulled down national flags;<sup>105</sup> while armed sharecroppers rallied under the symbol of the hammer and sickle at Kakdwip in 24-Parganas and at Dubir Bheri and Barakamalpur in Hooghly.<sup>106</sup>

But it was the situation in Calcutta that dominated the pages of the city's newspapers. Bomb-throwing and police firing had become regular features of Calcutta public life,<sup>107</sup> and middle-class Bengalis (such as our Birupaksha)<sup>108</sup> were fast losing patience. And they were not alone. The formerly militant working class increasingly shunned the CPI because of its violent protests. The railway strike called for 9 March 1949 was a failure; and peasant movements, too, began to lose their momentum. As former Communist Abani Lahiri writes with the wisdom of hindsight: 'We called for the overthrow of the Congress government without waiting for the people to come to that conclusion'. As a result, 'the strategy adopted was beyond the consciousness of the mass of the peasantry'.<sup>109</sup>

It should be noted, however, that this feeling of uncertainty was constantly fuelled by the well-orchestrated anti-Communist propaganda of the government and the press. And the major feature of this anti-Communist campaign was the issue of freedom, or more precisely of national sovereignty. The Communists were now cast as enemies of India's freedom, defilers of the nation-state and the cultural heritage that defined national identity. But the propaganda worked because it resonated with the public and helped them articulate what they felt. The Communist's slogan, '*Ye azadi jhuti hai*' ('This freedom is hollow') offended the patriotic feelings of many, if not most, Bengalis. So did their burning of the national flag which most Indians regarded as a sacred symbol of national identity.<sup>110</sup> Michael Welch's observation that flag desecration is an act of political iconoclasm that has the power to create moral panic among the citizenry is pertinent here.<sup>111</sup>

Then there was the 'Soviet connection'. Congress leader Suresh Chandra Banerjee, in a speech of September 1948 in defence of the West Bengal Security Act, opined that there were two kinds of imperialism, Anglo-American and Russian. India had nothing to fear from the first, he believed,

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<sup>103</sup> Extract from DO No.3265/31-49, dated 8 July 1949, from S'intendant of Police, Darjeeling; from Comm., Burdwan Div'n. to Dist. Mag., Burdwan, 8 June 1949; from DIG. of Police, IB, CID, to all S'intendents and Additional S'intendents of Police in charge of DIBs including Railways, dated 23 June 1949; GB IB, Serial no. 9/1926, File no. 36/26, Part XI, WBSA.

<sup>104</sup> From S'intendent of Police, DIB, Midnapore to Special S'intendant of Police, IB, CID, 1/6 December 1950, GB IB, Serial no. 7/1926, File no. 35/26 (MF), WBSA.

<sup>105</sup> For details see GB IB, Serial no. 171/26, File no. 35/26 (Bankura), KW, WBSA.

<sup>106</sup> See Lahiri, *Postwar Revolt*, pp.109-11. I intend to write about this second *tebhaga* movement in a separate essay.

<sup>107</sup> *The Statesman*, *Amrita Bazar Patrika* and *Anandabazar Patrika* of this period are full of such reports. Also see GB IB, Serial no. 206/1928, File no. 32/28 (1949), KW Folder, WBSA.

<sup>108</sup> Bhadra, *Birupaksher Bisham Bipad*, p.23.

<sup>109</sup> Lahiri, *Postwar Revolt*, pp.101, 128.

<sup>110</sup> *Anandabazar Patrika* (7 June 1949); and *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (17 Aug. 1949).

<sup>111</sup> Michael Welch, *Flag Burning: Moral Panic and the Criminalization Of Protest* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 2000), pp.4-5.

but the second constituted a real danger. Eastern Europe had already been taken over; China was about to collapse; and Malaya, Indonesia and Burma were sitting ducks. In India, Banerjee added, local Communist agents were preparing the ground for a take-over through internal sabotage. The country could lose its hard-won freedom if the Communists were not contained in time.<sup>112</sup> And Calcutta's liberal newspapers ran the same line,<sup>113</sup> both in their news coverage and in features columns,<sup>114</sup> as did popular literary magazines like *Sanibarar Chithi*.<sup>115</sup> India was not afraid of socialism or revolution these columnists argued, but they should be allowed to come about in their own way and according to an Indian timetable, not be dictated by the Russians. The Soviet model was the antithesis of freedom, the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* editorialised defiantly.<sup>116</sup> More significantly perhaps, these concerns also figured in the public speeches of Opposition leaders like Sarat Bose,<sup>117</sup> and Jai Prakash Narain, whose Socialist group refused to join with the Communists in the proposed Leftist union for precisely that reason.<sup>118</sup>

