

## Social Change in Bengal, 1757-1857: A Critical Analysis

**Krishna Das<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Independent Scholar

Department of History

University of Gour Banga

Malda, West Bengal, India

Email:[daskrishna7511@gmail.com](mailto:daskrishna7511@gmail.com)

**Bipul Mandal<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor

Kaliyaganj College, Kaliyaganj

Affiliated to the Gour Banga University

Uttar Dinajpur, West Bengal, India

Email:[bipulmandalklg@gmail.com](mailto:bipulmandalklg@gmail.com)

---

***Abstract:** British rule in India had originated in Bengal and it was inevitable that Bengal society would be the first to feel the all pervasive impact of the West and undergo changes which later spread to other parts of India. These changes had manifested themselves in the early decades of the nineteenth century. It is also needless to emphasise that social change is quite distinct from cultural change and the chief concern of the historian is to examine the social relationship which becomes a primary factor in a social change. The main aim of this paper is to study environment and a dynamics of the social change in Bengal during the period under review.*

***Keywords:** Battle of Plassey, Evangelicalism, Social Change, Utilitarianism, Westernism etc.*

---

**Date of Submission: 05-07-2023**

**Date of Acceptance: 11-07-23**

---

### Introduction

A study of the process of social change from 1757 to 1857 is no doubt arbitrary, but for a historical analysis this has to be done. It is conceded that no attempt has been made to base this paper on the hitherto unknown materials and neither any specific issue has been taken up for micro study. It is an attempt to make a critical analysis of the problem in its broad spectrum. It aims at challenging some fundamentals of the question of social change in Bengal with a view to provoking enquiry a new. Much has been written on social reforms, social legislation and part played by individuals or groups

It is also needless to emphasise that social change is quite distinct from cultural change and the chief concern of the historian is to examine the social relationship which becomes a primary factor in a social change.

## Social Change in Bengal, 1757-1857: A Critical Analysis

---

The object of this paper is to study environment and a dynamics of the social change in Bengal during the period under review.

From the later decades of the eighteenth century significant developments were taking place in Indian society particularly in Bengal. These developments which were especially manifest during the period 1757-1857, were possible because of the influence of new ideas which were beginning to emerge as a result of British rule. The western impact had presented a profound challenge to the entire social and cultural fabric of the country. It was during this time that this challenge was mostly keenly felt and most keenly answered. Apart from the fact that the nineteenth century saw the great socio-religious reform movement initiated by Raja Rammohan Roy which brought about significant though not revolutionary change in Bengal society. During this period that there were other changes of far-reaching importance took place, particularly in the field of education and in the economic and social life of the people.

Battle of Plassey has always been regarded as a great landmark in the history of the rise of English power in India. It was undoubtedly of great political significance. On the other hand it witnessed the beginning of the disappearance of the traditional country force and on the other; it saw the emergence of a new force. In 1757 Sirajuddulah was considered impossible by the English and he was vanquished and killed to be replaced by another Nawab Mirjafar. Through the tradition structure of power was apparently left intact. It ushered in a silent revolution in Bengal in which the fulcrum of political authority swing in favour of the English. The history of Bengal since Plassey is a record of transition from the old order to the new. It also witnessed a passage from darkness to light and as such, was a great significance in relation to the social change in Bengal in the nineteenth Country.

If the nineteenth century was a blossoming period, the later half of the eighteenth century had been a seed time. Actually the battle of Plassey was also a great event in the social history of Bengal. Economically speaking there were three main classes of peoples in the second half of the eighteenth century- the aristocracy or the nobility, the peasantry and the mercantile people mostly the banians. All of them had been affected for one reason for the other in the post Plassey confusion. The breakup of the old political and economic order had a deep impact on the society. In the age of decaying Mughal set up of social values were the first casualty. The vertical division of the society were badly disturbed when the Mughal authority was eclipsed. When there is a sharp political change those who are closed to the centre of power in the old regime are bewildered and cannot easily adjust to the new power structure that emerges.<sup>1</sup>The economic order that sustained the traditional society was essentially medieval in nature. Before Plassey the

## Social Change in Bengal, 1757-1857: A Critical Analysis

---

economy of the provinces which was primarily agrarian supplemented by handicrafts, ran in a traditional style within the Mughal administrative framework. It was a 'closed economy' or 'self sufficient village economy'. Charles Trevelyan put it in a different way. Within the boundaries of the Village, he observed, there existed a barbarous state of things in which everybody is obliged to produce and manufacture everything he required for his own consumption.<sup>2</sup>

