

BENGAL: FROM A PERIPHERY TO THE HEARTLAND OF SOUTH ASIA

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ABSTRACT. – **Bengal: from a Periphery to the Heartland of South Asia.** The historical province of Bengal, one of South Asia’s most densely populated areas from ancient times, was mainly a periphery within the states that succeeded on the subcontinent until the late Middle Ages. Conquered in the 16th century by the Mughals, an important part of its population embraced Islam. The arrival of the Europeans put the province into the frontline of international trade. In the 18th century Bengal became the center of the British Raj, which gradually extended to the whole of India, with its capital at Calcutta until 1911. In the first half of the 20th century, Bengal became one of the main centers of anti-British resistance. However, when India finally became independent, the unfortunate partition of the former British colony resulted in the second partition of Bengal too, the consequences of which are visible until today, especially taking into consideration the mass of refugees which flowed from Eastern Bengal to India. Though West Bengal and especially the great urban agglomeration of Kolkata remains one of India’s most important industrial and commercial zones and is quickly developing today, the region was for decades lagging behind other states, while Kolkata lost its primacy (behind Delhi and Mumbai) among the great cities of India.

Keywords: *colonialism, Raj, British Empire, independence, Partition.*

1. Introduction

In February 2024 I was able to participate at an Erasmus+ Staff Training Mobility at Jadavpur University of Kolkata, India. After a long voyage via Warsaw and Delhi, our Air India plane landed smoothly at the Kolkata International Airport, where our colleagues from JU were waiting for me. Though at first I was

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a little bit worried about traveling all by myself to such a distant country, their hospitality and careful attention made this encounter and the mobility a very pleasant experience.

Jadavpur University, though not the biggest of Kolkata, is one of the famous universities of India, where many celebrities studied or used to teach, like Amartya Sen, the 1998 winner of the Nobel Memorial Prize for Economic Sciences. During the last two centuries, the city of Calcutta (today Kolkata) was home to many famous scientists and philosophers from all around the world, such as Sándor Kőrösi Csoma (born in Transylvania), author of the first Tibetan-English dictionary, and Mircea Eliade, one of the best authors on Indian mythology, Hinduism and Buddhism.

Kolkata with its suburbs is today the third largest urban agglomeration of India (after Delhi and Mumbai), the capital of West Bengal, India's most densely populated federal state, and the center of one of the most densely populated regions of the world. The historical Bengal was divided in 1947 between India and Pakistan: the western part went to the Indian Union, while the eastern part became East Pakistan, then in 1971 gained its independence and became the Republic of Bangladesh, with its capital at Dhaka.

2. Historical Background

The large majority of the historical Bengal is situated on a recently created piece of land, on and around the largest fluvial delta of Asia and of the world, divided by the numerous and frequently moving branches of the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers. This makes it very fragile in front of natural hazards like tropical cyclones and the rising sea level, but at the same time one of the most fertile agricultural areas of the world, given the abundant monsoon rains and the permanent alluvial input of the two great rivers.

The human population of Bengal and of the other provinces of Northeast India preceded the emergence of agriculture by thousands of years. As a matter of fact, due to its geographic position, the delta region of the Ganges/ Brahmaputra rivers, situated between the Himalaya Range and the coast of the Bay of Bengal was inevitably in the way of the first migrants coming from Africa and going to Southeast Asia, whether they belonged to *Homo erectus*, *Homo heidelbergensis*, *Homo sapiens* or other species of humanoids not yet discovered and whether they were following the coastal way or the inner „Subhimalayan” route. The fact that no humanoid remains older than a few thousand years were discovered here can be explained on the one hand by the hot, wet climate, unfavourable for the conservation or fossilization of any living creature. On the other, we know that the

level of the Indian Ocean was much lower (by 110-140 m) during the glacial periods compared to today's and there is a rather large continental shelf in the northern part of the Bay of Bengal, this is why the seashore could have been farther by 150-200 km than at present, so the eventually conserved remains of the ancient migrants could now well be under the water.

The patterns of ancient migrations into the Indian subcontinent are not very clear yet, either based on archaeological research or on the results of genetic investigations. However, a lot of stone tools were discovered in different parts of India, dating both from the lower, middle and later Paleolithic industries, so the human presence in the region is quite certain. Recent research claims that when the first modern humans arrived to India about 65000 years ago, the area was already inhabited (though quite sparsely) by archaic humans, but we don't know to which species they belonged. What we know is that by the end of the Pleistocene era (about 11700 years before present) the archaic humans were extinct and once the Holocene began, the modern rhythmical pattern of the Indian monsoon became established (Mythen, S., 2012). About 9000 years ago farming spread from Iran to the Indus valley then, about 5000 years ago, to peninsular India too.

