

## **Bengali's Protest Movements against Colonial Domination, 1757-1858: A Review of History**

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### **Abstract**

The history of people power and politics in Bangladesh is intricately connected to the opposition protest movements dating back to the colonial era. Explanations abound on the glorification of history which are mainly imparted through autobiography and memoir. However, academic analysis of civilian protest movements in Bangladesh represents an important but little-known research area that this paper intends to address. The article is based on secondary sources, including published books and journals. Using historical analysis method, the paper finds that in all important juncture, the role of regular political elites—especially political party and leaders—became secondary, whereas the protest lead was taken over by the street masses who came from non-institutionalized political channels, ordinary village people, urban educated mass and socio-cultural networks, for example. The analysis suggests that the opposition movement in the Indian subcontinent era laid the foundation for the space of political contestation. It indicates that popular politics has grown out of the regular habits of Bengali people as an immediate response to regime oppression, social injustice and marginalized context.

**Keywords :** Protest, Bengali, Struggle, Opposition, British Domination.

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## **Introduction**

The historical account serves as a window through which people understand how their nation emerged, who the forbearers of the struggle for emancipation and political freedom were, and how they made it happen (Bartkowski, 2013). The traditional views of the civilian-led mass movement against foreign regimes worldwide seem to have expounded on patriotic identification. In the Americas, the Cuban war of liberation is glorified by the narrative of the heroic feats of their patriots against foreign oppression. Central and Eastern Europe witnessed a similar patriotic uprising from 1812-1814 against Napoleon's regime of occupation. The war of liberation in German states drew from the popular uprisings that broke out in Austria, and Prussia (Mann, 2014).

The South Asian narrative is no exception to this process. What is more, and interesting to note that, for centuries, people of this subcontinent had shown collective protest expression against diverse issues ranging from cultural and political hegemonic imposition to regional economic disparity. To simplify, people had been living in a context where the institutions of the society deliberately ignored political demands. A discrepancy between popular expectations and conditions to which one is entitled widened. These issues became a broad ideological banner built on a sense of injustice and deprivation (Bell, 1973; Gamson, 1990). The framing of prolonged persecution, disparities, and anti-colonial sentiment has had an influence on shaping the protest behavior of civilians (Schock, 2005).

The early account of Bangladesh's civilian uprisings is heavily concentrated on the popular dimension, and in that light, peasant movements, the struggle of indigenous groups, middle class, and above all, the subaltern class's radical movement struggles are mainly highlighted. Yet, the characterization of Bengali people's movement struggles is shaped by a one-sided explanation of social conflict, that is, civilian struggles are viewed in the context of violent action (Hossain, 2013). A deeper history of Bengali's uprising also suggests that ordinary people's struggle encountered contentious bargaining, often reflected in nonviolent political action (Haque, 2023) against political authority in support of establishing an independent homeland, a vision that had taken root outside constitutional politics, more emphatically among students and civilians (Ludden, 2011).

## **Research Objectives**

The main objective of this paper is to revisit the historical background of Bengali's protest movement activism, highlighting Bengali people's mobilizations against colonial domination. Following from this broad objective, the paper, the article aims to understand,

- i) the formation of Bengali as opposition force, and
- ii) the extent Bengali civilians waged protest movements against British domination and the resultant outcome.

## Methodology

To meet the above objectives, the paper employs qualitative research methodology. This research adopts a historical analysis approach to understand the growth and development protest movements over a defined period, in this case 1757 to 1858—the time when Bangladesh was part of the Indian subcontinent. This specific time frame is chosen based on their historical relevance to the study of collective action, and their significance on social, political, and cultural changes. For the qualitative data gathered from secondary sources including books, and journals, thematic analysis has been employed. A survey of literature is conducted. Data was systematically coded to identify recurring themes, such as the genesis of political mobilization of Bengali people, role of various groups, and the use of violence or nonviolence in resistance. These themes were then explained with supporting evidence drawn from scholarly literature.