Thus in 1949–50 there was a concerted attempt to plant the idea in public discourse that the Communists were the major enemies of freedom. And in the wake of that came another campaign, namely that it was the Congress which alone could protect Indian freedom from the country's enemies, internal and external. Nehru, addressing a meeting of local Congress workers at Allahabad on 4 September 1949 said: 'The country needs the Congress. There is no other party that can replace the Congress in these difficult times'.<sup>119</sup> B.C. Roy echoed the same view at a press conference in Calcutta a week later: 'If the freedom we have won is to endure, it is imperative that we of India should say nothing calculated to destroy the Congress prestige'.<sup>120</sup> And the partisan press agreed. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*'s view was that freedom could be preserved 'only by the Congress'.<sup>121</sup> To sum up, during 1948–50 the Congress, aided by a partisan Calcutta press, endeavoured to universalise its own version of freedom by invoking coercive measures, by resorting to ideological propaganda and scare-mongering about external enemies and above all, by promoting a new civil religion of the nation-state of which '*Bharat Mata*', or 'Mother India', became the new goddess and the national flag her most sacred emblem. An oleograph from Bengal in 1947 depicts *Bharat Mata* in all her material glory, sitting on the map of '*Swadhin Bharat*' or 'Independent India', with a national flag in her hand. Interestingly, the picture also shows how it had evolved—from the Congress flag designed in 1931—establishing in no uncertain terms the political conflation of party, nation and state.<sup>122</sup>

However, the question still remains, did the average Bengali accept this political conflation? It is interesting to note that the first flag-burning incident allegedly took place on 6 June 1949 at the Congress election meeting at Deshapriya Park as we have already mentioned. But we need to point out also that it was Nehru who first picked it up and made it a propaganda issue. In a

<sup>112</sup> WBLAP, Vol.3, no.2, 27 Sept. 1948, pp.100–1. For incidents of pulling down national flags, see GB IB, Serial no. 171/26, File no. 35/26 (Bankura), KW, WBSA.

<sup>113</sup> *Anandabazar Patrika* (18 Aug. 1948); *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (6 July 1949); *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 6 July 1949, *The Statesman*, 6 July 1949.

<sup>114</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (16 & 18 July, 18 Aug. 1949).

<sup>115</sup> Daybhagi, '*Kayekti Prasna*', *Sanibarar Chithi*, Vol.23, no.6, Chaitra 1357 BS, p.524; and Bimalchandra Sinha, '*Sapenastangamitamahima*', *Sanibarar Chithi*, Vol.23, no.11, Bhadra 1358 BS, p.471.

<sup>116</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (16 & 18 July, 18 Aug. 1949).

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.* (23 July 1949).

<sup>118</sup> *The Statesman* (6 Aug. 1950).

<sup>119</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (5 Sept. 1949).

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.* (12 Sept. 1949). Also see Sardar Patel's speech at the Brigade Parade Ground, Calcutta, on 15 Jan. 1950, *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (16 Jan. 1950).

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.* (12 July 1949). Also see editorial in *Anandabazar Patrika* (6 May 1949).

<sup>122</sup> This oleograph appeared on the cover of *History Today*, Vol.47, no.9 (Sept. 1997).



message to the electors of South Calcutta he charged Bose of aligning with the ‘antinational’ forces and referred to the flag-burning incident in the following emotive language: ‘Under which flag does Mr Bose stand, to which flag do his associates give allegiance?’<sup>123</sup> However according to *The Nation*, the flag that was burned was a Congress flag rather than a national flag. Even the pro-Congress *Anandabazar Patrika* in its initial report on the incident also described it as a Congress flag. So was it Nehru’s imagination, or his party’s willingness to manipulate the truth for political ends, that turned it into a national flag? We do not know; but either way the episode carried a sinister message—as this letter to *The Statesman* of 15 June 1949 emphasised:

...one can hardly share his [Nehru’s] wrath at the burning of a flag. If it was the Congress flag, his fury was unfounded; and if it was the State flag, the blame should lie with those who used it in an election meeting of the Congress party. It is not a feature of democracy to identify the party in power with the State.<sup>124</sup>

In conclusion, let me draw attention to a subsequent series of letters that appeared in *The Statesman* during January 1950 (remembering that similar letters were appearing in other newspapers as well). Note particularly their more ambivalent tone—no longer just vitriolic towards Communism, but angry and impatient with the political scene generally. A correspondent of 12 January 1950 wrote:

The terms ‘Communists’ and ‘Communism’ were till only the other day repulsive to most people. Why not now to the same extent? When ordinary people are constantly told (by the subversive group) that the Government are not seriously concerned about removing the causes of their discontents, evidently some find it rather difficult not to believe what they are told—an ideal condition for the spread of Communism.<sup>125</sup>