In Bengal the Calcolithic sites are concentrated in the valleys to the west of the Bhagirati River but some settlements began as Neolithic sites and gradually began to use metal. Further to the east, the Assam Neolithic included sites in the Garo Hills and the Cachar area. Neolithic sites have also been found in Bihar and Manipur. Connections with cultures in south-east Asia and eastern Asia were also suggested (Thapar, R., 2002).

About 3800 years ago the population center of South Asia shifted from west to east and 3000 years ago two ancient populations were already formed, one located in North India and the other in South India, technically given the tags Ancestral North Indians (ANI) and Ancestral South Indians (ASI). The ancestry of ASI derives from First Indians (Ancient Ancestral South Indians or AASI) and a population of Iranian farmers coming from the region of the Zagros Mountains. The ancestry of ANI comes from First Indians (AASI), a population related to Iranian farmers and Steppe pastoralists from Central Asia. Almost all present-day populations of Indians are a mixture of ANI and ASI, in different proportions in different regions and communities (Reich, D., 2019).

By the time the last migrants, the "Arya", arrived sometimes after 4000 BP, Indians in the subcontinent were already one of the largest modern human populations on Earth, had already led an agricultural revolution and then an urban revolution leading up to the creation of the largest civilization of its time, and were spearheading an agricultural transition in almost every region, in the north, south, east and west (Joseph, T., 2021).

There is early evidence of rice use in India, dated to around 8000 years ago and by 4000 years ago definitive evidence of domesticated rice, in the form of rice spikelets from the Neolithic site of Magahara in north-eastern India, precisely when *japonica* variety was arriving (according to genetic evidence) from the east. Other East Asian crops, such as apricots, peaches and cannabis also made their way into northern India at this time. These novelties probably arrived in India via networks of exchange connecting the cultures of East and South Asia (Roberts, A., 2017).

The Bengali-speaking people are a conglomerate of several racial elements with different ethnic origins. Four principal racial elements came together to merge as the Bengali ethnic entity. The original settlers in Bengal were of the Austric stock (called “Vedic”, “Kobili” or “First Indians”) and were present in Bengal well before the Aryan invasions. There were three other major racial elements which also came together to form the Bengalese people: the Dravidians (who were themselves the result of a mixture between First Indians and agriculturalist immigrants from the Zagros Mountains region), the Mongolian tribes (coming from Southeast Asia and speaking Austro-Asian languages or from East Asia and speaking Sino-Tibetan languages) and finally the Aryans. There was substantial intermarriage between the Dravidians from the southwest and the Mongolian races from the north-eastern Himalayas and Chittagong Hills. Later, a relatively small-scale migration of Aryans took place from the west (Sengupta, N., 2012).

The first political formations in North-East India appeared in the age of the Vedas. The intermixing of the Aryans and non-Aryans is illustrated by some legendary references such as the queen of the Asura king, Bali, having five sons: Anga, Vanga, Kalinga, Suhma and Pundra. Each of them founded a kingdom named after him. During most of its early history, Bengal was part of the Maurya and Gupta empires, but its role was secondary. Urban centers and ports in the delta such as Chandraketugarh and Tamralipti became centers of trade, and ships heading for the eastern coast and south India began their voyage from the ports of the delta. During the whole of the Aryan supremacy in North India, Bengal’s role was peripheral. The Aryans looked down upon the people living in the east and called them *vratyas* or *kikatas*. However, by the time of the epics (5th-4th century BCE), the Aryanization process had gone considerably ahead. The Ramayana includes Vanga as a part of Dasharata’s empire and also refers to Suhma (West Bengal) and Pundra (North Bengal). The Mahabharata indicates further advance of Aryan settlements toward the east. The ruler of the Vangas took part in the epic battle of Kurukshetra as an ally of the Kauravas (*idem*).