## Bengal as the Hotbed of Agitation and Movement

Bengal province, with Dhaka as its capital,<sup>1</sup> became the center of movement politics. Indian National Congress leader Gopal Krishna Gokhale expressed in flattery: what Bengal thinks today, rest of the part thinks tomorrow, meaning that the reverberations originating in Bengal were felt in other parts of India. Lord Curzon's home secretary once put it similarly: Bengal united is a power. The major opposition and defiance movements primarily came from Hindu political elites. A new generation of assertive leaders including Lala Lajpat Rai, Balawantrao Gangadhar Tilak, and Bipin Chandra Pal advocated the doctrine of passive resistance. Principally the nationalist leaders of the Swadeshi movement decided to avoid all forms of violent action in support of their demand. However, few incidences of violent attacks by Muslim peasants to Hindu landlords could not be avoided. The Swadeshi movement was participatory, in that educated professionals, students, and a small section of the working-class people were involved. This movement called for a relentless boycott of British goods and institutions and demanded complete independence from the British. Economic boycott as the method of non-cooperation came out to be an effective strategy of protest against British rule.<sup>2</sup> Later in the Gandhian era, the nonviolent approach to fighting against British domination flourished decisively. Gandhi's nonviolent strategy of struggle had exposed unarmed people's self-determination for liberation to the world's attention (Talbot, 2010).

The political mobilization of the Bengali Muslim community was far less collective than their Hindu counterpart. There were no such effective ties among the Muslim landed aristocracy. Even though there were Muslim trading groups in Calcutta, its members were overwhelmingly represented by non-Bengali immigrants. Given the acute backwardness as a community, the people of Bengal found it difficult to form associations needed to emerge as a coherent force. It was only in the nineteenth century that the reformers and activists of Bengal origins<sup>3</sup> implored the common Muslims to wake up. The Bengali Muslim's self-assertion was one of the interesting political developments. Recalling the history of Muslim ruler's past glories and former ruling race theory, Muslims came to believe that once again they could rise and postulated that they will again reign over others, especially Hindu subjects.

Muslim nationalist leaders had always tried to raise Muslim sentiments against the Hindu dominance (Islam, 2007: 19). In most Bengal districts there were *anjumans* (associations) formed by the local Muslim elites to arouse political consciousness among them. With the introduction of English education in the 1830s, urban-based professional middle classes were rising. The emerging middle-class people founded different occupational associations, such as lawyers, new landowners, educational associations, and other political institutions. They began to organize themselves on a political platform with a shared sense of exploitation and injustice.

### **Bengali's Movement Struggles in the Indian Subcontinent Era**

The term Indian subcontinent is explained here as a geographical area comprising all or parts of South Asian countries. The term has occupied special attention among academia for its celebrated history of transformation from empire to nation, colonization, and decolonization. The Indian subcontinent was pronounced for its cultural homogeneity and shared political history. Yet, contentious narrative of the partition in 1947 and the emergence of three independent states namely Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh as consequence of it have made the region an interesting area of study.

The early history of the Indian subcontinent was marked by the expansion and territorial control by the empires and conquerors. During the eighteenth century, the Mughal empire virtually encompassed the whole subcontinent region. It was then occupied by the British-Indian empire or the British Raj and ruled until the mid-nineteenth century (Mann, 2014). The early history heavily reflected on a specific period, the seventeenth and eighteenth century, for example, –the time when the subcontinent was undergoing imperial strife leading to a fractured process of state and empire building. Yet, a politically significant region had taken shape already. For example, India was made the center of governance as well as became the empire's military and economic power hub. The modern history of the Indian subcontinent, however, has underscored even more contemporary views of the civilian-led liberation struggle, nation-building, and state formation.

Yet, the historiography of the subcontinent is still a subject matter of debate and discourse. One line of historians put forward an imperialist narrative which solidifies the long-term benefits of colonial rule; the other group shared a nationalist history of the subcontinent (Mann, 2014). Indian historians, in particular, representing the latter group who published a significant number of scholarly works after the mid-1960s. A bulk of early writings on the social history of Bengal, based heavily on colonial official sources, tended to characterize people's protest activism against the regime as deviant political expression. However, recent research is much more interested to investigate the making of subjecthood of the struggling people through movement and struggles. One significant generalization is being made that there is always a more regular act of everyday form of resistance by the subaltern classes to oppression and injustice (Scott, 1985), underlying the violent outbreaks of major resistance. The Bengali's history was full of varieties of struggle and resistance phenomena which added a rich chapter in the socio-political history of the subcontinent.

### Opposition to British Domination

The centuries preceding the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 is vitally important to make sense of the Bengali people's emergence as the resisting force. The process of establishing British political supremacy in Bengal started from the last decade of the seventeenth century. Their establishment began with the acquisition of the zamindari right in different rural villages and step by step they started to strengthen their position by erecting a self-governing and fortified English-style settlement. One of the early expansions of British merchant's dominance in Bengal was the Kolkata settlement in 1698. Hegelian description of the Indian subcontinent provides an interesting explanation of the causes of India's being falling into prey to alien forces. In his depiction of India as an object of desire, Hegel wrote:

From the most ancient times downwards, all nations have directed their wishes and longings to gain access to the treasures of this land of marvels, the most costly which the Earth presents; treasures of Nature—pearls, diamonds, perfumes, rose-essences, elephants, lions, etc. — as also treasures of wisdom. The way by which these treasures have passed to the West has at all times been a matter of World-historical importance, bound up with the fate of nations (cited in Bose and Jalal, 2004:1).