In such an economic structure there was a peculiar co-existence of scarcity and abundance. Prices of commodities varied greatly from village to village. Trade and commerce went on in the traditional pattern hampered by sawyer and other inland duties by the bad state of roads and lines of communication. Industries flourished in localised areas under the village system. The system of credit and banking was not much developed in the modern sense of the term. The currency system was complicated and productive exactions. Despite these drawbacks, the economy of the provinces ran smoothly and the general condition of the people was good. Agriculture was in a flourishing state and land revenue flowed regularly to the state treasury through the old Zamindars –the landed aristocrats of the Mughal days. On the whole, the stability in the society was maintained by the continuance of the economic structure that may be characterised as a form of feudal economy.<sup>3</sup> The period following Plassey was marked by the decay of the indigenous economy and penetration of commercial capitalism Plassey gave a severe blow to the stability in economic and social life

Since Plassey there were three important land marks that cast a deep shadow on the social scene in Bengal in the late nineteenth century i) The Grant of Dewani ii) the Famine of 1770 and iii) the introduction of Permanent Settlement. It the period between 1757-1765 saw the establishment of same sort of Protectorate in Bengal by the English the 'coup –de grace came in 1765 when Clive obtain the Dewani Grant from the Mughal emperor. The English were no longer an alien force but a partner in administrations enjoying a part of sovereignty which helped in legitimatisation of their organised plunder of the economy of Bengal.

The history of Bengal since 1765 a story of the consolidation and extension of the new imperialism. If Farruk Siyar's Farman of 1717 was the 'Magna Carta' of the English trade and commerce in Bengal, the Grant of Dewani by Shan Alam II was like a Bill of Rights for the English rule in the province. A.F. Salahuddin Ahmed has aptly commented that 'by securing the Dewani of Bengal in 1765 Clive sought to clothe the newly established English power in a legal garb familiar to Indian tradition and practice. The new English sought to maintain the old laws and institutions, the established customs and usages, So long as they did not affect English interest'.<sup>4</sup> Actually Clive was faced with a difficult situation. Without sufficient knowledge of the

## Social Change in Bengal, 1757-1857: A Critical Analysis

---

administration of the country he had shouldered the burden of revenue administration. To meet the situation he introduced a system of dual government of the chief features of which was 'Power without responsibility'. Verelst and Cartier, two successive Governors, were passive spectators as well as the genuine interest of Bengal.

The terrible famine of 1770 which practically threw the society and economy. Whatever might be the reason, the magnitude of the famine can be understood by the fact that one third of the total population of Bengal had perished. The inability of the Government to appreciate the true character of the calamity was rendered more remarkable by the fact that the local administration then was still managed by the native officers. People died in lakhs and still there was no ruffle and the Government was slumbering.

The famine of 1770 intensified the law and order problem in Bengal. There were already numerous hereditary gangs of robbers operating in the provinces generation after generation. A state paper of 1772 noted that 'the dacoits of Bengal are not, like the robbers in England, individual driven to such desperate courses by sudden want. They are robbers by profession and even by birth. They are formed into regular communities and their families subsist by the spoils which they bring home to them.'<sup>5</sup> To make the situation worse a large number of people had been driven to rapine due to destitution or natural depravity and join hands with the hereditary gangs. The miseries of the common people know no bounds. Morality was at the lowest ebb and there was absolutely no security no protection. Hunter noted that even the old inhabitants of Calcutta remembered the time when 'no native would venture out at night with a good shawl on, and it was the invariable practice even in English mansions for the porter to shut the door at the commencement of each meal, and not to open it till the butler brought him word that the plate was safely locked up.'<sup>6</sup> It was the situation in Calcutta, one could well imagine the conditions in rural areas. Generally speaking a sense of despair and helplessness gripped the society from which it took a long time for Bengal to recover.<sup>7</sup>

Next the most important landmark in the second half of the eighteenth century was the introduction of Permanent Settlement by Cornwallis in 1793. It will show that the operation of the measures produced a new tension and confusion in which the remnants of the old aristocracy had been destroyed.

There had been a large scale transfer of Zamindari rights during the two decades of nineteenth century and a new class of men came to forefront by the purchases of Zamindaries. The rise of the landed aristocracy was an important phenomenon in the process of social change in Bengal in the nineteenth century.

## Social Change in Bengal, 1757-1857: A Critical Analysis

---

In the economic field Trevelyan wrote in his introduction of 'English Social History' 'The social scene grows out of economic condition to much the same extent that the political events in their turn grow out of social condition.' Thus 'Social Change' is primarily induced by changes in the institutional structures of society, of which economic structure is of basic and vital importance'.<sup>8</sup> Nobody can deny that economic factors lay at the bottom of the social change in Bengal during the period under review.