The first state that unified the different parts of Bengal was the Kingdom of Gauda, founded by King Shashanka in the 7th century CE, with its capital at Karnasubarna in present West Bengal. According to several Indian historians, Shashanka drove the Guptas and other prominent nobles out of Bengal and established his own kingdom most probably around 590 CE. After his death in 625, Gauda was soon divided amongst Harshavardhana and Bhaskarvarmana of Kamarupa. Kamarupa was the first historical Kingdom of Assam, which also included in the 7th and 8th centuries most of East and North Bengal.

At the beginning of the post-classical period (8th century CE) the territory of Bengal was at the core of a larger empire under the Pala Dynasty originating from Kamarupa. At its zenith under emperors Dharmapala and Devapala in the early ninth century, Pala Empire was the dominant power in the northern Indian subcontinent, with its territory stretching across the Gangetic plain to include some parts of northeastern India, Nepal and Bangladesh. In the early eleventh century the Palas reached Varanasi, but this expansion was checked by the advance of the Chola King, Rajendra, whose successful northern campaign threatened the independence of Bengal. The western campaign of the Palas was therefore abandoned and the King, Mahipala, hastily returned to defend Bengal against invasion by the Chola armies. Rajendra's impressive campaign was motivated both by a desire to obtain military glory and to assert a political presence. This was combined with an attempt to monopolize trade with South-East Asia, as well as the maritime trade with China, in which the Palas had been active. But the Buddhist Pala dynasty declined soon after the death of Mahipala and gave way to the Hindu Sena dynasty. Bengal experienced a brief efflorescence under the Senas, but eventually fall prey to the Turkish armies lead by Bakhtiar Kijli (Thapar, R., 2002).

Though present in India since the 7th century, the Muslims were slow to expand on the Ganges Valley and only arrived to East India in the 12th century. The conversion to Islam was made in the beginning mainly by Sufi missionaries. The Muslim population of Bengal, as it emerged, consisted of diverse elements: a significant constituent were the Turk migrants and the Persians of Delhi region – the stubborn Pathans who had settled down in significant numbers during the rise of Sher Shah, offered great resistance to the extension of the Mughal rule and thereafter settled down all over the province merging with local population; the large-scale converts from Buddhism and lower-caste Hindus; and also, a non-negligible number of upper-caste Hindus who embraced Islam for reasons such as attraction of superior government positions (Sengupta, N., 2012).

Bengali can be traced as an independent, identifiable language from only about the tenth century CE, although it traces its lineage to ancient Sanskrit and also to Prakrit and Pali. It belongs to the Indic group of Indo-Aryan or the Aryan

branch of the Indo-European languages. Together with its sister languages, Assamese, Oriya and Maithili, Bengali forms the easternmost language group in South Asia. In the 12th century Sanskrit was still the language of expression for the educated, although Bengali was the spoken language. Gradually, the distance between the newly revived, grammar-ridden Sanskrit and the Bengali vernacular language became greater and greater. The Tibeto-Burman elements which appeared in Bengal through the northeast and the Dravidian and Australoid tribal elements which were indigenous also made their impacts on Bengali language. Slowly but surely, a lingua franca took shape that was common to Bengal, Assam, Nepal, Orissa and North Bihar. Hiuen Tsang's travelogue in the seventh century suggests that there was a common language spoken in Bihar, Bengal and western Assam called Magadhi Abaphramsa. All the eastern languages branched off from the Maghadhi. Slowly, Nepali and Oriya dissociated themselves from Bengali dialect of north Bengal and parts of East Bengal, adopted the same alphabet as they spread into the Brahmaputra Valley, and were influenced by Bodo, Tibeto-Burman and Shan elements (*idem*).

Bengal was conquered by Muhammad Ghurî around 1199, when it became dependent on the Delhi Sultanate, but periodically independent during the weakening of the central power. Between 1200 and 1350, a lot of Dalit (untouchables) converted to Islam, hoping to achieve a better social status and to have access to jobs they were not allowed to practice before, like craftsmen or traders. The conversions continued constantly from 1350 to 1750. The Islamic influence became strong from the beginning of the 15th century. Under the Ilyas Shahi dynasty, the Sultanate of Bengal was installed from 1352 until 1576. Bengal was then a united and powerful Muslim kingdom, interrupted only by the Ganesha dynasty of Hindu origin (1415-1437), then by the short reign of the so-called Abyssinian dynasty which ruled between 1487 and 1493. The later was ousted by the minister Husain shâh Hussain, who founded his own dynasty and extended his rule over parts of Bihar and Assam. After a fight for power between Humâyûnand Sher Shâh Sûrî, Bengal became a province of the Moghul Empire, with a governor having a certain level of autonomy.