The mid-eighteenth century was beginning to witness a steady collapse of the Mughal successor state system and quick replacement by British domination. The cosmopolitan character of Mughal polity is considered to be one of the main causes of the rise of the East India Company, a territorial power (Islam, 2007). The whole Mughal India was left wide open for foreigners; lands were granted to English, French, Dutch, and others for business settlement in various parts within the kingdom. They were always privileged to get permission for living and free movement. Such an open-door policy was highly conducive to be an effective political authority parallel to that of the Mughals, at the same time, it came under the threat of external military invasion (Mann, 2014). The British came to establish their fortifications in Bengal decisively in 1757.

It was the high watermark in the political history of the community of India. Yet, the British had no free sailing on this land (Karim, 2011). Uprisings and rebellions became an omnipresent phenomenon. From the very beginning of the company rule, there were instances of decisive battles against exploitative administrative reforms initiated by the merchant government in many important sectors such as land system, law, and justice. The company regime replaced the old order—the one which was only profiting the emperors—with administrative control to the remotest areas so that the company authority over land is ensured. The resulting benefit of these reforms had satisfied the wealth-seeking merchants; however, it resulted in a variety of pressures on the village people. The affected parties could not but resort to protests and revolts (Islam, 2007).

Bengali people's defiant struggles which had started from the very beginning of the company rule were not homogenous. Different classes of people had confronted British rule differently: initially by passive means and in extreme cases, a violent revolt was the only choice for them. To provide a comprehensive ordering of

civilian-based political defiance and civic movements during the British control of this subcontinent, some significant rebellious attempts could not be detached from the narratives.

The fight of Buxer in 1764 was a military attempt against the British East India company. Mir Qasim, enthroned as the Nawab of Bengal by Robert Clive, got disillusioned with the company rule. He had resisted regaining the lost sovereignty of Bengal, which drifted in 1757 with the defeat of Nawab Sirajuddaula—the last independent Nawab of Bengal—by the Company's army at the battle of Plassey. The revolt of Buxer appeared to be a futile attempt, nevertheless, many other contentious confrontations were taking place. Those were mainly coming from non-princely kings. One such illustrative case of revolt was the fight against the British order called by Mirza Aga Muhammad Reza Beg of Sylhet. In 1799, he declared independence from the *Feringhee Hukumat* (foreign order) and appealed to people, mainly *zamindars* (landlords), to join him in his *jihad* (holy war) against the British (Islam, 2007).

Following it, the Zamindari revolt broke out as the clash of interest between the zamindars, and the merchant government of the East India Company intensified. A zamindar was a middleman appointed by the company rulers conferred on the responsibility to control local affairs. The institution of a zamindar was entrusted to carry out various official functions such as police, justice, administration, and communication, to mention a few. A zamindar was also responsible to assist the *Sarkar* (government) in times of war and emergencies (ibid, 2007). Zamindari institutions did not accept the colonial revenue exploitation policy towards them. The zamindars, once the local powerful elites of Bengal, had lost the glory of their honor and prestige in the eyes of people due to the circumstances caused by overwhelming debts. Raja Asaduzzaman, the zamindar of Birbhum openly defied the lordship and confronted the company. Subsequently, many other zamindars in the district of Chittagong and other parts of Bengal refused the excessive revenue demands of the company. The zamindars of Swandip—a small island under the jurisdiction of Chittagong district, resisted unprecedented tax increases. They launched a non-cooperation movement by stopping paying tax to the company, by refusing to respond to auction-bids. Some of them even made the system unworkable by resorting to local problems by propagating malicious words and stories leading to foment popular uprisings (ibid, 2007).