Village economy and market integration leading to the growth of a wider market are two mutually exclusive concepts. The chaotic condition in the internal market could not be allowed to exist in the interests of industrial capitalism of England. The political power of England coupled with their administrative abilities made the task of the company easier in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Generally speaking the growth of the internal market of Bengal corresponded to the crumbling of the Village economy.<sup>9</sup>

The social impact of the growth of the internal market and the crumbling of the village economy was in direct but tremendous. Marx, whose understanding of the Indian situation was not always correct as it was based on second hand information however, made significant observation on the break of the village system.

The growth of urban and semi-urban centres during the first half of the nineteenth century had a bearing on the process of social change. The growth of such centres was actually linked up with the growth of the internal market. With the extension of trade and commerce new centres of transaction slowly came up.

The growth of urban centres becomes all the more important because here flourished an educated middle class patronised and supported by the new aristocracy. They soon took the leadership of the society urged for social reforms and English education pressurised the government into positive action in the form of legislation and tried to bring about a change either radical or conservative as the case might be. An interesting fact is that this new urban aristocrat middle class combine was composed of heterogeneous elements and not a homogenous caste group. They were of diverse social origins but all linked with the British merchant rulers. 'The lure of money levelled to some extent the barriers of traditional caste occupations of many Brahmans, Vaidyas, Kayasthas and others and they threw themselves into the whirl of money making with luck, pluck and intelligence.'<sup>10</sup> One section of them took more interest in patronising the so-called 'Babu Culture' and other, began to seriously think of social problems being awakened by the stern thought process.

## Social Change in Bengal, 1757-1857: A Critical Analysis

---

Introduction and spread of English education and the gradual permeation of western ideas taken together constituted the greatest single factor in the process of social change in Bengal in the nineteenth century. Bruce Cameron rightly remarked that ‘the purpose of the social movement cannot be evaluated, nor the actions of the members understood, unless we clearly perceive the background of the society against which they play their part.’<sup>11</sup> This background in the early nineteenth century was enriched by the introduction of English education at the end of a long drawn controversy. The establishment of the Fort William College in 1800, the founding of the Hindu College in 1816 and Macaulay’s Education Minute followed by the Government Resolution in 1835 are too well-known to mention here. It is necessary to state that the Hindus were the first to accept the new education while the Muslims refused to fall in line and they slowly went into the background. This is one of the reasons why the social change in the period under review primarily related to the Hindu society while the Muslim clung vigorously to their orthodox shell till the middle of the nineteenth century with only minor exception. Notwithstanding the continued opposition of the orthodox group among the Hindu who become suspicious of the nature of Westernization, English education gradually struck roots not only in metropolitan and urban limits. Rural Bengal also showed enthusiasm for their education.

The achievement of English education was to open a new window to the thought process of Bengali middle class men. Saturated with a new spirit of rationalism, men began to critically probe into the irrationally accepted age old beliefs and social customs. Western education had turned out to an alien agent of social change in Bengal in the nineteenth century. Moreover it injected a secular element in the process of social change. One great service the English education had done that was to bring Indians nearer to western thought process. One has to examine the ideological foundation of the social movements’ before evaluating them. The period under review was marked by an upsurge in the realm of thinking in Europe itself the waves of which reached the shores of Bengal on the wings of English. Mainly two trends of European Socio-political philosophy influenced the educated Bengalese- liberalism and Utilitarianism - till the middle of the century. Up to the third decade Benthamite liberalism had a firm grip upon the reformers and man like Raja Rammohan Roy expounded the idea of rationally ordered society along the Benthamite lines. The first expression of liberal westernism was the passion for social reform, the attack on traditional practised and institutions which now looked as blind, irrational and unjust.

## Social Change in Bengal, 1757-1857: A Critical Analysis

---

Bengali Society in the early nineteenth century was thus in the melting pot. The political anarchy of the proceeding century had produced social chaos and prompted social evils characteristics of an age in transition.<sup>12</sup>

Political power has its impact upon culture and society. The Muslim who exercised political authority in India for nearly eight centuries left an indelible mark on the culture of the people. This was the more so because Muslim rule, unlike the British, was not an alien despotism. Islam was Indianised and the great majority of the Muslims were of Indian origin. This, however, did not mean that Islam was merged with Hinduism. In fact, Islam and Hinduism represented two parallel streams of Indian culture with many sub-streams connecting the two, but the two streams flowed separately. Through centuries of experience of living side by side, Hindus and Muslims had come to recognize and also to respect each other's differences.<sup>13</sup>