The first Europeans who appeared and installed themselves in Bengal were the Portuguese, who seized Goa in 1510 and occupied several strategic centres in the east of the subcontinent, including Chittagong. The Portuguese helped Sultan Ghiyas-ud-din Mahmud Shah in his military engagements against the Afghans and thus got the sultan's permission to construct a fort at Chittagong. In 1537, when Sher Khan laid siege on Gaur, Ghiyas-ud-din Mahmud requested again help from the Portuguese governor of Goa, but he was defeated and killed before the arrival of help from Goa. Later every year Portuguese merchant ships layed anchor at a place called Betore opposite the present

Calcutta Port and did extensive trading. They opened a factory at Satgaon in 1517 and another at Hooghly in 1579-80. But they earned notoriety on account of capturing people from riverine villages and selling them as slaves, their indiscriminate looting and converting people to Christianity by force (*idem*).

Portuguese naval supremacy was soon challenged by the Dutch, who appeared in Bengal by the middle of the 17th century and set up settlements at Hooghly, Cossimbazar, Patna, Dhaka, Surat, Agra and the Coromandel Coast. The main reason for the eclipse of Portuguese power was Portugal's annexation by Spain in 1580. Emperor Shah Jahan turned hostile to the Portuguese and ordered the subedar of Bengal to capture their factory at Hooghly in 1632. After that, the Portuguese only operated as pirates in alliance with Thiri, the king of Arakhan. The Dutch East India Company (VOC) established its factory at Chinsurah near Hooghly in 1653 and subsequently two other subsidiary factories at Patna and Cossimbazar. Soon, the French East India Company set up a factory at Chandernagore near Hooghly. Emperor Farrukj Siyar granted important customs concessions to both the Dutch and the French.

The English East India Company came to Bengal after the Dutch, when they set up the first English factory at Balasore in 1633, then another at Hooghly in 1651, followed by factories in Dhaka, Rajmahal and Malda. Meanwhile, the Danes and the French had also come and the neighbouring river ports of Serampore, Chandernagore, Hooghly and Chinsurah became seats of Danish, French, English and Dutch factories. By the end of the 17th century the Mughal authority declined to the point where it could no longer provide stable conditions for merchants, this is why the European merchants moved to fill the political vacuum in and around their settlements. On the other hand, the rivalries among the nations in Europe came to have a direct impact on the European merchants in Asia through armed conflicts in India too. After the Mughal governor Khasim Khan attacked and occupied Hooghly in 1686, the English decided to move to Sutanuti, better protected by the Hooghly river and where the Calcutta harbour was eventually built. In 1700 Calcutta was administratively separated from Madras and became a new Presidency. In 1717, the Emperor Farruksiyâr, treated by the British surgeon Hamilton, granted important privileges to the latter's compatriots. The English were allowed to take their merchandise to Bengal, to acquire land in Calcutta and to settle down anywhere in the subah (*idem*).

Soon the British East India Company started to break its contract with the Mughal princes. Contrary to agreement, agents started to dabble in duty-free private trade, while tax exemptions were sold to local merchants which deprived the nawab of his revenues. In 1756 the Company refused to obey to the nawab's orders to cease building fortifications, which were driven again by

Anglo-French rivalry. In response, the 21-year-old new nawab Siraj-ud-Daula stormed Fort William and seized the British company's base of Calcutta. The following year Robert Clive, a military officer who had already played a leading role in the Company's territorial acquisitions in Coromandel, was ordered to sail from Madras and recover the city. After accomplishing that goal, Clive exceeded the terms of his authorized mission by conspiring with the nawab's disaffected commander-in-chief to overthrow the unpopular nawab. In June 1757 he defeated the nawab's forces at Plassey (150 kilometers north of Calcutta) and then installed his native co-conspirator as Bengal's new Mughal nawab, who then became in effect a Company puppet. After its troops defeated a coalition of Mughal armies at Buxor (13 km west of Patna) in 1764, the East India Company tightened its de facto authority in Bengal. In the following year Clive personally met the Mughal emperor Shâh Âlam II, who signed the so-called Diwami treaty of Bengal (August 1765), formally giving Company officers the right to assess and collect the province's revenue (Hunt, T., 2015, Eaton, R. M., 2020).