‘Disturbances in Calcutta’, opined another correspondent, ‘are manifestations of widespread discontent.... I feel that the Government’s economic policy, which has failed to satisfy many people, is a [major] cause of present discontents’.<sup>126</sup> The answer to the Communist menace, a letter of 20 January claimed, was not ‘strong precautionary measures’; for ‘if the price of containing Communism...[was] denial of fundamental rights’, then the people were in ‘more danger...[than they would be living] in a totalitarian State’.<sup>127</sup> Yet other letters complained of ‘the present regime’s increasing encroachment on civil liberties’,<sup>128</sup> and looked back nostalgically to what one described as ‘the Gandhian way’:

The public may not like [the] Communists...but it hates Fascism, as well as the measures taken by the Government in trying to eradicate subversive activities.... Communism, a foreign ideology, cannot be fought to a finish by the foreign ideology of anti-Communism. Unless a genuine Indian, i.e., Gandhian way is found, one cannot foresee what troubles may await the country.<sup>129</sup>

The term ‘Gandhian way’ appears to signify here an indigenous conception of freedom, as opposed to imported (e.g. Communist) ideologies of ‘liberation’. This valorisation of the home-

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<sup>123</sup> *The Statesman* (9 June 1949).

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.* (15 June 1949).

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.* (12 Jan. 1950).

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.* (22 Jan. 1950).

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.* (20 Jan. 1950).

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.* (16 Jan. 1950).

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.* (21 Jan. 1950).

grown echoed the Bengali middle class preference for orderly transition, and their anxiety about a possible breakdown of authority, which we saw reflected in the writings of Birupaksha. As a letter to *The Statesman* of 26 February 1950 put it: ‘...if the Congress is defeated, there will be chaos in the country. It is therefore imperative that the Congress remains the supreme party’. But what this correspondent had in mind was a reformed Congress, free of ‘the stigma of selfishness and corruption’.<sup>130</sup> As Manikuntala Sen notes in her autobiography, a similar ambiguity prevailed among the peasants and the workers as well, even in the so-called ‘liberated’ areas, where responses to Communist mobilising efforts gradually became less and less enthusiastic and attitudes to Congress more ambivalent.<sup>131</sup>

## VI

After 1950 new factors emerged which further changed the texture of West Bengal politics, most importantly the deterioration of the communal situation, worsened by increased refugee influx, and the re-emergence of the Hindu Mahasabha; but these developments lie outside the purview of the present essay. My concern is with the Bengalis’ initial responses to the idea of freedom. In the last section, I shall try to relate that story to a more generalised discussion of postcolonial nationhood in India.

It appears from the discussion above that for the people who were under colonial rule for two hundred years and were exposed to its model of modernity, the natural tendency was to think of freedom in terms of its Other, i.e., freedom as the absence of unfreedom. And whenever we think of unfreedom, we tend to think of agency, i.e., persons or objects or conditions that could potentially threaten or take away our freedom. As long as the British ruled India, the enemies of freedom were easy to identify, and the imagining of the Indian nation was to a large extent defined by this anti-colonial axis. To put it differently, it was the anti-colonial focus that brought Indians from many diverse backgrounds to uphold different conceptions of freedom together in one national movement.<sup>132</sup> However when freedom actually arrived, these competing conceptions of freedom began to collide. As we look at this contested terrain, what we find is a pervading sense of incompleteness. This is not the freedom we wanted, many people decided. This is not the freedom we imagined! So what were these conflicting imaginings of freedom?

It is important to note that while our nationalist movement is often described as a ‘*freedom struggle*’, the fifteenth of August is celebrated, in official discourse and subsequently in popular parlance, as ‘*independence day*’. Indeed, the Bengali language has no synonym for freedom; the word most often used in this context is *swadhinata*, meaning independence. A better word would be *mukti*, but this is rarely used in reference to this particular day. Thus a narrower political version of freedom—one that signified the end of political dependence on a foreign power, Britain—became privileged in official and state-sponsored popular celebrations of the event. But while the central and provincial Congress leaders (though not for the most part the rank and file members of the party) remained preoccupied with this narrower expression, the masses hankered for an extended definition of freedom. The various expressions of freedom conceived over the first three years of free India that resulted from this longing can be lumped together into the same discursive category—one that Ross Poole has called the ‘nationalist concept of freedom’.<sup>133</sup> But

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<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.* (26 Feb. 1950).

<sup>131</sup> Manikuntala Sen, *Sediner Katha* (Calcutta: Nabapatra, 1982), pp.185–98 and passim.