In fact in many respects, the culture of the upper class Hindus was similar to that of the upper class Muslims, and this continued to be so down to the early part of the nineteenth century, long after Muslim political power had ceased to exist. As Rammohan Roy pointed out, during his time besides the similarity in dress between upper class Hindus and Muslims, “ the Mussulmans, as well as the more respectable classes of Hindus chiefly, cultivated Persian literature a great number of the former and a few of the latter also extending their studies like wise to Arabic’.<sup>14</sup>

The different reaction of the Hindus and Muslims to English rule and English education profoundly affected the subsequent development of the two communities. While the Hindus had welcomed English rule with enthusiasm, the Muslims regarded it as a calamity. Their failure to adjust themselves to the new situation not only brought about a sharp deterioration in their position from which they took a long time to recover: it also widened the gulf between the two communities.<sup>15</sup>

Now let's talk about the religion and social reform movement. In analyzing the Social movement in modern times one must have a peep into the conditions in the eighteenth century which provided a significant back drop. If the nineteenth century was a blossoming period, the eighteenth had been the seed time. The genesis of many of new development of the nineteenth century may be found in the previous one. ‘The eighteenth century was a passage from darkness to light and as such, the period of great significance in relation to the Social Movement in Bengal in the nineteenth century.’<sup>16</sup> The gradual breakup of the old political and economic order had a deep impact on the society.

## Social Change in Bengal, 1757-1857: A Critical Analysis

---

With the introduction of English administration and justice a new vista was opened in the rural social sphere. In the process of economic transition, the rural society was severely strained. New industrial and trade centres grew up with a shift in the population. A structural imbalance was in the offing as a result of what may be called the new urban pull.

There are three trends of European socio-political philosophy influenced the social reforms in varying degrees. They were liberalism utilitarianism and positivism. Charles Heimsath has rightly observed that ‘the common reaction of Social reformers to western society and western ideals was responsible for the uniqueness’<sup>17</sup> of the social movement in Bengal in the nineteenth century.

The story of the Indian social reform movement practically began with the efforts of Raja Rammohan Roy who first directed his guns against the practice of burning Hindu widows, otherwise known as Sati. The cry against the practice was not, of course, raised by Rammohan for the first time. Since 1772 Christian Missionaries were presenting, petitions to the Government for abolishing it. Bentinck was essentially a reform minded Governor-General and to his pleasure he found the intellectual atmosphere in Bengal quite congenial for taking action. Remarriage of child widow was another burning issue of the nineteenth century, and we find Pandit Iswarchandra Vidyasagar among those who fought for the cause. On sixteenth of July, 1855, ‘The Widow Remarriage Act’ was passed.

However, the attempts of person and organizations to reform the society were undoubtedly sincere and serious. There was no dearth of understanding as regard the problem.

It is emphasized that social change through movements would have come –Rammohan or not, English education or not. Social movement takes place sooner or later when the stable intra-society relationship is significantly disturbed. In the nineteenth century relationship was under strain due to the economic transition in Bengal. The secluded village economies provided the solid foundation of oriental orthodoxy. Once that foundation started gradually melting away, social movement in Bengal would have come as a natural society corollary. The process had started but the breakup of the old economic order was not complete in the nineteenth century. Money market did not fully develop, trade and industry were at the periphery, communications were slow to develop, and the internal market had not been completely integrated. All these had a reflection on the contemporary society relationship again stabilized in the second half of the nineteenth century after an initial shake up. The society adjusted to the new condition and the intelligential and the middle class were able to to adopt Indian traditionalism to the rational



## Social Change in Bengal, 1757-1857: A Critical Analysis

---

philosophy of the west to effect a happy compromise. In a sense social movement in Bengal may be expressed in terms of conflict between tradition and modernity.<sup>18</sup>

Now I would like to conclude the article. Actually British rule in India had originated in Bengal and it was inevitable that Bengal society would be first to feel the all pervasive impact of the west and undergo changes which later spread to other parts of India. These changes had manifested themselves in the early decades of the nineteenth century. One aspect of the transformation was social mobility particularly among certain sections of the people, despite the inhibitive influence of caste, religious customs and traditions. The process had started in the eighteenth century, with the breakdown of the old political order.

The reform movement in England, particularly the movement of the free-traders, had a great impact upon the social and economic development of Bengal. The attempts of the free-traders to enlist the sympathy and support of the Indian merchants in their struggle against the monopoly of the East India Company, promoted remarkable commercial activity which greatly facilitated the growth of the Indian business community. Utilitarian and evangelical influences provoked social consciousness among people of different classes and helped in creating a climate of opinion which favoured both reform and reaction.