In 1769 the British restricted the Bengalis' rights of trading for several products, provoking the terrible Bengal famine of 1770 which killed around 10 million people, a third of the population.

Another development of catastrophic proportions that hit British India was the great anti-British uprising of 1857, the so-called sepoy mutiny, also called India's first war of independence. The direct cause of the mutiny was said to be the compulsory use of bullets that were said to contain both cow and pig fat, calculated to humiliate the religious feelings of both Hindus and Muslims. The real reason was a variety of economic, social and political factors. The introduction of some modern reforms had antagonized the orthodox sections, both Hindu and Muslim. The revolt started in Bengal at Baharampur (Murshidabad) and thereafter at Barrackpore near Calcutta. At Barrackpore, a sepoy named Mangal Pandey protested against the use of cartridges and attacked an English officer (29 March 1857), but thereafter Bengal was quiet. After such a massive uprising the British government felt it unwise to leave the governance of India to a commercial company and decided to assume direct power of governance. Under an act passed by the Parliament on 2 August 1858 the British Crown took over the Indian empire from East India Company. Queen Victoria was proclaimed the Empress of India. The mutiny did not have any impact on Bengal except for some isolated incidents at Chittagong on 18 November 1857 and at Dhaka on 22 November. The people of Bengal, both Hindus and Muslims, by and large sided with the British rulers. The educated Bengalis treated the revolt as only a sepoy mutiny and not as a nationalist uprising or a freedom movement. The contemporary press in Bengal, both English and Bengali, supported the British and opposed the rebels. Bengali public opinion had too much vested interest in

the continuance of the British rule, its liberal tendencies and the opportunities it had opened up for professional classes, and did not therefore fancy the prospect of a return to the medieval order in the form of restoration of the Mughal Empire. In this respect Bengal stood along with Punjab, western India and southern India that had also opposed the great revolt (Sengupta, N., 2012). Bengali Brahmins and Kayasthas set off to serve the Raj “upcountry” in government offices around Orissa, Bihar, The United Provinces, Punjab, Rajputana and Bombay; they were also engaged in their thousands as surgeons, physicians, postmasters, businessmen and contractors. By the beginning of the twentieth century, there were so many Bengali Hindus in administrative positions in Assam that Bengali had become a medium of instruction in local schools (Chatterji, J., 2024).

In 1876 Assam was separated from Bengal and formed a separate province under a chief commissioner. But three predominantly Bengali-speaking districts, Sylhet, Cachar and Goalpara, were included in Assam, the first instance of the vivisection of the Bengali-speaking territory. The censuses revealed that Muslims made up just over 20% of the population of India, confirming them to be a demographic minority as a whole. Two provinces alone bucked the trend: Bengal, India’s largest province in the east, and the Punjab in the west. Between 1905 and 1911 a first attempt to divide Bengal into two was made under Viceroy Lord Curzon: Bengal proper and the province of Eastern Bengal and Assam where the All India Muslim League was founded. By cutting Bengal into two, officials claimed, the „backward” province of Assam would, together with eastern Bengal, have a more efficient administration. But behind the scenes, they were conscious that Bengal was home to some of the Raj’s most vocal and articulate critics, the Hindu elites or *bhadralok* (gentlefolk). A partition of Bengal would thus neutralise this „thorn in the side of government”, but it proved to be one of Cuzon’s biggest political blunders. Then, in 1911, the partition of Bengal was revoked, to the consternation of the Muslims of East Bengal who had hoped to benefit from having a province of their own (Sengupta, N., 2012). In the same year, the capital of British India was moved from Calcutta to New Delhi, geographically better positioned and former seat of the Mughal emperors.

The First World War had created favourable conditions for the revolutionaries to wage an armed struggle with the help of arms obtained from the Germans. The Bengal revolutionaries, with the support of Indians who were resident in Germany, established contact with the German government and were assured of supply of both arms and funds. Indian revolutionaries in the USA also promised support. A German ship was to come to the Bay of Bengal and unload its cargo of arms at an undisclosed point in the Sundarbans or on the Orissa coast. The whole scheme of an armed uprising was finalized at a meeting of the revolutionaries. Naren Bhattacharya went to Batavia (Jakarta) to negotiate