The ideologically indoctrinated landless class took an opposition role defying the mastery order of paying tax and revenue. One instance of such peasant-led resistance was the Faraizi Movement of East Bengal. It was articulated on religious lines, Dudu Mian the leader of the movement expounded on the belief that only Allah's sovereignty prevails on the land. This religious ideology of defiance had gained much currency among the agrarian societies of Bengal (Bose and Jalal, 2004). The second half of the eighteenth century was marked by increasingly hostile relations resulting from the government's interference in the religious freedom of the Bengali people. The Company government of Warren Hastings considered the local religion of Bengal as superstitions and imposed an embargo on religious preaching of the

*Fakirs* (beggars) and *Sannyasies* (monks). They called those religious mendicants gypsies of Bengal and labeled them as plunderers (Bhattacharyya, 2016). The government also banned the free movement of Fakirs holding weapons made of iron or bamboo. This order governing religious activity was sharply resented by Fakir Maznu Shah of North Bengal and his associates. The Fakir rebellion was a collective political expression of protest that involved disgruntled peasants, impoverished artisans, and disbanded soldiers (Sengupta, 2020). They proclaimed independence from British rule and demanded due tributes from the British to their religious practices (Islam, 2007).

In the 1860s, peasants of Bengal particularly in Rangpur, Noakhali, Mymensing, Muniganj, and Dhaka district were dissatisfied and took up rebellious attempts against the East India Company's policy to collect revenue and commodities from settled agriculture (Dasgupta, 1986). They formed a strong peasant community by contacting door to door and motivated people for their causes. The organization was run by the subscription fees in the form of donations collected from the whole body of peasantry.

During this decade, tribal peoples projected their discontent by undertaking militant activism against the policy of colonizing the forests. The Santhals tribe ran the risk by confronting the powerful: first, against the British who were allegedly tearing their forests, and second, against the Indian money lenders who were grabbing their inhabited lands (Rahman, 2020). During the period between the 1810s and 1830s, the north Indian towns were the epicenter of protest of artisanal groups. In the urban areas, occupational people like weavers had resisted the shrinking business opportunity caused by the free-trader industrialists and merchant groups. It had spectacular consequences on shaping the landscape of protest in the early colonial era. As such, Indian society was engulfed with widespread protest, uprisings, and revolts, affecting different societal and occupational groups, and almost every region of the subcontinent (Bose and Jalal, 2004).

Without a doubt, British rule had experienced a popular dimension in the Indian Mutiny of 1857 which was to be named the Great Rebellion. It was a patriotic uprising against the colonial regime (Mann, 2014). By nature, it was a revolt of the army, encouraged accompanied by discontented element of civil population drawn from both Hindu and Muslim communities. The historiography of the event of 1857 is somewhat confusing and offers ample debates. There is still unanimity among historians whether the revolt was a forward-looking freedom movement, or it was just a reaction combining a group of landed magnates and rebellious peasants. The tension of understanding heightened further by one group of historians' claim that whether it was a secular movement or religiously motivated holy war (Bose and Jalal, 2004). In the British record, this event was described as 'Sepoy Mutiny', a movement led by the *Sepoy* (soldiers). The modern Hindu and Muslim historians, especially the early twentieth-century radical Indian nationalists considered the uprising as the first war of independence (Kulke and Rothermund, 1998).

There have been several causes that led people to be indignant and ultimately resisted against the colonial power. The doctrine of laps introduced by Lord Dalhousi

mandated to British to annex princely states that had no male heir. It invited the hostility of Rani of Jhansi. The annexation policy also threatened ruling nawabs and kings, leading to widespread resentment against the British Lords (Akanda, 1981).

Yet, the greased cartridge episode and the outbreak of the sepoy revolt is interconnected (Leyman, 1933). The mutiny stemmed from a new design of ammunition with greased cartridges which soldiers had to be bitten before loading into the gun barrel. Both the Muslim and Hindu soldiers assumed that the cartridges contained fat of both pig or cow. Beef fat was religiously forbidden for Hindus. Muslims were also not permitted by religion to come into contact with animal fat, especially pork (Mann, 2014). The jerk in the revolt of 1857 was not merely rooted in religious resentment against the British. The previous strands of rebellions converged. Along with soldiers' disappointment with the cartridge issue, the mutiny got a new level of intensity. Compared to the past incidence of rebellions and movements which were characterized by uncoordinated disparate characters, the rebellion of 1857 was turned out to be widely expanded in scale and marked the watershed in the colonial history of the Indian subcontinent (Bose and Jalal, 2004).