The new generation of the English-educated people particularly of the urban areas, which was not directly involved in landed or commercial interests, tended to become radical in outlook. The radicals derived their ideas from Western rationalism. But their spirit of revolt grew out of the fact that society had as yet no place for them. The radicals were thus the status-seekers of the age, who could not long be neglected either by society or the Government.

On specific issues such as those relating to free trade and colonization, religious and social reform and education, opinions were sharply divided. There were again issues such as those connected with missionary activities or the question of the freedom of the press on which particular groups expressed strong opinions. The modes of expressing all these opinions were distinctly Western or rather modern- newspapers, associations or organizations, public meetings and petitions

The impact of Indian opinion upon Government policy, even at this early period of social consciousness, was considerable. Not only was the Government unable to ignore any opinion publicly expressed, it was very often obliged to modify its policy in face of public sentiment. Thus on the question of the abolition of *Sati* the Government took action only after a fairly strong public reaction had developed in Bengal against the custom. Similarly, the education policy was also influenced by the ideas of the age.

# Social Change in Bengal, 1757-1857: A Critical Analysis

---

## Notes & References

---

- <sup>1</sup> . Banerjee, Tarasankar, Various Bengal Aspects of Modern History , Calcutta: Ratna Prakashan, 1985,P.88.
- <sup>2</sup> Trevelyan ,C.E., Report an the Inland customs and Town duties of the Bengal Presidency , Calcutta; Bookland , 1964,P.4.
- <sup>3</sup> Banerjee, Tarasankar, op. cit., P.89.
- <sup>4</sup> Salahuddin, Ahmed, A.F. 'Social Ideas and Social Change in Bengal, 1818-1835' Calcutta: Rddhi, 1965, P.115.
- <sup>5</sup> Hunter, W.W., The Annals of Rural Bengal, New York: Leypoldt and. Holt, 1868, p21.
- <sup>6</sup> Hunter W.W,op.cit., p.45-46.
- <sup>7</sup> Sen, S.P (ed), Studies in Modern Indian History:A Regional Survey, Kolkata:Institute of Historycal Studies, 1969, P.173.
- <sup>8</sup> Renascent Bengal,1817-1857;Proceedings of a seminar organised by the Asiatic Society, Calcutta:The Asiatic Society,1972,p.12.
- <sup>9</sup> Banarje ,Tarasankar, op.cit ,p.96.
- <sup>10</sup> Renascent Bengal, op.cit,p.15.
- <sup>11</sup> Bruce Cameron, William, Modern social movements sociooogical outline, New York Random House,1966.p.21.
- <sup>12</sup> In 1801 the Bengal Government had sent out a questionnaire to the district officials enquiring about the moral conditions of the inhabitants. The answer received from all the thirty-five officials make melancholy readings. They all emphasize the low standard of morality among all classes of people. Copy of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 35<sup>th</sup> Interrogatories; proposed, by the Governor-General in Council of Bengal, to the Judges of Circuit, and the Zillah Judges in 1801 : with the Answer of the said Judges to those Interrogatories' P.P.H.C., 1812-13, viii, 166, 425-45.
- <sup>13</sup> It is true that the caste system prevented Hindu from interning into close social relationship e.g. inter-dining and inter-marriage and Hindus in general would not have such relationship with Muslims. But this did not necessarily mean any disrespect or hatred: both sides perfectly

## Social Change in Bengal, 1757-1857: A Critical Analysis

---

understood each other's prejudices, cited in Ahmed, Salahuddin H.F., *Social Ideas and Social Change in Bengal. 1818-1835*, Calcutta: Rddhi, 1965, pp. 18-19.

<sup>14</sup> Written evidence of Raja Rammohan Roy on the condition of India before the select committee of the House of Commons on the affairs of the East India Company, P.P.H.C., 1831, V. 320A, pp.739-41.

<sup>15</sup> Muslim Separatist feeling which led to the growth of a powerful Muslim nationalist movement in the twentieth century and eventually created Pakistan, may be traced to this period.

<sup>16</sup> Sen, S.P.,(ed) *Studies in Modern Indian History : A Regional Survey*, Calcutta: Institute of Historical Studies, 1969.p.185.

<sup>17</sup> Banerjee, S.N., *A Nation in Making*, London : Oxford University Press, 1927,p.396.

<sup>18</sup> Banerjee, Tarasankar, *Various Bengal, Aspects of modern History*, Calcutta : Ratna Publication, 1985, P.133.