with the Germans and to receive arms. The German ship *Maverick* was expected to arrive at Balasore coast with its load of arms. Coinciding with this, the revolutionaries had planned to blow up a number of key bridges on the three railway routes branching out from Calcutta, thereby preventing military movement to Bengal from outside; organize a liberation army in East Bengal which would first free East Bengal and then move on to Calcutta; and occupy the armouries in and around Calcutta, and then occupy Fort William. But the plan proved to be impractical, seriously flawed and foredoomed. The *Maverick* never arrived at the mouth of the Mahanadi. The plan was betrayed to the police. Thus ended one of the most heroic episodes in the history of the armed revolutionary movement in Bengal. Naren Bhattacharya went to the Soviet Union after the Soviet Revolution and, under a pseudonym, M.N. Roy, became an associate of Lenin and a leader of international communism (*idem*).

Bengal played a major role in the Indian independence movement, in which revolutionary groups were dominant. While the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League were vying with each other in showing loyalty to the British Raj during the war, the Bengal revolutionaries carried on relentless underground efforts to destabilize colonial rule. Unfortunately, there were intestine conflicts from the very beginning within the movement. The provincial Congress of Bengal, representing mainly the Hindu *bhadralok* elite, nearly split away from the national Congress as firebrands like Subhas Chandra Bose demanded direct action against the moderates dominating the Congress. In 1938, as Congress pressure on the princely states mounted and as Congress governments in the provinces rejected Muslim overtures for power sharing, Bengal's governing Muslim party joined the Muslim League of Mohammad Ali Jinnah, which was claiming to represent the majority of Muslims in India (Keay, J., 2010).

The outbreak of the Second World War brought along with the British declaring war on Germany a bland proclamation by Viceroy Lord Linlithgow that India was at war with Germany. No Indian leader had been consulted and India was dragged to a war with a country that was not a direct threat to it. Gandhi's initial hunch was to unconditionally support Britain. Nehru, on somewhat different emotional bent, wanted India to play its full part and commit all its resources to the 'struggle for a new order' by which he could have meant the abolition of both Nazism and colonialism. Subhas Chandra Bose, still an important Congress leader, favoured that India should utilize the international situation, including the British Empire's discomfiture, to press for freedom. Another step Subhas took to consolidate Muslim support for him in Calcutta was leading an agitation for removal of the Holwell monument at Dalhousie Square in Calcutta. His selecting this issue for launching a sustained agitation confused the government which, at that time, was at the point of arresting him for his anti-British seditious

speeches. Subhas showed deep strategic sense; the agitation united Muslims and Hindus. It inflamed opinion against British rule, so on 2 July 1940, Subhas was arrested but soon he made one of the most daring escapes in history. At midnight on 16 January 1941, he left home in a car dressed as an upcountry bearded Muslim in a long sherwani, was driven by his nephew Sisir Bose to Gomoh and boarded a long-distance train to Peshawar. He was traveling as Mohammed Ziauddin, an insurance inspector working with the Empire of India Life Insurance Company. From Peshawar he made his way to Kabul through the Khyber Pass accompanied by one Uttam Malhotra, reaching there on 27 January 1941. He got in touch with the German ambassador, Dr. Pilger, who was not particularly helpful. After a lot of delicate negotiations through the Italian ambassador, the Germans agreed to let him proceed to Berlin to plan a German-Italian overture to Indian soldiers. On 18 March Subhas left with a fake Italian passport arranged by Pietro Quaroni, the Italian ambassador, for the Soviet Union, reaching Moscow by train via Bokhara and Samarkand. From Moscow he flew to Berlin on 2 April 1941. He soon submitted to the German foreign ministry a memorandum, the first among several with the title *A Plan for Cooperation between the Axis Powers and India*. In this, he proposed the setting up of a Free India government in exile in Berlin. On 27 April, he had a meeting with the German Foreign Minister Von Ribbentrop at Hotel Imperial in Vienna and later with Adolf Hitler himself, who didn't show too much interest in helping him. On 18 January 1943 Subhas Bose boarded a German U-boat at Kiel on another of his daredevil missions. Off the coast of Madagascar Subhas and Abid Hussain were shifted to a Japanese submarine which took them to Singapore to complete their ninety-three-day odyssey. From Singapore they flew to Tokyo where Subhas had a meeting with the Japanese prime minister Tojo on 19 June 1943. The Japanese proved much more positive than the Germans. On 18 June, Tojo pledged before the Japanese parliament his government's support to Indian freedom (*idem*).