<sup>132</sup> I have recently discussed this pluralist aspect of Indian nationalism in *From Plassey to Partition: A History Of Modern India* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2004).

<sup>133</sup> See Ross Poole, *Nation and Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

problems of translation remain.<sup>134</sup> While Sarat Bose's election manifesto would fit readily enough into this category, the broad popular demand for a '*krishak-praja-mazdur-raj*' does not exactly translate as a call for 'citizenship' rights. Gandhi once said that the 'Congress stands for democratic-kisan-mazdoor-praja raj'; but he never cared to define this concept. And his moralistic definition of rights<sup>135</sup> would hardly fit into the modern definition of citizenship. His followers, who were vocal in the West Bengal Assembly as Congress backbenchers, were worried by the fact that the Congress was gradually gravitating towards big business and away from the peasants and workers. Their concern was for the right of small people 'to live honourably in free India' and in search of that end they eventually left the Congress and formed, in 1951, the short-lived Krishak Mazdur Praja Party.<sup>136</sup> However, at this stage we know little about how they imagined their alternative *krishak-mazdur raj*. As for the Bengali middle class at large, to judge from the letters we examined, it was caught between two contrary impulses—its desire to cling to the heritage of the Raj, and its need to find a new identity free from colonialist hangups—though preferably not by way of violent convulsion. In other words the Bengali bourgeoisie wanted 'freedom' to solve all the problems of its quotidian existence, without turning the familiar world upside down.

In the West Bengal countryside, on the other hand, we still find in the 1947–50 period echoes of earlier modes of peasant resistance against the local agents of oppression in the shape of the *zamindars* and *jotedars*, and of 'non-modern' factors such as tribal solidarity. This does not mean, however, that the Bengali peasant was unaware of the modern state and its structures of power. The coming of the railways and the print culture were breaking down the insularity of the village.<sup>137</sup> Towards the end of his novel *Ganadevata*, Tarasankar Banerjee notes despondently: 'The village society, with all its ancient customs, had, as a matter of fact, already collapsed.... The bonds that held the village together had loosened'.<sup>138</sup> Therefore, the embracing of the Communist Party by the Bengali peasantry in the 1940s might not have been just an extension of a tradition of subaltern resistance. Yet here, too, are signs of ambiguity. In Bankura, the Santhal peasants used to call the Communist Party 'Coma Congress',<sup>139</sup> indicating perhaps a certain amount of fuzziness in their understanding of organised political structures and their distinctive ideological strands. The call for *tebhaga*, though, was potent enough to bring them into confrontation with the police—now the agents of an independent Indian state. But as veteran Communist leaders like Abani Lahiri and Manikuntala Sen have admitted in their memoirs, although a yearning for social justice and a mentality of protest against the local agents of oppression had developed by the late 1940s, there was not at this time sufficient class consciousness in Bengal to sustain what the Communist leaders like to call a 'people's democratic revolution'. Elements of ambivalence and ambiguity have been integral to the process of political modernisation in India.

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<sup>134</sup> See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>135</sup> Gandhi argued in an interview with N.G. Ranga on 29 October 1944 that 'Every Congressman must make up his mind to make the Congress an honest organization, and therefore a *kisan* organization. As for rights they should follow as a natural corollary from the performance of service. Otherwise there is only usurpation'. *The Collected Works Of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol.LXXVIII, pp.248–9.

<sup>136</sup> See Gupta, *The Congress Party in West Bengal*, p.35.

<sup>137</sup> See Rajat K. Ray, *Exploring Emotional History: Gender, Mentality and Literature in the Indian Awakening* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>138</sup> Banerjee, *Ganadevata*, p.253.

<sup>139</sup> 'CPI. Activities in the District of Bankura', GB IB, Serial no. 171/1926, File no. 35/26 (Bankura), Part I, WBSA.

The Indian nation in 1947–49 remained, to borrow an expression from Ania Loomba, ‘a ground of dispute and debate’,<sup>140</sup> a site where alternative concepts of ‘freedom’ competed—some defined in very narrow terms, others vaguely or not at all. But even as they struggled to come to terms with what ‘freedom’ meant, Indians began to fear that their imagined freedom might be in jeopardy—might not even survive. But who were the real enemies of freedom? Were they the Communists, or the smug power-obsessed Congress politicians who controlled the West Bengal and other provincial governments? On this, too, there was no consensus—although there are signs that in Bengal at least, a convergence was beginning to emerge by late 1950. Until recently the post-colonial period was virtually uncharted terrain so far as historical scholarship is concerned. Obviously, much more work needs to be done before we can claim to fully comprehend the convoluted, multi-layered political domain of ‘free’ India.

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<sup>140</sup> See Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p.207.