To look into the social basis, the revolt of 1857 was a restorative uprising—on the part of wide multitudes beyond the armed soldiers—against British supremacy. It succeeded, although partly and for a short time, binding different strata and various social circles into a common cause for the reinstatement of Mughal glory in Bengal (Karim, 2011). The British authorities believed that the uprising of 1857 was a conspiracy created by the Muslims in retaliation to the defeat of their Mughal (Muslim) rule. This perception resulted in mounting Muslimophobia. As a result of this kind of prevailing outlook, the Indian Muslims had to bear social and economic sufferings and lived in an atmosphere with great suspicion (Mann, 2014). Moreover, they were distrusted by the new English masters. The situation led to grave misfortunes for Bengali Muslims. They fall from availing better opportunities, position, prestige, and economic resources. The persecution of the Muslims extended to such a limit that they found their community relatively powerless and marginalized.

The Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 left a profound and far-reaching political consequence, marking a transition from company rule to government rule. It signifies the efficacy of people struggle that defeated British East India Company's army, ultimately led to the downfall of the Company rule and transfer the power to the British Crown. This transition allowed the British Raj to centralize administrative functions and develop state machinery to suppress Indian dissent. In the societal level, the mutiny deepened racial divisions, The British sowed the seeds of hatred with their efforts to implanting "divide and rule" policies based on caste, religion, and regional identities. It further marginalized the both the Hindus and Muslims. However, the rebellion, fueled nationalist sentiments and laid the groundwork for future nationalist movements seeking complete independence from British domination (Kayastha, 2024).

One of the defining features of the Indian subcontinent's movement landscape was the recurring tension of religious strife between the Hindu and Muslim communities.

From the mid-nineteenth century, few political elites got fascinated by the European project of divided sovereignty. The Hindu elites started to internalize the idea of a distinctly Indian territorial state. The framing of the concept of *Hindustan* (land of Hindus) led to the formation of Hindu nationalistic discourse. It brought Muslims as well as other alien forces as their rival party. The cleavage between the Hindu and Muslim communities became large ahead of the partition of Bengal in 1905. The partition made it more likely that Bengal politics would be drawn on the line of religious hostility (Broomfield, 2007)—a phenomenon that is better conceptualized as communal politics. The mainstream Muslim political elites decorated their political ambition on a populist line by pointing to Hindu counterparts responsible for their relative backwardness. The Muslim problems, according to nationalist leaders, could be solved by separating the Hindus politically. The subsequent political movements leading to the partition of the subcontinent were firmly rooted in these religious cleavages.

### **Conclusion**

The paper takes a tour to the growth and development of Bengali civilian political action that gained ground on the backdrop of colonial subjugation. Civilians adopted both violent and nonviolent protest methods and tactics and other forms of civil disobedience which have proven to be successful strategies for bringing about social and political changes.

The above survey of Bengali people's resistance to coloniality indicates that Bengali people were always concerned about losing their customs and traditions of their own. When alien rulers or political authority and the new regime, departing from tradition, were not respecting the local religion, established discriminatory order and policy of power-sharing, administrative law, a new system of justice and magistracy, land control, and above all, outrightly ignorance to the demands of the local people, substantially formed opposition which ventilated in different ways from passive resistance to armed struggle. And such movements engaged people from different segments of the society: from ruling elites, zamindars, peasants, religious groups, tribal people, and students.

The article unpacks that the Bengali's protest movement was generated from a strong feeling of frustration concerning institutional structure, government policies, or programs that directly affects them. Moreover, a well-organized process of cognitive liberation resulted in the urge for mobilization to improve unjust conditions. Nationalistic fervor, perception of illegitimate colonial rule, and social injustice are some factors that could be responsible for bringing ordinary civilians into movement struggles.

The paper finds that opposition movements in different junctures proved to be a very strategic tool in the hand of marginalized communities to redress structural imbalance and claim rights to justice or self-determination. It resulted in the rise of people power which remained catalytic for bringing about unprecedented change of power dynamics between traditional power holders and civilian protesters. This paper shows that Bengali popular politics reacting to adversaries characterizes the

erstwhile protest landscape of the Indian subcontinent. Mass agitation of the civilians constituted the base of bottom-up power construction by its ability to collect huge participation from different sectors of society. It, therefore, serves as a collective agency capable of bringing change in society and politics.

### Notes

1. From a regional point of view, Dhaka had remained an imperial metropolis for Eastern India. The Mughal imperial administration was based in Dhaka until the late 1700s.
2. Due to the 1905-6 boycott movement, the British cotton and textile industry faced a huge loss: a nearly 25 percent fall in the quantity of imported goods.
3. To mention a few such dignitaries, Sir Syed Amir Ali (1849-1928) was a great Muslim reformer, regenerationist, and jurist. Another champion of the Muslim cause in Eastern Bengal was Nawab of Dhaka Sir Salimullah Bahadur.

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