The Japanese invasion from Burma started on 7-8 March 1944, when General Mutaguchi's forces, accompanied by the 3,000-strong Subhas Brigade of the INA commanded by LtCol. Shah Nawaz Khan, crossed the Chindwin River into the Indian border at Moirang and attacked Imphal in Manipur and Kohima in Assam. After fierce fighting they were close to success by the end of March. But they were beaten to it by the early monsoon rains that bogged down the Japanese and the INA forces. With the supply line from Burma cut off by rains they retreated to Burma. Meanwhile, the Gandhi and Azad Brigades led by Colonel Mohammed Kiani took part in an assault on Imphal in which they suffered heavy casualties. The besieged and dug-in Allied forces both at Imphal and Kohima held on, and what had appeared as a sure victory for the Japanese became a major defeat, indeed the turning point in the war in Southeast Asia.

By July 1944, the Japanese and the INA forces were back on the Chindwin line. Subhas's great expectations remained unfulfilled. Even his experiment of sending INA personnel by submarine to Baluchistan and Bengal came a cropper, as they were apprehended. But Subhas Bose, undaunted by all military reverses, went on broadcasting to the Indian people weekly, assuring them that the INA was determined to march into India 'as soon as all preparations were complete' and exhorting the people in powerful language to rise up against the British. On 17 August, with seven of his staff, Subhas took off from Saigon in Vietnam on his way to Manchuria presumably with the Soviet Union as his eventual destination. The intrepid rebel was now planning an alliance with the Soviet Union against British Raj. But he could not anticipate that the Soviet Union would declare war on Japan just before Japan's surrender, upsetting his calculation. After refueling at Taihoku airfield in Taiwan, as the Japanese bomber took off, it caught fire and crash-landed. According to eyewitnesses, Subhas survived the crash, although badly burnt, and died in a military hospital shortly afterwards (*idem*).

India's participation at World War II was unfortunately full of much more serious consequences than Subhas Bose's adventures: more than 2.5 million soldiers were mobilized and fought on the allied side not only in Asia, but in Europe and North Africa too. Over 87,000 Indian troops and 3 million civilians died in World War II. India was also used as a base for American operations in support of China in the China-Burma-India Theater. Most of the Indian casualties were caused by the last great famine in Bengal of 1942-1943, set on by the sudden withdrawal of Burmese rice from the Indian market. Churchill's callous failure to feed India's subjects precipitated the end of the empire. He pretended it wasn't happening. For him, feeding Britain and fighting the war was the focus, and he would not be deflected from it, so he declined even to accept an offer of 100,000 tons of rice for India. Botched if well-meaning official policy in Bengal compounded the situation. Indians were not blameless either: some Indian traders sought to manipulate the grain prices to keep them high and they did so by hoarding grain. But South Asians still blame imperial lack of accountability and the callousness of racism for the episode (Chatterji, J., 2024).

But the most serious consequence of the war for India was its final drift towards Partition. Winning the war was the top priority for Lord Linlithgow too who couldn't confront the Muslim League at a time when Congress was already refusing to co-operate with the war effort. It could in fact be argued that it was Congress which badly miscalculated; by withholding its support for the war, it practically obliged the British to play along with the Pakistan idea. At the same time, the arrest of the Congress leaders meant that the party was unable to direct the movement for independence and it would be singularly ill-prepared for the post-war endgame. The Muslim League on the other hand, unchallenged

by either the British or the Congress, continued to proselytise, organise and mobilise. Soon it became glaringly obvious that Jinnah would accept, and most Muslims would settle for, nothing short of a Pakistan to which sovereignty and power were directly transferred by the British. Lord Mountbatten, the last viceroy of British India, nevertheless pursued a proposal whereby power would be transferred to the provinces and the princely states, who might then choose whether to join India, Pakistan or neither. This was quite unacceptable for Javaharlal Nehru, who foresaw a „Balkanisation” of India. His protestations produced some hasty British revision and let Mountbatten to accept Partition as inevitable (Keay, J., 2010).

On 18 July 1947, the Indian Independence Act 1947 of the Parliament of the United Kingdom stipulated that British rule in India would come to an end just one month later, on 15 August 1947. The Act also stipulated the partition of the Presidencies and provinces of British India into two new sovereign dominions: India and Pakistan. Muslim-majority British provinces in the northwest were to become the foundation of Pakistan. The provinces of Baluchistan (91.8% Muslim before partition) and Sindh (72.7%) and North-West Frontier Province became entirely Pakistani territory. However, two provinces did not have an overwhelming Muslim majority: Punjab in the northwest (55.7% Muslim) and Bengal in the northeast (54.4% Muslim). After elaborate discussions, these two provinces ended up being partitioned between India and Pakistan (Read, A., Fisher, D., 1998).

The eastern part of Bengal was thus included into the new state of Pakistan, where it was soon called East Pakistan because of the opposition of West Pakistan’s leaders to Bengali nationalism. The union between the two parts of the new Muslim state of South Asia presented serious problems from the beginning, the western Pakistanis considering East Pakistan just a remote colony good for exploitation, while intentionally failing to provide it with resources for development. Besides the geographic distance (1300 km), there was an essential cultural difference between the two parts of Pakistan, having practically nothing in common except religion. They even tried to impose Urdu as official language in East Pakistan, while Bengali is the native language of the whole population.

The conflict between West and East Pakistan finally exploded in 1971, when the government of president Yahya Khan refused to admit the recent election results and name Sheikh Mujibur Rahman prime minister. Soon an invasion of East Pakistan by western troops followed, trying to submit by force the eastern province. The aggression of Pakistan in northwestern India in December 1971 finally gave the Union the opportunity to directly intervene in East Bengal, where a guerilla war was being fought for months by the local resistance. In just

a couple of days, the Pakistani troops were surrounded and forced to surrender to the Indian army, which put an end to the war of independence and brought international recognition for the new Republic of Bangladesh.

3. Conclusion. The Weight of Present Day Bengal

South Asia is one of the most densely populated regions of the world (with an average density of 362.3 inhabitants/km²), its total population (2.04 billion) representing 25.1% of the world population (2024 estimate), so every fourth human on the planet lives currently in South Asia, while its surface is only 3.5% of the total land area on Earth. The Indian Union is by far on the first place among the nations of South Asia, with its 1450 million inhabitants, representing 71.1%, and is followed by Pakistan (251.2 M, 12.3%) and Bangladesh (173.5 M, 8.5%). This means that the countries of former British India have almost 92% of the total population of South Asia, while the rest live in Afghanistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan and the Maldives.

The state of West Bengal, with its total population of 103 million (2023), is one of the most densely populated in India (1160 inhabitants/km²) and represents 7.1% of the Union's total population, while its total nominal GDP was 6.2% of India's total GDP in 2023, so the state's weight in the Union's economy is slightly under its populations'. On the other hand, West Bengal and Bangladesh together would presently number about 276.5 million inhabitants, which is 13.8% of South Asia. The total GDP of Bangladesh was \$451.5 billion in 2023 which, combined with West Bengal's \$210 billion, would weigh about 13.1% of South Asia's total. However, there is a significant difference between Bangladesh and West Bengal from the GDP/capita point of view: while the former showed \$2650/capita nominal in 2024, the latter had only \$1700/capita (source: Wikipedia).

The development of West Bengal wasn't thus following the growth of other Indian states in the recent couple of decades, remaining behind 23 other states, in spite of its recent spectacular growth rate (11% in 2023/24). At the same time, Bengal's cultural influence exceeds largely the economic weight of the two historical parts of Bengal, Bengali language being widely spoken not only in the neighboring states of Assam, Bihar and Odisha, but also by a large Indian diaspora throughout the world: while Bengali is presently the second most spoken first language of India (after Hindi) and the fifth largest language of the world (after Mandarin Chinese, Spanish, English and Hindi). It is also the second most spoken in the United Kingdom after English, not to mention the other diasporas on five continents.

Due to its accelerated development in the last couple of decades, India has become not only the most populated country in the world, but also the fifth largest economy, emerging as a regional geopolitical power and a key member of the BRICS community. It is also the largest democracy of the world, though signs of extremist Hindu nationalism and a certain drift towards autocratic government are frequently showing nowadays. Its military power and nuclear deterrence capability might be a counterweight for China's ever-increasing dominance in the Far East, but the greatest danger is still coming from its western neighbour Pakistan, also a nuclear power and affected by ethnic conflicts, chronic economic crises, corruption and political instability. On the other hand, the relation with Bangladesh is quite normal and improving, making a stable framework for further development of both parts of Bengal, although overpopulation, environmental issues and natural hazards still pose serious problems in the region.

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